

Chapter 6

Here and there: comparisons of place in accounts of settlement practices.

6a. Chapter introduction

I have been focusing on the practical contexts of the interview situation because the place of encounters is so central to this study. I have suggested that it makes a difference where you are speaking from. In this chapter I examine how migrant subjects in Sydney articulate differences between ‘here’ and ‘there’, referencing the spatial separation of migration, as well as their ongoing accommodations between places and social trajectories. This discursive to-ing and fro-ing is a means of ‘settling’, or living with the contingencies of migrant movements.

To speak about places is intrinsically comparative. Talk about a place implies a relation with other places. In my first interviews with recent migrants in Sydney in 1995-6, I was struck by the ubiquity of binary comparisons between places that sharply dichotomised attributes of ‘here’ and ‘there’. In a general sense this is linked to the structures of spatial perception and of referential practice in speech. Despite the constantly shifting of reference during a communicative engagement, deictic terms such as ‘here’ and ‘there’ broadly enforce a binary division of the world within discourse spaces. While ‘here’ and ‘there’ are never really simple or fixed points of reference, the binary structure of spatial descriptions provides a simplifying basis for bringing complex contexts and experiences into comparison, as places which embody collective perceptions of difference.

This chapter details the contents of emergent migrant discourses about place. Comparisons of place constantly appeared in interview situations where perceived qualities of physical spaces of and around the body served as points of reference or affective markers. They emerged alongside and in response to mundane, ‘factual’ questions about the ordinary tasks of migrant experience – administrative processes, finding housing or work, forming routines and social networks. Comparisons of place are intimations of sensuous and affective dimensions – the ‘feel’ of a place – providing

vivid viewpoints on particular trajectories of change, the ‘fit’ of dispositions formed elsewhere, and fluctuating orientations to different social and cultural locations.

The inherent spatiality of speech was employed in the generation of ‘spatial stories’ of migrancy. These narratives would often cut across dominant understandings of the ‘proper’ spatial order, providing subjects with a means of inhabiting and making sense of very different places. These ordinary, even banal narratives draw on spatial dispositions acquired in Hong Kong (see chapter 3) as well as shared accounts of migrant experience. Because they draw on embodied perceptions, all of the senses are brought into play in these accounts of the differences and absences of an unfamiliar everyday world. Everyday comparisons of ‘here’ and ‘there’ provide migrant subjects with an ongoing means to evaluate their social and spatial trajectories by indexing the ‘feel’ of very different places and scales. These narratives are a means of analysing shifts and adjustments in migrant subjects’ sense of place, which enable them to ‘settle’, to accommodate themselves to Sydney, or into a pattern of movements between places. I also point to the limits of such discursive strategies, and the kind of traumatic memories and affects that cannot be easily integrated into banal comparisons of place.

6b. Comparisons of place: spatial stories of here and there

Since ‘to speak is to occupy the world’, we can understand speech itself as a spatialised and spatialising practice, in which positionality, reference to objects, viewpoint and social location in relation to other interlocutors are not just expressed, but are actively staged (Harre and Muhlhauser in Foley 1997: 263). De Certeau’s notion of ‘spatial stories’ suggests that spatiality is inherent in all narrative. For de Certeau ‘pedestrian practices’ – orienting, moving and navigating through socially established places such as city streets, and in the process re-constructing these spaces, are closely related to the narration of accounts which place the subject in particular spatial contexts (de Certeau 1984: 115-130). Speech and linguistic categories are integrally involved in ‘pedestrian practices’ of moving through spaces in a kind of tactical narration. Conversely, re-remembered accounts of journeys and movements between places entail a re-*placement* through a kind of discursive enactment of a space in relation to the subject. De Certeau’s notion of ‘spatial stories’ points to the inherent spatiality of

spoken language, as linguistic practice constantly draws on and distributes places in so far as it *articulates* through an “enunciatory focalization”, by the act of practising it’ (De Certeau 1984: 130). What is common to pedestrian practices and narrative accounts about other places is the body of the pedestrian/narrator which grounds both practices.¹ Lived space entails a mobile sensibility. In Minkowski’s words, lived space ‘cannot and would not be crossed, since it moves with us; it relates much more than it separates; it does not grow or diminish with the removal of objects; it has no limits...’ (Minkowski 1970: 403). However, the lived space of a subject is not restricted to the mobile territory immediately surrounding the body (Goffman 1971: 26-58) as it momentarily passes through locations. Spatial practices encompass shared histories, acquired habits and dispositions, and the ongoing construction of relations between places.

In de Certeau’s terms, spatial stories ‘found’ spaces, based on an ongoing partitioning of spaces. ‘From the distinction that separates a subject from its exteriority to the distinctions that localize objects, from the home (constituted on the basis of the wall) to the journey (constituted on the basis of a geographical “elsewhere” or a cosmological “beyond”), from the functioning of the urban network to that of the rural landscape, there is no spatiality that is not organized by the determination of frontiers.’ (de Certeau 1984: 123) There is a perpetual interplay between a spatial order with its ‘determination of frontiers’ and the ‘founding’ of spaces through practical improvisations. Interview texts and conversations can be analysed in terms of the various properties of the discourse space – absences and presences, dimensionality, directionality, velocities, densities and intensities (de Certeau 1984:117).

Migrant spatial stories are never merely individual: they have a collective dimension. Ordinary talk amongst migrant subjects builds on a mixture of shared experiences and received values in order to produce common-place understandings and perceptions that are easily exchanged, developed, elaborated or simplified.

¹ The acts of narration while walking or moving and while constructing narratives *about* moving through spaces should nevertheless be distinguished as different kinds of practices, even if both draw on embodied spatial experience. De Certeau at times conflates the articulation of spaces implied in any physical movement and in more consciously crafted literary texts.

