

## Chapter 11

### Conclusion

*We need to say, "Look at these new people, they need to find their own bearings."*

#### 11a. Thesis overview: formal elements and terms

The belated recognition of the significance of migration and travel and the resultant cultural interpenetration has affected the way in which ethnographers conceive and frame spatial domains. The ethnographic field has been unbound from its fixed location. I have pursued the potential of multi-sited ethnography in tracing the movements of migrant subjects between Hong Kong and Sydney. Extending Appadurai's injunction to interrogate the nature of locality in increasing deterritorialised (or reterritorialising) contexts (Appadurai 1991: 191), the object of this study is the emergent sense of migrant spatiality itself. I have maintained a concentration on dispositions towards spatiality and place as an analytical approach to apprehending the multiplicity of changes and adjustments that contemporary migration entails.

In this study I have detailed a number of locations or sites, a sort of matrix of representations of urban space generated from a limited set of interviews. These sites include: Hong Kong as the place of formation of spatial dispositions; Sydney as a contrasting habitat that poses specific problems of practical orientation and inhabitation; the filmic space of *Floating Life* with its affective resonances of contrasting urban spaces; Hong Kong as a place of return; and the discourse spaces of interviews in which these narratives of movement between places emerged. Together these sites form a kind of interconnected topography of migrant being linking two cities.

What is a site? Within this analysis, 'sites' are not so much bounded empirical spaces, as emergent understandings, a 'sense of place' derived from a context of movement and settlement. However, migrant sites are hardly homogenous, seamless or symmetrical in terms of the way in which they are apprehended and connected by

subjects. A sense of place is inevitably subject to differing ‘power-geometries’ (Massey 1993: 61) in which groups and individuals are differently positioned in relation to various flows and connections within and between sites. In other words, places are differently constituted by the configurations of movement which connect them – places recently constituted by migration more obviously so.

In chapter 4, I produced a rough typology of Hong Kong migrant trajectories using the categories of willing and reluctant settlers, returnees and astronauts. This served to illustrate the singular patterns of contemporary Hong Kong migration. These categories also suggested two dimensions that engender a hierarchy of migrant subjects: the range of potential spatial and social trajectories; and the differing dispositions of subjects towards these trajectories.

In this thesis I attempted to capture some common elements of acquired spatial dispositions and practical styles ‘inherited’ from exposure to Hong Kong’s urban space. At the same time I sought to account for significant differences in migrant trajectories, for differing horizons and senses of possibility. This analysis of changing ‘states’ relies on the assertion of relatively homogeneous collectively embodied states of being (‘spatial dispositions in Hong Kong’), while acknowledging that differences between these dispositions are the basis for an array of distinctions and differential accommodations to the new spaces of migration.

This study presented an assemblage of migrant narratives (or ‘spatial stories’) in such a way as to make visible an array of ways of negotiating and making connections between lived spaces. The focus on habituation to lived space drew both on dispositional commonalities within a given group of migrants, and on varying capacities to improvise and adapt to new environments.

Migration locations were examined in terms of the practical attunement of the spatial dispositions of subjects. Urban space in Hong Kong was assumed to be the site of formation of a common stock of spatial dispositions. These dispositions could only be imprecisely posited, and always remain somewhat speculative. The analysis of spatial dispositions in Hong Kong could not be approached solely through the

narratives of the migrant subjects in question, since the capacity to reflect on the most taken for granted aspects of mimetically acquired 'native' dispositions is clearly very limited. A particular reading of historical material was necessary to ground the relation between contemporary spatial dispositions and practices and the 'production of space' arising from Hong Kong's very specific colonial conditions. While colonial mercantile relations have shaped Hong Kong's contemporary spatiality, 'native' spatial practices have also played their part in constituting Hong Kong as a singular place: a place in turn incorporated into the very bodily sense of its inhabitants. This analysis pursues a more nuanced understanding of what has sometimes been presented as a stereotypical Hong Kong 'ethos', characterised by a highly pragmatic orientation to survival in a dense and challenging environment. These typical orientations (to speed, efficiency, convenience, work, money etc.) are often strongly inscribed in the self-understandings of Hong Kong people. Nevertheless, I maintain that we should accept such typifications as general descriptions only to the extent that we can also examine their contingency and potential for change. Migration can bring these kinds of naturalised 'attributes' more sharply into question, potentially unleashing conflicts and ambivalences to the qualities identified with particular places.

