

# Hope and Belonging in a Multicultural Suburb

Amanda Wise

*In this paper I explore the complex nature of multiculturalism as place-sharing, of cross-cultural interaction, or multiculturalism of inhabitance. I investigate, in particular, the struggles over and potentials for a sense of hopefulness and belonging in a culturally diverse suburb shared by more than one ethnic group. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Sydney suburb of Ashfield, I present a series of ethnographic vignettes that represent what I term 'hopeful intercultural encounters'. I theorise these in terms of Simmel's notion of gratitude, and Hage's notion of 'hope on the side of life' as a means of reflecting on the social possibilities for new forms of integration in culturally diverse localities.*

**Keywords:** Multiculturalism; Cultural Diversity; Intercultural Relations; Intercommunal Relations; Social Cohesion; Hope; Racism; Age; Place

*In the active relations between us, in the unfolding, contingent or paired interplay, between our outgoing responsiveness toward an other or otherness and its incoming, complimentary responsiveness toward us, a third (at least partially) living unity is created in our meetings with these others—an invisible unity which is nonetheless felt as a 'real presence'. (Shotter 2004: 453)*

Integration, social cohesion, unity in diversity; such phrases constitute the political lexicon of contemporary multicultural nationhood. Yet despite the abundant literature on racism, difference and power (cf. Bhabha 1994; Hage 1998; Wal and

---

Amanda Wise is a research fellow at the Centre for Research on Social Inclusion, Macquarie University. She has recently completed a two-year ethnographic research project entitled 'Contact Zones: The Micro-dynamics of Cultural Diversity in Suburban Sydney' which explores the everyday dimensions of living with diversity in suburbia. Amanda has previously researched and published on the East Timorese refugee diaspora in Australia, exploring ideas of trauma, politics, home, belonging and identity, pre- and post-independence. Correspondence to: Amanda Wise, Research Fellow, Centre for Research on Social Inclusion, Macquarie University, NSW 2109, Australia. Email: amanda.wise@scmp.mq.edu.au

Verkyuten 2000) we are only just becoming aware of the complex task of actually 'doing' everyday togetherness-in-difference (Ang 2001). What lessons might be learnt from quotidian actors? In this paper I explore the complex nature of multiculturalism as a form place-sharing, or, as Hage has termed it before me, a multiculturalism of inhabitation, or the multicultural *real* (Hage 1998: 233). It is therefore a paper about diversity that exists in real, lived environments, not simply in abstract multicultural policy, and consequently implies layers of ethnically different individuals *inhabiting* suburbs and urban environments, corporeally interacting with one another as neighbours, shoppers, workers; rubbing up against one another in a myriad of quotidian situations. In the following pages I attempt to ethnographically unravel some of the struggles over and potentials for a sense of hopefulness and belonging across and between difference in a culturally diverse suburb shared by multiple ethnic groups. My discussion is, in essence, about hopeful affect, togetherness and the pursuit of being and asks what possibilities lie in the suburban multicultural real (Hage 1998: 233) for attaining a sense of belonging and homeliness within difference?

After introducing the fieldwork project on which this paper is based, I offer, by way of Ghassan Hage's notion of 'hope on the side of life', a theoretical filter through which to read a series of ethnographic vignettes describing what I term 'hopeful intercultural encounters'. I subsequently go on to theorise these in terms of Simmel's notion of gratitude as a means of reflecting on the social possibilities for the encounters I describe.