‘The most interesting unit of study for environmental cognition may ... be small, intimate, social groups who are learning to see together, exchanging their feelings, values, categories, memories, hopes, and observations, as they go about their everyday affairs.’ (Lynch in Pile 1996: 25) This sentence sums up the way in which representations of place emerge out of the sharing of practical exigencies. It seems to fit the situation of migrants confronting new environments and contexts. While memories may well relate to actual sensations and experiences of a subject, ‘social memory’ entails ongoing interpretation and elaboration (Fentress and Wickham 1992: 30-1). Shared discourse provides a framework for orienting one’s subjective position in a cross-national topography of places, in which desire and affect coexist with instrumental strategies. The sharing of stories, comparisons and contrasts, helps generate an idiom of talk about spaces, environments and the qualities ascribed to them.

Migrant discourses about place tend to take on a binary structure, which is usually flexible enough to provide migrant subjects with means of discursively negotiating shifting spatial relations between ‘home’ and ‘away’. Verbalised memories and comparisons made between different places and times enable an ongoing evaluation of migrant trajectories and fortunes. They could be characterised as ‘accounting practices’ (Shotter 1990:121), in the sense of ‘giving an account’, as well as being ‘accountable’ to the shared memory of a particular social group.

Talk about places often draws on apparently banal stereotypes that actually derive from broader historically formed ideas about relations between places. For instance, amongst Australians (at least eastern state Australians), comparisons are routinely made about Sydney and Melbourne – Sydney is brash and trashy, Melbourne is more urbane and European, Sydney is more aggressive, Melbourne more friendly but conservative, and so on. However empirically empty these common observations seem, they nevertheless contain elements that are the outcome of an historical rivalry between these two cities which have jostled for contention as the most significant place within the national space. The politics of competition between states and state capitals continues to be a major dynamic in Australian state and often Federal electoral politics. Australians have internalised these comparisons as markers of their own location and history. Such speech can be understood as ‘banal’ in its inescapability,

and its apparent innocuousness. Like talk about the weather, it has a function as an expressive and evaluative vehicle, whether or not we see the weather as an allegory of something else. Banality does not imply insignificance. For instance, Michael Billig (speaking of English contexts) uses the term ‘banal nationalism’ to describe “prosaic, routine words, which take nations for granted...and, in so doing, inhabit them”. (Billig 1995: 93-4)

For immigrants the stakes are higher, as the places compared mark out much more immediately pertinent disjunctions of histories, choices and fates. I want to pursue the subtle inhabitations of place through the words of migrant subjects in Sydney.

6c. Migrant sense of place in Sydney

The first objective of my initial fieldwork in Sydney was to examine how Hong Kong migrants perceive and construct a sense of place in a new location in Sydney. ‘Sense of place’ is a phrase often used by human geographers to denote the significance and affective investments attached to particular locations (Rose 1995: 88). It encompasses differences in access and relationships to given spaces. For instance, Doreen Massey observes that ‘a woman’s sense of place in a mining village – the spaces through which she moves, the meeting places, the connections outside – are different from a man’s’. (Massey, cited in Macdowell and Sharp 1999: 201) ‘Sense of place’ is used by Bourdieu in a less spatial manner to describe the conjunction between a person’s social position and their dispositional sense of possibilities and limits inherent in a particular social ‘being’. This is ‘more like a class unconscious than a “class consciousness” in the Marxian sense’ (Bourdieu 1985: 728). I want to marry the geographical analysis of practical and subjective relations to bounded, physical spaces, with the sense of location within the ‘social space’ of particular social fields. These two modes are never empirically separate (although it can be analytically useful to separate them). Perceptions of status, belonging, and social attainment tend to adhere to specific locations. An ongoing sense of social trajectory is attached to horizons and perspectives formed in relation to concrete locations which form the sites of practices. I also want to press this notion of ‘sense of place’ into service to encompass multiple places traversed in migrant trajectories. A sense of place is constructed relationally

with others who share it. A migrant sense of place implies a common (if sometimes contested) recognition of contrasting contents and qualities of particular places.

Newcomers such as migrants neither simply bring their world with them nor passively absorb the spatial and social categories they encounter. Hong Kong emigrants in Sydney are newcomers to a pre-existing lived geography. At the same time, Sydney, or a specific localisation of 'Sydney', is incorporated into the lived experience of people whose practical world has been formed somewhere else i.e. Hong Kong. My analysis draws on responses to questions about Sydney's environment, and how the city was encountered by people with dispositions attuned to life in Hong Kong. I concentrated my questioning on practical details of 'settlement', geographical and temporal strategies of movement, choice of residential locations and sites for work and study. The minutiae of pragmatic details of an ongoing process of migrancy was examined in order to apprehend changes in practical dispositions, and the extent to which these changes can lead to subjects gaining a viable sense of place.

6d. 'Good for retirement': life in the slow lane

I want to start with some accounts given by one interviewee – I'll call her Fay – who seemed exemplary, in that her speech yielded the most sharply dichotomised qualities of place. This was due partly to the relative shortness of her time in Sydney. Here she is comparing her life in the eastern suburbs of Sydney with her life in Hong Kong.

I used to work in Hong Kong and the life, sort of, very busy, and you feel very important because you have a role to play, and you know the place well and how to get about. You have a circle of friends, relatives, and all of a sudden you move to a place you don't know much. And also I find things very different. At first I find it very boring, because no friends, no job, and also the pace is very slow. Everything too slow ... I don't understand how things can get about in that way, you know, in that pace, sort of, finishing one thing one time. Everything very slow. It's good for retirement.

This sense of the relative speed of a place is explicitly tied to the self-evaluation of the interviewee's own trajectory and the changes in her routine and social intensity. Fay

compared her slow life in Sydney to her job as a social worker at a large Hong Kong hospital:

... from Monday to Saturday actually working [in Hong Kong], and very little time for entertainment, so lots of programs you know, very fully packed. But here all of a sudden I stay in my house all day long, and no friends, no calls even, don't know who to call and then, nothing to do, idling at home, the program is going to supermarket.