This historical inquiry into Hong Kong space was conducted in tandem with a more situated examination of a locality within Hong Kong. Tsing Yi, like many parts of Hong Kong has undergone rapid change and contestation around its ongoing 'production of locality' (Appadurai 1995). Through a 'pedestrian analysis' I introduced my own embodied perspective, that of a subject moving into a pre-existing space to which he is not attuned, in order to examine everyday spatial practices. If ethnography makes the ordinary practices of others strange and hence explicit, it does so through the contrary motion of an ethnographic 'mini-migration' (Clifford 1992). Exposure to new modes of orienting oneself in an urban space to which one is not habituated provides a basis for practical learning and understanding based on comparisons (both bodily and mental) with what one takes for granted. This resembles – in reverse – the perspectives of migrants moving to Sydney: the gaps and limitations to this knowledge are also apparent, as they are to migrant subjects.

Ultimately the spatial dispositions of migrant subjects could only be meaningfully accessed through their accounts of a contrasting space, that of suburban Sydney. Dispositions are generally made explicit only when subjects encounter significant discontinuity between what they know and expect and what actually confronts them. The second half of the thesis (chapters 6 to 9) concentrated on how contrasting spaces of representation – of ‘Hong Kong’ and ‘Sydney’ – are generated and utilised in accounts of the practicalities of movement and settlement. Far from being fixed, representations of urban space are an ongoing work of condensation and differentiation. The sets of contrasts drawn between different kinds of spaces are a means of aligning and orienting dispositions between the two cities linked by migrant practices. Hong Kong and Sydney are conceived as sharply differentiated sites or territories within a single ‘place’, a larger topography constituted by migrant movements and trajectories. An expanded field of place draws on a collective idiom for accessing multiple locations and times, as much through memory and circulating representations as through direct experience.

I drew on diverse ethnographic, linguistic and phenomenological theories in order to support an analysis grounded in the inherent spatiality and referentiality of spoken accounts.<sup>1</sup> Despite the often fragmentary nature of these accounts (often generated from ‘fast-food’ interviews) my analysis is firmly grounded in the referential speech of informants. All the ethnographic analyses are based on a hunch that spatial practices can reveal their logic, can connect past, present and future in terms of locations and trajectories. This is anchored, not in the dynamics of specific social fields, but in the negotiation and inhabitation of lived spaces. The sense of location, direction and possibility for these migrants is linked to the practicalities of inhabitation in and between places. Migrant orientation and sense of possibility is indexed by ways in which subjects are able to connect and mobilise the differences between places. These spaces are not neutral settings for action – they are an ongoing historical product of social orders and ways of being which engage its occupants at the very level of bodily dispositions. Different kinds of space are only gradually incorporated into the larger ‘place’ of migrant subjectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> Principally Hanks (1990, 1996), De Certeau (1984) and Casey (1993, 1997).

The discursive structure of comparisons between the two cities resulted from a collective referencing of contrasting lived spaces of Hong Kong and Sydney. I have argued that these are indeed strongly structured around a stock of commonly recognised categories. Perceptions, judgements, tastes and identifications are fused in these comparative accounts of places, hence their aura of naturalness and ideological nature. Embodied perceptions of Hong Kong and Sydney (too much or too little space, verticality/horizontality, speed/slowness etc.) merged with an array of judgements (economic/social, dynamic/dissipated, efficient/inefficient, work/leisure etc) generated through what we might call a specific 'repertoire of evaluations' (Lamont & Thévenot 2000: 5-6). These evaluations of places are at the same time means of self-evaluation and identification, an idiom for articulating emergent affinities and preferences between places.