I base my discussion on a year of fieldwork I completed early in 2004 for a research project called '*Contact Zones: Living with Diversity in Multicultural Suburbia*', which looks at what I call quotidian diversity or multiculturalism as place-sharing in the diverse Sydney suburb of Ashfield. Ashfield is located about 25 minutes west of Sydney's CBD and forms the gateway to the city's working-class multicultural suburban heartland. It is an old federation suburb, emanating a sense of genteel decay in its housing, roads and high street. Prior to the Second World War it was seen as a green escape from the urban, industrial poverty of inner-city Sydney, a place where the middle classes moved to enjoy backyards and green public space. Eventually it contained a mixture of working-class and middle-class residents, Catholic and Protestant, respectively, represented in the suburb's abundant churches. Many of its longer term residents worked in one of the factories in the local area; the now closed biscuit and electronic factories commonly mentioned as large local employers. Up until the war, Ashfield was almost entirely Anglo-Celtic but with the post-war migration boom, it became quite a diverse area with large numbers of Greek, Italian and Polish residents making the suburb home during the 1950s and 1960s. During the 1970s and 1980s Lebanese and Turkish people moved to the area, and more recently, large numbers of Indian and Chinese migrants came to Ashfield, the latter bringing the most profound changes to the local urban landscape. What most characterises Ashfield today is the Chinese commercial presence along its main shopping strip on Liverpool Road, home to around 100 small street front shops and a small shopping mall. The change has been rapid. In the last 10 years the street-scape

has transformed from a mix of Anglo, Italian and Greek shopping. Today, about 85% of the shops along the Ashfield high street are Chinese small businesses, predominantly restaurants and small supermarkets. To put this in perspective, according to the 2002 Census data, 11% of Ashfield residents speak a Chinese language at home while long-term resident Anglo-Celtic seniors make up an estimated 10% of the total Ashfield population of about 49% Australian born.<sup>1</sup>

Methodologically, the research involved a year of ethnographic fieldwork where I participated in 'quotidian' Ashfield; attending senior citizen's groups, Returned Servicemen's League Clubs (RSLs), football and lawn bowls clubs, lurking in the local shopping centre, shopping with local residents, attending local churches, watching and participating in various neighbouring activities, and living full-time in the suburb myself. I also conducted 40 individual in-depth interviews of about three hours in length and a series of group discussions with local senior's groups, as well as interviewing local council workers, social workers and ministers. The first part of my research focused principally on elderly Anglo-Celtic residents, while the latter stages involved a small number of interviews with Filipinos, Lebanese, Greek, Indian and Chinese residents. To my knowledge, though, there has been little qualitative, ethnographic research into how elderly working-class Anglo-Celtic Australians are negotiating increasingly diverse suburban realities. Mindful of this omission, it is to them that I confine most of my reflections in this paper, but always in terms of their encounters and interactions with culturally different residents in their home neighbourhood.

### **Cultural Dissonance and Changing Suburban Landscapes**

One of the more important findings has been the extent to which the Anglo-Celtic elderly in my study are local in their orientation. The majority I interviewed have lived in the Ashfield area for more than 50 years, and, indeed, I was surprised to find that a large number have lived in the area their entire lives. They went to school in the local area, married locally and attended church locally. Few of my participants made regular trips outside Ashfield. Moreover, age and mobility were the most significant determining factors in the level of anxiety expressed about the changes in the local suburb. The more elderly and less physically mobile were not able to travel far. Most were no longer able to drive and even a bus ride to the next suburb would be a tiring and thus a rare expedition. The lives of these residents were increasingly confined to the local suburb. For women in particular, local shopping seemed to be their main activity and so Ashfield shops are and have been a centre of their social lives.

The majority of my interviewees voluntarily offered a history of the local shops. They would tell me about each of the stores along the main shopping strip and offer intimate histories of their local corner shops. Many were able to trace back over 50 years and tell me who owned each shop along the high street, what they sold, who worked there and which shopkeepers they had friendly relationships with. Many of the women told me that in years past they would often take all day to do their

shopping in Ashfield because they'd always meet people they knew on the street and would have to stop in each shop along the way to chat. This was a time of course when many of the local women did not work outside of the home and the fact that these earlier expeditions were on foot was also important. Because these women used to walk to the shops, expeditions would entail stopping for chats to neighbours along the way and those I interviewed had a clear mental map of the route between their homes and the shops, and as they narrated these routes, memories of long-gone neighbours and shopkeepers they knew along the way emerged giving a kind of lived quality to their memories of landscape. Importantly however, these were not just memories of Anglo-Celtic shopkeepers. In my interviews and incidental discussions, these memories extended especially to the Greek and Italian shopkeepers who appeared in Ashfield from the 1950s, especially fruit and vegetable and corner shop owners. Here is a typical example of such a relationship, related to me by Jack, an elderly man in his 80s, speaking about his local corner shop:

*We became good friends with the Italians who owned the corner shop here too. They used to deliver and we became quite chummy with them. They lived in Joseph Street. . . . What touched me quite a lot, there was, I've forgotten his name now, there was Tony and his wife, and his kids, and his dad, and the chap who used to help in the shop when he had to go somewhere. I was very touched, when mum passed away, the whole lot of them came to the funeral, and they must have closed the shop to come.*

However, close relations with shopkeepers began to change when these small shops suffered with the introduction of the Ashfield Shopping Mall in the mid 1980s and the subsequent arrival of large numbers of Chinese shops along the Liverpool Road high street in the mid to late 1990s. While it is obvious that the introduction of the new shopping mall was to blame as much as anything for the death of many of Ashfield's small businesses, the elderly in Ashfield associate it more readily with the arrival of the Chinese. In other words, they don't see the financial struggles caused by the arrival of a shopping mall causing their beloved street shops to close, but they do see them replaced by lots of new Chinese shops selling wares completely unfamiliar to the longer term residents. It became increasingly clear in my interviews that the older shopping experiences represented an important form of belonging and offered many an important social space where they had developed a sense of connection to the local area and its inhabitants. It provided networks of shopkeepers who knew their names, who noticed if they'd been ill or had not visited the shop for some time, and they were places where they'd meet and chat with friends. For them, the change in Ashfield's shopping landscape represents a physical and social break with the kind of neighbourhood they felt they belonged to and in its place is something perceived to be foreign and unwelcoming. The following is typical of the comments my interviewees made:

**Rosemary:** *We did try, we did try one of the new Chinese restaurants here. . . . the menu was not in English at all. You'd have to just point to something so we didn't know what we were eating at all. We couldn't wait to get out of there. The waiters just made*

*us feel unwelcome. They made it obvious that it was an imposition on them that they had to serve people who weren't Chinese.*

**George:** *We thought we'd try one of the little Chinese supermarkets one day. We went looking for some noodles. We didn't find what we were looking for. Rice noodles and we couldn't find any. And nobody was helpful. They couldn't speak English so they couldn't understand what we wanted anyway. And they just ignored us. So that was it. We gave up after that.*

As is apparent in these interview extracts, misunderstandings and cultural differences in shopping practices and expectations around customer service cause resentment among older residents who simply interpret their experiences in the newer Chinese shops as rude and unwelcoming and therefore unpleasant as compared to what was available before. Such disjunctural interactions in shops were a frequently recurring motif in my interviews. Sometimes they had to do with other bodies in a queue, sometimes with bodily rituals expected of shopkeepers and other shoppers. They show the kinds of disjunctures that emerge when habituated (see Noble and Watkins 2003) ideas about what a 'welcoming body' should do differ, and indeed ideas about where welcoming bodies should be found and how they should respond at particular moments, in particular social fields (Bourdieu 1990). Very often the response is not so much confrontation but simply a quiet withdrawal from those social spaces, avoidance of them in future and perhaps a little simmering resentment that those spaces seem closed to them. There are also significant differences in cultural practices and expectations surrounding the display of wares, lighting, aisle width, window displays and shop decoration which combine in Ashfield to produce a distinct sense of bodily displacement among many Anglo seniors. The following are typical of the feelings older long-term residents reported to me about the changed landscape of Ashfield shopping:

**Mary:** *Ashfield's just unattractive now. That main street. Not one shop is attractive. They don't have pretty windows, it's all busy busy busy. The shops aren't friendly. They're not welcoming. Some of the shops you wouldn't even know what they are.*