Fay was recalling when she first arrived in Sydney, some eighteen months before. Later she would find employment and make more friends, but still she used the comparison of fast and slow places as an explanation of the world she finds around her. Slowness is taken as an index of lack of motivation, drive, and efficiency. Commenting on what she saw as bad service in shops and banks, and a lack of commitment to the customer, she says: 'Quite annoying, big city life, Sydney, should go this slow, and non-efficient.' This reference to 'big city life' is sharply ironic in tone. She had already reflected:

F: Sometimes I wonder, how come Australia become a big nation, they are so backward. They didn't want to improve or something. They don't like big city. *They don't like big city* (repeated for emphasis, more vehemently the second time). Actually, they sort of like countryside, or something....

P: (I chime in, somewhat defensively): Sydney is the biggest city...

F: Supposed to be the cosmopolitan city.

P: You don't find that?

F: No. I find it very backward, especially when women like shopping, we used to shopping in Hong Kong, so many brands, so many fashions, up to date things. Here, I cannot find anything. I cannot find anything fashionable, trendy. Very strange.

The city and its sense of being vital, cosmopolitan and a sophisticated 'fashion centre', is inversely related to actual physical size – its essence is concentration. A man I interviewed succinctly expressed this economy of size and density:

Hong Kong is a very tiny place, and Australia is a big country. In Hong Kong you can earn much wages but because it's a tiny place and a very small unit costs very much, costs a lot of money.

The crowdedness and condensation of Hong Kong are valorised, as yielding more energy and vitality, as well as an obligation to maintain the pace and commitment. Hong Kong's smallness and concentrated localisation seems to maximise the symbolic power attributed to it. Janie offered this explanation of Hong Kong's power as a lived space:

J: Always in Hong Kong I never know where, what's the life in other countries...Hong Kong is so small, but at the same time its big....A lot of Hong Kong people have a real sense of....a need to expand.

P: People are very contained within what they know.

J: For sure. So some people they can't leave Hong Kong even for holidays, just a few months. Or a month may be too much for them because they are so attached to their mother or parent or whoever. But some people just can't leave their mother.... While other people are different. They can't leave Hong Kong because of the life, just the life, shopping, night activity and (laughing)...the *mahjeuk*.

Migrant subjects typically construct a 'social physics' of forces and gravities, in which Hong Kong plays a key role. Hong Kong is felt to be both big – having certain gravity, centrality, density; and little – concentrated, limited, and enclosing. A *big little* place encapsulates the paradox of the contained cosmopolitanism that can seem both enveloping and self-contained, and dynamic and expansive, pushing its subjects outwards. At the centre of this 'gravity' ascribed to Hong Kong are powerful attachments – 'mother, money and mahjong' – that bind people to it. Sydney by contrast is perceived to be big, but decentred and diffuse. Its gravity is weak – its attraction is being other to Hong Kong, a place of different possibilities.

Fay put forward a morphological theory of money and human motivation grounded in Hong Kong as place:

In Hong Kong, you will feel people more dynamic. They have a goal to chase after, they go very hard. That's why Hong Kong, a small place like that can be that prosperous. They really compete. Competition really keen. Even those big shots, you know, in big companies, you know, the wealthiest, they in at eight o'clock, even, in the office. 8 P.M. – still in the office, still working, still waiting for fax. Very hard working.

The dynamism of Hong Kong capitalism, and its and competitive and disciplinary ethic are taken for granted and expressed as a pure effect of location, arising from this tiny crucible of a place:

F: But the trend is, that you cannot help, because you are already *there*. You cannot help yourself, you cannot back out, or slow down. You are compelled to push forward.

P: That's how it all works?

F: Yeah. Either you retire... if you are still there in this place then you are compelled, you are pushed forward, or you will be left behind.

The topography of Hong Kong space itself, its condensed energy, appears to subjects to supply them with both drive and compulsion – hence its ambivalence as an object of desire for those migrants who have left it.

Sound, or noise, is a common element in these comparative stories. Paul Rodaway points to the different character of sound geographies, or auditory space, compared to vision. While 'the eye focuses, pin-points, abstracts, locating each object in physical space against a background' (Rodaway 1994:114), the ears do not operate through fixed focus or direction. The source of sounds may not be as clearly locatable – 'there' – as a visible object in a field of vision. Hearing is not only a function of the ears – it is also closely connected to the haptic system (i.e. 'touch'). One hears with the whole body, as studies of the 'fully deaf' have shown (Rodaway 1994:98). The auditory field is less clearly bounded by intentionality as the visual field – and its data, sound, is dependent on activity, things and people making sound, including the sound of one's own voice, and all the sounds of one's own body. Perceptions of noise and quiet are a key element in the comparison of places and their social character, because they are associated with actions and events that may be mysterious.

To return to Fay's account of moving into a house in eastern Sydney:

Yes, when we first moved in that unit, and things sort of very particular, even at half past eight, say, in the evening, and then they say, ask your children to don't run about, or something. Actually my children very grown up. [One was 15, the other was at university!]. And I also discovered the house here, very sound carry. You heard about their flushing, and then when we flush toilet, and they, they sort of put it nicely saying,

‘could you please check your toilet?’ I said ‘what’s wrong?’ Maybe something wrong, you know, the water always running, the pump always. Actually its not, its because we go to bed late. And then sometimes the toilet will flush, and we also heard them flushing the toilet. So it’s very quiet, maybe too quiet. So, everybody’s hearing noises.

This soundscape of a block of units may be familiar, where aggravating noises invade across porous boundaries, contributing to *unheimlich* feelings. These sounds are magnified when a normative ‘way of life’ is assumed. The established residents mobilise a sense of ‘how things should be around here’. As Fay put it, ‘they don’t want to see a ... different lifestyle. Maybe you don’t go to bed as early as they, or you dump, your garbage, you know, differently.’ I was not able to work out the difference in garbage dumping practices, since it was not clear to Fay either. Complaints about immigrants have often been phrased in terms of what appear to be minor ‘cultural’ differences in domestic practices, such as the hanging of washing from windows or balconies. Rather than being seen as ‘petty’ complaints, they can be taken as deeply felt breaches of an ordered ‘homely’ imaginary of the Australian suburb.