Elements drawn from the lived spatiality of one place are transferred and incorporated into new contexts, assisting in the practical negotiation of different environments, at the same time locating the position of migrant subjects within a spatialised structure of difference. Both these aspects are implicated, for instance, in the way that Hong Kong settlers classified different parts of suburban Sydney, incorporating relations drawn from class and ethnic hierarchies present in Hong Kong society, while at the same time positioning themselves in relation to Sydney's singular (but fluid) hierarchy of spaces. Remembered Sydney spaces were folded into the larger sense of place of returnees in Hong Kong. This is a two-way traffic. Return to Hong Kong did not result in a simple reversion to prior spatial dispositions. Hence Hong Kong on return is a different 'site' to Hong Kong prior to migration. Memories of Australian spaces are incorporated into a larger network of place, as traces of alternative ways of being. Remembered spaces are infused with affects, tastes and pleasures. They are intimately tied to hopes and desires (whether fulfilled or not) generated within migrant trajectories and to modes of connecting places. Dispositions change along with developing practical capacities, tastes and desires. These changes encompass shifting horizons of possibility, a sense of potentiality emerging from different experiences of place. Some subjects are clearly more able than others to develop a more 'cosmopolitan' ability to appropriate and profit from

the differences between places.<sup>2</sup> Yet capacities to negotiate differences between places may not be fully understandable in terms of simple transfers of recognised ‘cultural capital’, such as education, language capacities, and experience of travel. Numerous engagements and adjustments to the multiple encounters and contingencies of everyday life condition accommodations to living with migrant trajectories.

Throughout this study I have used the metaphor of accommodation to characterise the shifts and adjustments to the contingencies of migration. I have also employed a cluster of terms – settlement, dwelling, orientation, attunement and fit – to broadly classify modes of migrant accommodation. These overlapping terms all point to ways in which subjects negotiate new and constantly changing situations and conditions, through a ‘somatic modality of engagement’ (Nagatomo 1992: 195). While it is difficult to objectify, to ‘put a finger on’ dispositions, they are best apprehended in relation to their practical objects, that is, to the places, things or tasks with which they are engaged.

I have used ‘settlement’ in a way that is quite specific to this migration context – the naturalisation of an administrative term applied to the process of becoming practically established in Australia. At the same time settlement is predicated on the achievement of a degree of affective equilibrium – a sense of being settled. In the context of mobile, cross-national migration, settlement will entail a grounding in more than one place, or in a cycle of movements. I have maintained the importance of a dialectic of motion and repose in the analysis of the negotiation of spaces. This occurs at various scalar levels from the immediate proximity of bodily space to the larger orbit of migration movements. Capacities for mobility require the cultivation of still points, places of rest, while the possibility of being at home is defined by movements, entrances and exits.

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<sup>2</sup> Robbins (1998: 259), amongst others, has made the argument that cosmopolitanism should not be conceived as a ‘western’ characteristic or privilege. Rather it points more generally to differential capacities to manage disparities between the degree of social recognition subjects can deploy in different places. Robbins (1998: 260) suggests that cosmopolitanism is a more useful and dynamic way of thinking about mobility and cultural difference than the more ‘fashionable’ notion of hybridisation.

‘Dwelling’ is closely related to settlement – both entail the founding and maintenance of spaces for the body. I use dwelling more specifically to designate the cultivation of selves (individual and collective) through an ongoing project of inhabiting spaces and elaborating ways of living in new environments. For subjects habituated to the concentrated and saturated spaces in Hong Kong, encounters with the spaces of Australian suburbia typically generated an uncertain accommodation of desires and aspirations which could not necessarily be reconciled.

‘Orientation’ refers to the directional aspect of spatiality, to the capacity to align oneself and to navigate physical spaces. This is related to capacities to interpret and respond to the social logics of new environments. Orientation is not only about adjustments to the determinations of external environments, it also entails alignments of the self in moving between places. I have used the notion of orientation practices to refer to ways of opening up a sense of place through movement, forming new pathways and defining boundaries.

‘Attunement’ more generally refers to the fusion of bodily engagements and emotional states in a sense of the ‘affective resonance’ of new place, person or situation. This is often registered by subjects as a quite visceral combination of physical sensation and affective connection (or lack of connection). ‘Fit’ refers more directly to an embodied sense of social insertion into a place or situation, to the sense of legitimacy of one’s presence. In the previous chapter I detailed several cases where the sense of fit negatively (as mis-fit) indexed assimilatory pressure within everyday Australian life. On the other hand, many subjects exhibited a palpable expansion of being, drawing on an attunement to a wider place of migrancy.