**Erma:** *The feeling I have in Ashfield is if you have to walk down the main street, walk quickly to get away from the noise and the dirt and people's heads are down. And get past the doorways. The Ashfield shops, the doorways—they're really just slots in the wall.*

**Harold:** *And they don't have window displays . . . you can't look into the store. They have it cluttered. And the aisles are narrow and it's very dark. So you just don't want to go in.*

**Eunice:** *I mean it's a barrier isn't it. They say to me 'don't enter'. It's saying to me 'don't come in'. 'You can't read these signs, so you're not welcome'.*

Such comments starkly reveal the discomfort among the local elderly surrounding unfamiliar shopping and urban environments. The changing nature of neighbourly

relations is another typical area of unhappiness. Intercultural or otherwise, contemporary neighbouring practices have changed fundamentally in modern Australian suburbs for many reasons, but often to do with the fact that the 'at home mum' is an increasingly rare phenomenon. In the Ashfield context, this is compounded by the language difficulties experienced by many of the new Chinese residents who often feel shy to make conversation or contact with their neighbours for fear of embarrassment over their lack of English. Whatever the cause, the changes themselves are experienced in very real ways by the elderly for whom neighbours may be the only point of human contact in a day. Norma, an Anglo working-class woman in her late 60s and married to a Filipino man talks about how her friendships with neighbours have changed over the years.

**Norma:** *When we moved into our street, we had a Dutch family this side, she was friendly, then we had Croatians came. The other side we had Greek, and next to them were from the Philippines. Over the road were more Greeks, and Maltese. And we were all really friendly with each other. But they all moved away. Now, we've Chinese in most of the homes around us, who make no effort to get to know anybody. And we don't know them either. I have tried, I went to introduce myself and I try to greet them up at the corner shop, but they're sort of locked away all the time and I don't know how to be friendly with them. They just don't seem interested. So it's really quite lonely now.*

Norma's neighbours are no doubt simply working exceptionally long hours, busy eking out a living outside the home with little time to get to know neighbours or learn English, and are probably embarrassed to speak with her because of their perceived lack of language skills. Yet in Norma's mind, their lack of 'neighbourly contact' is simply connected to their ethnicity. The elderly of course often rely on neighbourly relations in times of illness, loneliness or need, and many in my study were deeply anxious that they might fall ill, for example, and no one would notice.

### **On Hope, Belonging and the Multicultural Suburb**

These interview extracts signal the fact that the radical changes that have taken place in Ashfield have produced a rupture in the locality and forms of sociality familiar to the long-term elderly residents of Ashfield. They are no longer possessed of the bodily habitual knowledge to reproduce it as a locality for themselves (Appadurai 1996). Affective identities that were once intimately and subtly mingled with experiences and memories of place are now experienced as resentful nostalgia surrounding that lost place identity. Ashfield has become an alienating place for these elderly people, and this translates very often into ugly and angry expressions of distaste for the abstract Chinese other. There was a clear feeling in many of my interviews that Ashfield's seniors are experiencing a sense of closure, of being isolated, cut off, made an individual in a sea of strangers, rather than part of a network of people who respond openly to them in local encounters. The lack of what they expect of 'community' in a local suburb, at the shops and with neighbours gives them a sense that their worlds

have shrunk to the four walls of their home. Moreover, it became clear during my fieldwork that many of these older residents feel a real shyness about interacting with culturally different locals. Many of these elderly place great value on 'good manners' and feel quite anxious about not knowing the right thing to do when interacting with someone from a culturally different background, and express a wish not to offend. Probyn refers to this as the shame 'born of the body's desire to fit in' (2004: 328). In other words, there was a real sense among many of my research participants that they felt they had no idea how to 'do' difference in an embodied sense.