If the neighbours are complaining about noise, it is the quiet that bothers Fay – a quiet, however, that never becomes absolute silence. For in Hong Kong, ‘You don’t hear your tummy sound, you know, here you feel your ears, sometimes you know, whistle, something like that. Ya, very quiet.’

The quietness points to the lack of social connection and unaccustomed time on her own that forces Fay into an awareness of her own bodily space, which is projected onto the surrounding environment. The sound of her belly and the gurgling of pipes in the walls are similar, perhaps producing the sense of being inside a huge body.²

Busy-ness, social engagement and intensity are explicitly connected to the perceived qualities of living space. Whether a place is objectively noisier or quieter, or more or less dense is not of interest here. What is at issue is the affective sense of a place. Here I exploit the multiple connotations of ‘sense’ – not just as the passive collection of perceptual data and reaction to stimuli, but as an active practice of receiving,

² Clinical psychologists have shown how states of heightened awareness of internal spaces may also produce a feeling of expanded space. Hunt (1995:202) notes that ‘introspectors’ experience a sense of the elongation of their bodies, a sensation linked to mystical or schizophrenic experience.

remembering, framing, giving meaning, positioning and re-constructing the place-worlds in question. From interviews with ‘Fay’, I constructed the following list of binary place-characteristics: ³

Hong Kong	Sydney/Australia
small	BIG
dense	spread-out
noisy	quiet
dynamic	backwards
fast	slow
sociability	isolation
stimulation	boredom
necessity	freedom
uncertainty	security
danger (crime)	less dangerous
vitality	retirement
compulsion	freedom
government, economic – liberal	regulated, taxed
urban, cosmopolitan	rural
compressed space, convenience	space as emptiness, distance
Chinese	‘white’

Table 9: Hong Kong and Sydney – ascribed qualities

These comparisons are implicitly political – as cultural values and stereotypes merge with perceptions of environment, and of judgements about the relative level of ‘development’ of places. I take the above to represent some perceptual and discursive parameters common to an analytical class of people – recent Hong Kong migrants to Australia – in a broadly Bourdieuan sense. By not engaging explicitly with some form of analytical class-ification I am prone to doing it implicitly, in the very ‘naming and framing’ of a group and the characteristics attributed to it by default. In *Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu (1990:59-62) writes of the link between class habitus and individual habitus – what unites social positions and dispositions. Bourdieu’s

³ The table was slightly altered and augmented to encompass other interview material but is substantially the same as the original constructed out of interviews with Fay.

conception of class is neither that of the Marxian relation to a capitalist mode of production, or the Weberian accounting of market-situation and the modes of distribution of goods and resources, notably property.⁴ These ways of constructing class positions, which may offer some basis for understanding economic positions in terms of a given mode of production or ‘life chances’ in a particular market structure, may not be so useful in apprehending the translation of positions, places and contexts in migration. Bourdieu defines class habitus as:

... a subjective but non-individualised system of internalised structures, common schemes of perception, conception and action, which are the precondition of all objectification and apperception...the singular habitus of members of the same class are united in a relationship of homology, that is of diversity within homogeneity....Each individual system of dispositions is a structural variant of the others, expressing the singularity of its position within the class and its trajectory (Bourdieu 1990: 65)

Bourdieu’s conception of class habitus as a generic category for any group of individuals with common conditions of existence and resulting social dispositions may appear to be circular, yet it is useful in apprehending what a particular migrant grouping may have in common. The conception of class habitus also allows for – in fact, demands – relationality within the class grouping, and for an array of social positions and trajectories within these groupings, while also pointing to commonly recognised values and aspirations. The presence of the past projected onto the present space-time generates these common structures of comparison. These values are not merely ‘free floating ideas’ or neutral categories, but exhibit a dualistic logic characterised by an array of dominant and subordinate terms (Plumwood 1993: 42-7).

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How generalisable is the above scheme? It seemed applicable to most of my Sydney interviewees who were at an early stage of encountering urban Australia. These elements of common-sense understanding drew on both embodied experience and memory as well as on shared discourse and ideologies. The above sets of oppositions

⁴ However, Bourdieu’s notion of class is closer to Weber’s notion of status groups, which acknowledge a commonality which enables communal formations based on “a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honour. This sense of honour may be connected with any quality shared by a plurality” (Weber 1948: 187).

are in common currency within a migrant group covering a spectrum of different positions in terms of class and gender. Being a migrant and sharing a common place of origin may initially be a more ‘defining’ characteristic than either economic class or gender, in aligning subjects within a hierarchical social field of Australian nationality.⁶ The above scheme may also obscure a great deal, since it is derived only from examination of a particular discursive micro-practice – talking about and comparing places within a migratory circuit.

Locating dispositions of a recent migrant group (as opposed to a more ‘established’ group) entails not just the study of formative backgrounds and inherited cultural resources, but also of transportable and translatable capacities to negotiate movement and change. But even speaking of a group such as ‘Hong Kong migrants’ is problematic, and can tend to create a false substantialism, the sense of a commonality, which cannot be assumed. In order to evaluate the extent to which ‘each individual disposition is a structural variant of the others’, I want to further examine some accounts of places and comparisons between places – banal mixtures of memory and judgement – and how they were deployed by other Hong Kong emigrants.

6e. ‘Just the place is different’: modes of being in place

Compared to Fay, Angie seems to have a quite different disposition towards urban environments in Sydney. I asked her the reason for moving to a leafy north shore suburb:

‘Cause there are a lot of schools, and more trees and the houses cheaper, and quiet. I like quiet places I don’t want to move. Because it’s quiet, got trees and got a lot of birds. (Laugh)..... I think the main reason is coming from Hong Kong to Australia is to look for a place where you can have some quiet, peaceful.

This has the air of a retrospective judgement. Hong Kong is by comparison:

⁵ Plumwood’s analysis is concerned with how dualities structuring ‘western thought’ and organised around an array of master identities underpin colonial and patriarchal thinking (Plumwood 1993: 64-8).