These conceptions of interlocking modalities of accommodation emerged from the analysis of accounts of small details of everyday spatial engagements in Sydney and Hong Kong. This study of changing spatial dispositions represents only a very specific and partial attempt to examine the intricacies of migration encounters. Further research remains to be done in this direction, examining dispositional accommodations of contemporary migrants to complicated strategies of movement and settlement.

## **11b. Conclusion part 2: a view from Sydney, February 2002.**

In the previous chapter I gave Fay the last word, if only to suggest that there is no final place of inhabitation for many of the subjects of this study. After stubbornly resisting many aspects of Sydney's space and style of living, Fay had made a temporary accommodation with it, while hinting that it is by no means the final accommodation she will have to make. The very banality of her account of her engagements with urban life in Sydney – ordinary mis-fits and estrangements, prejudices and unruly dispositions – emphasises the 'turbulence' that characterises these migrant movements.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, Fay is hardly the 'whole', stable person she may seem to be. Such narratives of self were the outcome of a careful selection of fragments of speech and analysis, drawn from a few moments within a complicated migrant trajectory. Similarly the places outlined by the chapters of this account are an assemblage of elements designed to present a spectrum of ways of perceiving and inhabiting these spaces linked together by migration practices.

These places are constitutive elements of a larger, albeit limited migrant place. (This is why I have used the term cross-national rather than transnational.) The play of represented places – of Hong Kong and Sydney, here and there, centre and periphery, home and away etc. – open up glimpses of what these places encompass, incorporate in the taken-for-grantedness of everyday inhabitation and in ongoing memory and narrative. The ways that these places are understood in relation to other places brings out some of the constitutive elements of subjects' insertion into these social spaces. These migrant understandings of place, then, are deeply relational, linking contrasting qualities and ideologies of place as they are lived, or inhabited. For instance, we could relate the embodied discipline attached to the emporium space of Hong Kong, the image of Australia as a tourist site, a dream place of retirement and

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<sup>3</sup> The metaphor of turbulence with its aeroplane connotations seems apt to describe contemporary passages between migrant places. For Papastergiadis (2000: 4), given that migrant movements cannot be explained by any general theory, by 'direct causes and effects', turbulence describes 'the mobile processes of complex self-organization that are now occurring' in global migration.

social potential, and the imagining of Sydney's suburban spaces through the lens of class and racial difference acquired in Hong Kong.

There are many ways in which these images and understandings of place could be structurally interpreted and explained: in terms of a reconstitution of identities enfolding gender, class and racialised identities; of colonial and emergent post-colonial subjectivities; of the position of an emergent middle class in complex political economies of migration, of the play of policies and objectives of states and governmental regimes. None of these dimensions can be adequately addressed here. I do not wish to 'conclude' by over-generalising and thematising these connections between places, forcing a closure of interpretations of fuzzy and still emergent practices. As with Hong Kong's liminal political and social situation in the SAR period, not much is certain, making any judgements highly provisional.<sup>4</sup>

Given this uncertainty, any adequate understanding of Hong Kong – Australia migration must hold multiple 'macro' and 'micro' aspects in tension. Throughout this study I have sought to avoid the culturalism of approaches to migration that overemphasise either immigrant integration and adaptive interaction with the host society; or the coherence and continuity of 'diasporic' communities or culture. Neither of these standpoints seemed adequate to deal with the mobile and unpredictable exchanges that are a feature of contemporary Hong Kong emigration. In the last chapter I traced the play of migrant attachments and affinities as a 'belonging between' places. It is evident that there is neither symmetry nor clear direction to the way that subjects pursue this belonging. Unilinear 'models' of migration that imply a stable directionality and relatively homogenous integration into the host nation no longer seem adequate, if they ever were. The older one-way models of cultural/national assimilation – produced largely in accord with state policy agendas – are inadequate 'because the change that occurs does not always confirm the same identity and structures of the original form' (Papastergiadis 2000: 208). Nevertheless we cannot underestimate the role of host states and the interaction of national political attitudes and actions on migrant existence. While