I entitled the paper 'Hope and Belonging in a Multicultural Suburb'. What has all this to do with hope, then? It doesn't seem terribly hopeful at all! I want to argue that all is not quite as bleak as would seem from the preceding interview extracts. There are individuals I have come across who are slowly but surely beginning to explore and discover ways of connecting across difference. In the following sections I would like to attempt to unravel what I see to be some of the conditions of possibility for hope in Ashfield. I then report some contrasting extracts from my interviews and ethnography which represent what I call moments of micro-hope and which, I believe, signal some of the preconditions for forms of open, intercultural belonging at the neighbourhood level.

In an interview with Mary Zournazi in her collection on hope (Zournazi 2002) Lebanese-Australian anthropologist Ghassan Hage has advanced some stimulating ideas on what he calls 'hope on the side of life', which he connects to joy and homeliness. For Hage, 'hope on the side of life' is not the capitalist notion of hope where joy is deferred in the pursuit of some greater goal. He describes hope on the side of life as more of a bodily principle of hope, which, 'drives us to continue to want to live, it is the existence of something to live for' (2002: 151–52). It is, he argues, what gives life a meaning and is based on an 'ethics of joy', where joy comes from a simple change to the better in the state of the body. Signalling a kind of Bourdieu, via Spinozan notion of *conatus*, Hage describes it as a sense of reaching a higher stage in your capacity to act, associate and deploy yourself in your environment, as it is happening (Zournazi and Hage 2002: 151).

Hage reinforces Spinoza's point, however, that 'we are capable of reaching even greater joyful leaps when we combine communally with others' (Zournazi and Hage 2002: 152). Joy, hope on the side of life, then, is premised on the ability to act communally, which requires some sense of community. He describes 'a sense of community as a sense of *articulation* to others ... the feeling of connection, of sharing, or recognition' (Zournazi and Hage 2002: 162) and says that a feeling of homeliness comes from all this. He also reminds us that communities are not just imagined; they are 'also so many bodies relating to each other. They are a practical ensemble of relations between people that one uses as a support in the pursuit of being' (Zournazi and Hage 2002: 162). It is then intimately tied up with the idea of belonging, as I said, or homeliness, as Hage calls it. And for him, homeliness is a bundle of things, familiarity, community, security and hope (Zournazi and Hage 2002: 159–61).

For me, hope on the side of life, joyful hope, also represents an opening to the world, to the other, to the stranger. It represents an opening up to new possibilities, for new ways of thinking, doing, knowing, an opening up to the possibility of new relationships and connections and is therefore not about stasis or fixity, it is about possibility. Massumi refers to hope as *being* in the present. Hope, in his view, exists at the threshold of potential (Zournazi and Massumi 2002: 212). So for me then, joyful hope requires a sense of community, but its conditions of possibility are a sense of belonging, trust and security of the outward looking kind, the kind that gives us a sense of belonging and safety from which we can embrace the world and other people in that joyful, hopeful, sense outlined here. It in turn produces a capacity to act or deploy oneself in a social field, across difference. I want to offer now a few ethnographic vignettes which I think represent hopeful intercultural moments in multicultural Ashfield, after which I will briefly reflect on what I see to be the conditions of their possibility.

### Hopeful Moments

Against the narratives of closure and isolation reported earlier in the paper, I went looking for and found a number of encounters that typify more hopeful relations. Usually these situations relied on some kind of ice breaker; sometimes that was an individual deliberately and bravely reaching out beyond difference, sometimes it was a certain social environment that unexpectedly connected those involved. What characterised these situations, a few of which I describe below, is that they often precipitated a flowering of exchange between the parties involved and beyond. While I do not wish to over-romanticise things or brush away the very real antagonisms and power differentials (cf. Hage 1998: 233), I want to emphasise that digging down into the ethnographic depths of an intercultural suburban context demonstrated to me that there are things happening that encompass this kind of hopeful, opening up to the other. Importantly, the stories about these moments seem to have become important talismans for a number of my interviewees, moments they report to show all is not lost in their multicultural neighbourhood, moments they narrated to me to demonstrate that the 'other' is 'ok' after all.