⁵ For an application of a Bourdieu-ian analysis of habitus, capital and field to Australian nationality see Hage (1995).

... very different, and you pay a lot of money to buy a flat, which is so small. And the air pollution and people making so much noise, especially going to a restaurant. Because everybody talk. (Laugh). You don't have a peaceful time.

I mention that Hong Kong people had often told me 'it's too quiet here'.

Ah yes, it depends on the character. If you are ahead [socially 'forward'], you like to join a crowd, you wouldn't like to be quiet. I am quite used to quiet life, so I don't like the life style in Hong Kong, so I never go out during the night time, or meeting too many people, unless its just the job requirement, otherwise I don't like to go out.

Unlike Fay, Angie values quiet and open space. But quietness is, as for Fay, also associated with a form of social retirement, with a certain resignation from the intense sociality of 'the crowd', associated with the dense social space of Hong Kong. Those who 'settle well' find their place and value its attributes in relation to Hong Kong. The quiet is no longer *too* quiet. The binary structure of the place comparisons is not disturbed, only evaluated differently.

Later, Angie would remark that 'everywhere is the same' – one's life is transferable, and once you are settled then you might as well enjoy it. But even Angie, one of the happiest of my interviewees, makes a distinction about the one place that is not the same.

All my inside, all my content inside belongs to Chinese culture. I understand I am living in Australia and I have to find a way to suit myself, suit my timetable. And this (her Chinese-ness) is the thing inside, but outside, I still have to get along with the English-speaking people, and to deal with them.

Her body is the last place of adaptation, the last bastion of Chinese-ness. One's body becomes the site of 'race' or culture, of common being, when that affinity is not found in the surrounding world. Edward Casey describes the body as an 'intra-place', a place in itself that also helps structure the spatiality of the places around it. The body as intra-place is 'a place *through* which whatever is occurring in a given setting can take place: it is a place of passage of such occurrences, which array themselves around it' (Casey 1987: 196). At the same time, the body is also an 'inter-place', a moving place

that is always in between places (Casey 1987:196). But for Angie, the irreducibility of her body as a marker of difference from others in the space around her, leads her to internalise Chinese-ness as essence, in a way she would not have done in Hong Kong. Although she finds little echo of commonality with non-Chinese, she has learned to 'deal' with them. The contraction of cultural identity to a body's internal space occurs where that body is felt to be a racialised object. 'In the white world the man (sic) of color encounters difficulties in the assimilation of his bodily schema', as Fanon put it in *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 1968: 110). In Fanon's account of relations between colonised Africans and Europeans, blacks could find 'no ontological resistance', or cultural recognition – they could only internalise a sense of inferiority projected by white culture. For these Hong Kong subjects, however, there is little sense of the inferiority of Chinese culture – quite the opposite. However this culture is felt to be unrecognised and secreted like a private possession inside their bodies.

Lona similarly expressed this core embodiment of Chineseness in a non-Chinese space: 'I think that I'll be a Chinese forever'. When I asked her what she meant by this she replied:

L: That means that ... you know the blood inside my body is Chinese. I'm still a Chinese, but I just, uh, live in Australia.

P: Do you think you'll become 'Australian' in any way?

L: No (laughs). I only tell people I am Australian Chinese, not Australian. My eyes are still black in colour. Yellow skin.

P: What do you think 'being Australian' would mean?

L: In my mind? It means the people that, their homeland is Australia. Those people with white skin colour. High nose. (laughs).

For Lona, Australia was a racialised place, the homeland of the white Australians, in spite of the rhetoric of multiculturalism, which she was aware of. But her un-assimilability, the fact that she can't regard herself as Australian, didn't bother her:

It doesn't mean a great difference. Because I can communicate with the people, and also I work here just similar to that in Hong Kong. To me it's not so different.... just transfer from one place to another.

Lona accepted a 'colonial' relation to the Australians she assumed were 'the people with white skin colour', perhaps because this was 'not so different' to the order she was used to in Hong Kong. She challenged this order not by opposition or resentment, but by a remarkable distancing. She refused to position herself within a racialised hierarchy she nevertheless fully recognised. After chatting about favourite places to eat and go out in Hong Kong, I asked Lona if she missed these places:

No I don't think so. Still have entertainment in Australia, the job nature is similar. Just the place is different.

Place is conceived instrumentally as a means of fulfilling certain functions which are transferable between locations. Perhaps this is the disposition of the ideal global labour migrant. Wanda, like Angie, sees herself as well settled, and happily committed to staying in Australia:

I feel I'm satisfied, in the sense of, well, you always have your ups and downs, but I don't feel that I'm sacrificing, like a lot, I don't feel like I'm missing out on a lot although I miss a lot of life style. ... But I don't think I feel sad about it, because I just feel that this is a choice that we made, I made this choice, this is where I live now, and I just want to make the best use of it. You compare from time to time, but you don't let it sort of, um, get you down.

But in a moment of reflection or uncertainty, Wanda spoke of the difference between a culture you can 'own' and a culture you can participate in, while not really feeling you belong to. Now she would like to go back to Hong Kong more often, where this ownership of the meaning of things is restored:

Automatically I will just take up, I mean, I don't have a problem adjusting back to Hong Kong. A lot of people say when they go back they find it noisy. I don't know. I interpret, I think, that's where I come from. I don't think its too noisy, I don't think that people are too quick, I don't think there's too many crimes, I just think that.... it is good.

Here the environmental comparisons come thick and fast, underlining the intensity of the Hong Kong space as felt by Hong Kong people returning. 'A lot of people say...' indicates the commonness of this structure of comparison in accounts of strategies and movements back and forth. For some, re-adjustment to Hong Kong life can be

daunting, although the binary comparisons can be deployed positively or negatively. ‘A lot of people’ use the adverb of excess, ‘too’ – ‘too noisy’, ‘too quiet’ etc. Or the qualities can be accepted and valued – its noisy, its good. Wanda can combine and partake in both worlds *because* they are clearly demarcated and can be enjoyed in their singularity. ‘I can enjoy the quiet nature here, and the trees and bush, I can enjoy that as well’. But this Australian world remains the other of the more intensely ‘cultural’ world she feels she can claim some ownership of.