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<sup>4</sup> Erni (2001:411) as editor of a journal edition on Hong Kong's culture and politics since 1997 characterises the situation as at most a 'pre-emergence'.

assimilation is no longer official policy, assimilatory pressures remain in everyday engagements. This is no doubt linked to the decline in state support for a multicultural pluralism in Australia.<sup>5</sup>

It has not been my primary intention to present an explicit diagnosis of the public politics affecting Hong Kong migration to (and from) Australia. I merely noted in passing the appearance of various ‘political’ viewpoints or references when they appeared in these mobile and fragmentary accounts of moving between places. The existence of actual spaces of possibility for intercultural sociality – that is, sociality which proceeds beyond (and in spite of) cultural categories of difference – are often largely invisible to the public eye. They must be sought beneath the torrents of rhetoric, both political and academic, on ethnicity, identity and difference (Bottomley 2000: 181-2). In this study I have taken the tack of looking at some of the pre-conditions of intercultural inhabitation by bracketing analysis of immediate ‘external’ interactions in order to investigate dispositions towards spaces. This muting of the public context of migration enabled an analysis of how built space as social product embodies many hidden aspects of social and cultural orders. Earlier I drew some parallels between this study and Clara Law’s strategy in *Floating Life*. As Law put it:

Those superficial things of having a relationship...I think that actually doesn’t help at all. We need to say, “Look at these new people, they need to find their own bearings.”

(Clara Law cited in Mitchell 2000: 109)

How migrants are disposed to find their bearings has indeed been the subject of this thesis. Readers of this thesis may wonder, as some of the Aussie viewers of *Floating Life* were wondering, what is the point? There doesn’t appear to be any central problem. There’s no enemies, and therefore no winners. No good guys or bad guys. No one dies. Some characters are a little unsettled, perhaps suffering from jet lag after a long flight. None of these middling subjects are really oppressed, are they?

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<sup>5</sup> Various commentators (for instance, Jupp 1999) have pronounced the end of multiculturalism as public policy in Australia.

These people from Hong Kong are counted amongst the good migrants, happy sailors on the ‘good ship Migrant Policy’, ‘highly skilled migrants with good English language skills’ enhancing Australia’s competitive advantage.<sup>6</sup> After over a century of ‘yellow peril’ these new Chinese are starting to look like something of a model minority. Their loyalty could be questioned at times, but at least they’re not illegals, Muslims or likely terrorists. Nevertheless they (or any non-Aussies) can hardly benefit in the long run from the increasing polarisation which seems to be occurring as the Lucky Country goes into a divisive frenzy over border protection, queue jumping refugees, and a general post cold-war demonisation along the lines of a ‘clash of civilisations’. All this sits uncomfortably with the accompanying celebrations of the joys of globalisation and deterritorialisation, whether it emanates from politicians, market analysts or cultural theorists.

In this thesis I have chosen not to thematically address many important questions: the nature of contemporary international migration, gender and class relations in migration practices, world cities as nodes of global interchange, the effects of urban planning in Hong Kong or Sydney, or migration policies in Hong Kong or Australia. Rather, these questions were allowed to emerge as fragments in the viewpoints of subjects still negotiating their place in relation to these broader contexts.

The subjects of this study are not positioned as victims, nor are they the somewhat hapless innocents some of my accounts may make them out to be as they ‘find their bearings’. Amidst the present clouds of political verbiage about others, attempts at engaging with understanding the specific and very ordinary experiences of migrants or any kind of ‘other experience’ are becoming rarer, if not suspect. This study is a small contribution to that end.

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<sup>6</sup> These words come from a newspaper article headlined ‘Skills essential for the good ship Migrant Policy’ by Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock (SMH 11/2/2002: 8). This article appeared at a time when the Minister was at the centre of widespread controversy about the government’s policy of mandatory detention of asylum seekers, amidst protests and hunger strikes by refugees in detention centres.