The women I have been citing have arrived at a certain point of view on their trajectories as migrants by projecting and assigning certain idealised qualities to places which are then available for comparison as clearly bounded differences. Usually these comparisons are not precisely located – not limited to this house or that street – but are projected into the generalised space of ‘here’ or ‘there’ which stand for the world they have come from and gone to. Hence ‘here’ and ‘there’ is also ‘now’ and ‘then’ – a way of indexing the complex spatialised history of migrant passages. Using these comparisons, subjects usually manage to ‘settle’ and reconcile themselves to a primary place from which they can establish a viewpoint, as if to say ‘this is where I am now’ (even if the point of view may switch depending on their movements). But in the three cases I have just presented, an accommodation to functionally being ‘here’ has its cost, symptomised by the radical differentiation of the space of their bodies, into which a racialised identity is compressed. The environment of ‘here’ is not always homely, and cannot be owned in the same way as it can by ‘Australians’. I have presented the above accounts as examples of modes of being in place in Sydney, of locating the self in relation to another lived space.

6f. One who cannot find her place

‘Settling’ is a mode of being comfortably in place, following its more modest original meaning, in which a person is seated, or can ‘dispose oneself comfortably’, according to the Shorter Oxford Dictionary (1993:2796-7). We say that we’re unsettled if we don’t feel at ease in a place in which we’re supposed to be. The word ‘settler’ began to refer to a colonist or someone moving to a new country from the mid-17th century. The use of ‘settlement’ in the administrative language of Australian immigration authorities, like other terms such as ‘landing’, often finds its way into migrants’

(English) accounts.⁷ Apart from referring to the process of migrating when a considerable amount of time is spent in the host country (it does not usually refer to the short exploratory trips or ‘landings’), settling is commonly used to convey an existential adjustment, a degree of affective equilibrium. A couple of quotes from different subjects illustrate this sense:

Because when you first came, and then you came with your family, and then you’re looking for houses, and everything is unsettled. Can your wife settle, and your son settle? Those are the questions you can’t answer unless you experience it. If they come back every day crying, and they are ill today at school, and your wife says the neighbours bad, and then you have to go back.

The new migrant, they still have to find a way to settle. Everything, every sliding movement will make them to think whether it’s against them or for them.

Settling would seem to be related to achieving a degree of repose, in an uncertain, ‘sliding’ world. I want to use the case of a woman I call ‘Celia’ who has found settling difficult, as will be evident in her use of place comparisons. She came to Sydney some six years before to study, but had made few close contacts here. Her work as a secretary did not engage her interest, and she generally found Sydney to be boring and unfulfilling. At the time of this interview Celia still had not resolved where she wanted to be:

When I’m in Australia I want to go back, ...but when I’m in Hong Kong, I don’t quite like it. The people are impolite, ...and they rush, I mean the job pressure, and pressure to live in the big city, and the air pollution, the noise.

The binary comparisons – noisy/quiet, polluted/natural, pressure/relaxation – are in this case deployed critically against *both* places. This doesn’t help Celia to resolve her unsettled state. She experienced disappointment in making friends in Australia, as well as failing to improve her economic and career prospects. She was also feeling the pressure of passing time, that it may have become too late to return. Other friends and

⁷ I once asked a woman why she had returned to Hong Kong although she had originally intended to remain in Australia. She replied, ‘because of the family reunion.’ She had rejoined her husband who was not coping well with living on his own in Hong Kong. ‘Family reunion’, an official term adopted

colleagues in Hong Kong had progressed in their careers and life-paths and she felt she was being left behind. But she was ambivalent about returning although she felt she 'can't stand it any longer here.' She expressed this ambivalence by displacing it onto the weather: 'Actually my ideal thought is that, if I can live in both places for half a year. When Hong Kong is hot, I come and live in Australia'.

Living in both cities was not an economically realistic scenario for her. The weather is a metaphorical field for expressing the possibility of enjoyment. In a survey of Asian migrants in various Australian cities (Inglis et al. 1996), Hong Kong migrants, when asked why they came to Sydney in particular, placed the weather as the primary reason, ahead of other concerns such as political freedom, or employment opportunities. For Celia, it is the very similarity of Sydney and Hong Kong's weather that expresses a lack of a place of preference.

It (the weather) is very similar to Hong Kong, but actually, when I arrived in Sydney, I don't like Sydney because, if I want to find another place to live, I want to find a place that's different to Hong Kong. Many migrants, they like Sydney because Sydney's very much like Hong Kong. But I want to live in a place that's different to Hong Kong.

Here Sydney and Hong Kong cease to be dichotomised, becoming identical. Celia cannot find an 'other' to 'here' because she cannot locate a principal place to be. This suggests that the binary structure of characteristics attributed to place has a practical function in settling, even if this settling is a kind of stabilisation of the self in motion between places. Settling in this sense is not limited to inhabiting a single locality, but entails making an accommodation with a series of places and situations.

Comparing places is a process of selective and evaluative spatial memory that helps in the work of making practical choices and adjustments. Memories of place inevitably undergo a great deal of discursive work, in order to generalise them into the dichotomous forms I have been describing. Interviews with Celia also brought forth other memories of migration that are not easily assimilated into shared discourse. She related some memory fragments she associated strongly with her early period of settling in Sydney. Once, a light bulb went out and she had to climb on a high shaky

from the immigration terminology, was personalised and reversed to describe a personal reason to rejoin her family in Hong Kong.

chair to change it. Another time she recalled burning herself trying to take something out of the oven. The dish said ‘oven safe’ but not understanding this, thinking the label meant it must be safe, she burned herself badly. Gazing at her hands, Celia described the feel of the ‘water under her skin’, as if she had returned to the place and moment of her injury.

These dream-like memory fragments condense the trauma of domestic spaces that are rendered uncanny and dangerous because subjects are not truly at home. Celia remembered (although she didn’t know why she remembered) how upset she became after cooking dinner for herself and another Hong Kong woman she was living with, when she realised she would have to wash all the dishes as well. When I asked the significance of this memory she said, ‘We had it too easy there’. Whenever she had returned home from work in Hong Kong, her mother would always cook the meals and she never had to do anything. This loss of homely (i.e. motherly) provision seems fundamental to her sense of displacement. Accounts of domestic space in Hong Kong often assume this space is under the rule of the mother, who does everything, leaving no undomesticated or private spaces. The maternal space of the home could be perceived as nurturing or stifling, or both simultaneously.⁸

Several times I have encountered people struggling to speak about migrant experiences which have apparently not been cycled through the filters of ‘social memory’ and so absorbed into everyday discursive exchanges. With traumatic memory, certain experiences are unable to be organised on a linguistic level, and may be re-experienced somatically as flashbacks or re-enactments of a situation. In remembrances such as these, “the ability to recover the past is paradoxically tied up...with the inability to have access to it” (Caruth 1995: 154). If the articulation of such memories are of value for a researcher interested in affect or embodiment, at the same time they are strange and troubling, as the subject appears to be removed from the present, at least momentarily, to the time and place of that memory. Such disclosures point to the limits of what is available to discourse, and to the limits of discursive strategies of dealing with traumatic effects of displacement.

⁸ Generational domestic conflicts often emerge in migrant comparisons, particularly where adult children were obliged to stay with their parents in small apartments. There was often a clash over freedom of lifestyle and sexuality and a general question of autonomy.

This leads me to make some broad distinctions about memory. A great deal of memory work is practically embedded in habituation. Casey (1987:151) characterises habitual body memories as ‘an active immanence of the past in the body that informs present bodily actions in an efficacious, orienting and regular manner’. He also distinguishes a second broad category of body memory, which is traumatic, memories which ‘arise from and bear on one’s own lived body in moments of duress’ (1987:154). As we would expect, these memories are often repressed and marginalised. Their return to consciousness can be accompanied by heightened emotionality. Casey points to the tendency of traumatic memory to be concerned with the fragmented body. As Lacan put it, ‘the fragmented body ... usually manifests itself in dreams when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual’ (Lacan 1977:6). If habitual memory acts to co-ordinate, to pull together orientations, actions and purposes, then traumatic memory may focus on the body broken down into uncoordinated parts, or of a sense of the body not in its place (pain, isolation, unheimlich feelings). These memories tend to be very specifically focused on the particular settings in which they originated. It is as if the remembering takes the person back to the place and to the affective state, which is re-experienced.

Memories of the traumatic type are not easily generalised and brought into the domain of everyday speech about common experiences of place and migrant trajectories. This suggests some limits to the kind of (non-traumatic) commonplace memories I have been talking about. Comparisons of place are easily exchangeable statements, often of a banal and common-sense nature, which function generally to mark out where the subject is in relation to more than one here and there. Place comparisons are produced along with the discursive sharing of common trajectories and positions. The variations in such comparisons point to differences in migrant strategies and relative capacities to command and capitalise on the occupation of space. Of course, many elements contribute to these capacities, not the least of which is the work of time.

6g. Between here and there: economies of migrant mobility

As the reader may have noticed, these examples of place comparison were largely provided by women. Men I interviewed also voiced similar dichotomous perceptions

of place, but tended to adopt a more explanatory, generalising mode of speech. This contrasted with the rather more 'personal' and affective accounts of the experience of migration offered by women. For this reason they were mostly less interesting and illustrative for my purpose, since they resorted less explicitly to sensory experience in their accounts of difference between places.⁹ This also points to the importance of gendered modes of experiencing and appropriating space. Much of the material I have used relates to the uncanniness of domestic space, the spaces of the home or other consumption-oriented spaces such as shops rather than workplaces. In the case of astronaut households, married women often faced a 're-domestication', being called on to look after children and houses by themselves, sometimes sacrificing careers. They were often expected to be the familial anchor ('ground control') while their partners remained in Hong Kong to work. Their experience of Sydney in many cases reflects a gendered division of labour in which they were repositioned as sole care-givers. In Hong Kong a large part of child-rearing work is provided by grandparents or live-in 'maids'. An abundant supply of the cheap labour of Filipina and other Southeast Asian domestic workers maintain many middle-class households in Hong Kong and fill the old role of *amah*. They form a subaltern domestic labour force that underpins Hong Kong's labour force (Constable 1996). The loss of these sources of support placed an even greater burden of responsibility on migrant women.¹⁰

The sharply gendered differences in speaking positions and styles in the Sydney interviews did not seem so apparent in interviews conducted in Hong Kong. This suggests that being in Australia imposed effects in gender differentiation and subject positioning, at least in relation to the capacity to produce accounts about migration experiences. It seemed as though women interviewed in Sydney lacked some of the expressive confidence they had when I spoke to them in Hong Kong, perhaps due to being in 'home' territory. Informants who had returned to Hong Kong employed a similar language of place comparison (the 'here' and 'there' are reversed), but not so frequently or in so polarised a fashion. Feeling more at home, in spite of the usual

⁹ Here I would wish to avoid too sharp a bifurcation between male=governmental/objectifying speech and female=emotive/subjective speech. Nevertheless, especially with couples there was often an enunciatory division of labour – women I interviewed often explicitly marked their discourse as *about* their personal feeling ('I can only tell you what I was feeling'), while men would often explicitly mark their speech as more generally explanatory, giving me the truth... ('Hong Kong people *like to...*')

¹⁰ However, a few informants in Sydney resorted to employing older Chinese women very cheaply to tend children and cook for them.

complaints about the pressures of Hong Kong, subjects were not so disposed to think of 'there' in such strongly dichotomous terms, since 'here' was now their originary habitat. Instead, the focus was more on the exigencies of return and on the nature of Hong Kong, how it was changing or would change in the future. 'Hong Kong' was not a 'there' with characteristics fixed by memory, but a living and changing entity that had been made strange by a period of absence.

There are clearly great differences in capacities to viably inhabit cross-national spaces. If there is a continuum of migrant strategies between the settler who simply comes to stay and the astronaut who engages in long-term movement between places, these different modes of migrancy are clearly enacted in spatial stories of the inhabitation of place. The capacity for international movement and being at home with this movement is itself a form of cultural capital.

One genuine astronaut, an entrepreneur called James who 'bases' himself principally in Australia while spending about two thirds of his time outside the country, could easily and unironically characterise himself as a 'citizen of the world'. He mentioned the word 'world' eight times in a short interview: 'world markets', wanting to make the best products in the world, and so on. This man did not speak in terms of sharp dichotomies between Sydney and Hong Kong discussed above, because he had many 'global' reference points. He could feel 'comfortable anywhere'. For James, 'settlement' is not an issue: having the capacity to move almost at will, there is no need to make an ultimate choice of where to be. Such people rarely conceive of themselves as 'migrants' – a term which suggests a more limited trajectory, a lesser belonging, and a closer existential identity with the requirements of state immigration policy.

While few informants approached this degree of mobility, I only came across a few informants who had not engaged in considerable travel between Hong Kong and Australia. At the other end of the spectrum to the astronaut businessman is Stephen, the building inspector who had been living in Sydney for four years, and had never been back to Hong Kong even for a brief visit. 'No point. You have to spend too much money. Hotels and shopping for presents for all your relatives. My brothers are all there but their houses are too small to stay.' It was much easier for his brothers and their families to stay with him in Sydney where they could stay at his house. 'A

different world' he said while looking at a tourist poster of Hong Kong, 'maybe I won't ever go back.' Stephen said this with a tone of resignation and distance. The world is split into different and incommensurable worlds. Hong Kong was by now a distant place, by now existing in his memory only as difference to his current life. By contrast, for the astronaut there is just one world, which is defined by its functional similarity – it is all there for doing business in. While there are no doubt material preconditions to being a 'citizen of the world', these entrepreneurial astronauts are not reliant only on economic capital, but on cosmopolitan capacities to operate within multiple contexts as if it was 'one world.'

6h: Chapter conclusion

In the interviews analysed in this chapter, highly dichotomised perceptions of place seemed to express the most generalised spatial divisions, the migrant 'here' and 'there'. This simplicity is partially an effect of deictic structures of reference.¹¹ The banal, common-sense nature of these comparisons of place is a way of simplifying communication and evaluation of the difficulties and uncertainties of the migration process. Narrative accounts of migrant experience simplify shared spatial and temporal reference points, generating a sense of common perceptions and practices. Although these accounts at once discursively simplify and spatially generalise understandings of shared experiences of migration, at the same time they are also grounded in the specificity of lived spaces.

The scheme of oppositions that I drew up from my early interviews with Fay seems to apply broadly to the perceptual schemes used by most interviewees to make comparisons between Hong Kong and Sydney. These point to common structures of understanding within a broadly defined 'class' of migrants moving in different trajectories between the two cities. However, there are substantial differences in the way in which subjects can utilise these shared perspectives on their 'sense of place'. The structure of comparisons of place shared by this migrant group allows for a

¹¹ While any number of 'heres' or 'theres' can be postulated, at any discursive moment within a narrative 'the sectors of here *and* there, taken together, are coextensive with the experiential field as a whole, leaving no remainder' (Casey 1991: 55).

multiplicity of interpretations and the generation of a range of positions and hierarchies.

The majority of my interviewees who did not have the means to maintain property in both cities faced a choice between Sydney or Hong Kong as a primary place of residence. Nevertheless, a high degree of movement between places was common in most cases. In this chapter I focused on ‘settling’, specifically as the way in which discursive comparisons of place provided a way of evaluating and living with a choice to be based in a particular place. Settling in this sense is not restricted to residence in the host country – Celia could settle in either Sydney or Hong Kong. Nevertheless, settling entails some resolution of acquired dispositions with the place or places of inhabitation. ‘Settlers’ could be contrasted with ‘astronauts’, those stereotypical possessors of the economic and cultural capital to move at will.

But even wealthy astronauts rarely remain permanently in orbit. For some it is a temporary strategy to gain economic leeway to secure families or careers. A distinction between ‘astronauts’ and ‘settlers’ only points to a relative capacity and inclination to operate trans-nationally – they are not opposed types of migrants. Even permanent ‘settlers’ can make frequent movements between Hong Kong and Australia over a long period of time. ‘Settling’ should not be given the finality usually assumed in the migration literature. Settling in this context may entail disposing oneself comfortably to various contingent cross-national routines and arrangements. Settlement more generally suggests the achievement of an existential still point around which subjects can build a relatively secure basis for existence, even if this does not entail a permanent embeddedness in a particular place. For Clifford, contemporary ‘location’ may not entail a fixed and stable ‘home’, but “a *series* of locations and encounters, travel within diverse, but limited spaces” (Clifford, in Kaplan 1996: 168. Original emphasis.). Contemporary Hong Kong migration often entails complex strategies of movement. At the same time, it is also dependent on specific localisations in Hong Kong and Sydney and on the maintenance of social and economic connections and resources in both places.

Chapters 7 and 9 will explore ways in which migrant subjects try to navigate and make sense of mobile histories and trajectories, social and spatial. Migrant accounts are not

static but highly fluid, even inconsistent or contradictory, as re-interviews often show. The ongoing formation of spatial understandings of migrant subjects is linked to the degree to which they are able to ‘mesh’ new social relations with dispositions acquired in Hong Kong, at the same time acquiring new dispositions attuned to everyday practice in Sydney. The next chapter will more closely examine practical accommodations to lived spaces in Sydney, from encounters with suburban houses and gardens to the gradual development of an image of the city and its hierarchies of difference and distinction.