### Bill's Story

In his late 80s, Bill lives alone in a flat in Ashfield. His wife had been blind for the last 10 years or so of her life and Bill cared for her alone. Sadly, his wife had died only a few weeks before I interviewed him. By the 1990s nearly all the neighbours were Chinese in Bill's block of about 20 flats. During our interview, he told me he knew very few of them, but that there was one young woman, Mai—not long migrated from China—who had shown him particular kindness when she realised he was struggling alone to care for his wife. She would drop in and ask if there was anything he needed, help him up the stairs with his groceries, or keep an eye on his wife if he



had to go out. Not an uncommon practice, her parents divided their time between China and Australia because they were unable to obtain permanent residency here. They would come out from Shanghai to live with their daughter for six months at a time, returning to China for six months and back to Ashfield again for a further six months. Although Mai's parents had little if any English, Bill got to know them a little when they were living with her and they would exchange brief greetings if they met in the hall or on the stairs. Bill was deeply touched when the young Chinese neighbour, on hearing of Bill's wife's death, went out of her way to help him. A few days before our interview, Bill received a letter from Mai's parents, now in Shanghai. The letter said how very sad they were to hear of Bill's loss and invited him to come and stay with them in Shanghai if he was lonely, and they wrote that they have asked their daughter to look after him now he was alone. Reporting this poignant moment of cross-cultural care to me, Bill was visibly moved and very close to tears at their concern for him, despite the fact that they were just neighbours and so culturally different. Such stories of intercultural neighbourly care are not isolated as the following vignettes will show.

### **The Watering of the Plant Incident**

Esther and John are a couple in their late 70s who I interviewed for the project. They have lived in the same flat since 1967, a small complex of about 10 flats in a quiet street in Ashfield. They are a very 'proper', well-mannered couple. They see themselves as good local citizens; John was president of one of the local lawn bowls clubs for a number of years. Despite some discomfort with the changed shopping landscape, Esther and John emphasised to me how much they like having Chinese as neighbours and illustrated this to me in the following way:

**Esther:** *We have quite a few Chinese living in our block. We find them extremely nice, very friendly, very helpful. And as you know, it's **a tradition of Chinese to help older people**. If they see you coming up the stairs, they'll think nothing of grabbing the parcels, or rushing to open the door if we are coming. And I let them know how pleased I am and thank them. We are very friendly to them, and their children. We help them when we can.*

**John:** *There is one old couple. The old chap, doesn't speak a word of English. But I noticed recently that the planter box downstairs was being watered. And I noticed this morning he was doing it. It was him!! We'd been trying to find out who was doing it. So we can only say that as far as the Chinese people are concerned, they've been absolutely wonderful neighbours.*

John's story about the planter box being watered secretly by the elderly Chinese neighbour is typical of the type of narrative my elderly interviewees would report as an example of 'good neighbourliness' and in turn 'good multiculturalism' in Ashfield. They are usually stories of simple forms of reciprocity and neighbours showing a 'little kindness'. Esther's report to me that 'it is a tradition of Chinese to help older

people' was something I heard over and over again, and is one of those values shared cross-culturally, and no doubt one that is comforting to the elderly who feel devalued and isolated in the contemporary world.

### **Teresa and Her House-warming: Unfolding Neighbourly Reciprocities between Old and New**

Teresa's story has similar themes. Teresa is a late middle-aged Filipina lady who lives in a crumbling free standing federation cottage not far from the centre of Ashfield. During our interview, Teresa told me that when she moved into her home in Ashfield only about three years after migrating to Australia she noticed that the homes on either side of her house seemed to be in some disrepair with overgrown gardens and little sign of life. Eventually she realised that the two homes were occupied respectively by very elderly Anglo ladies living completely alone. She told me she felt terribly sorry for them when she noticed they were not very mobile, left their homes only rarely, and had very few visitors. So she decided to have a house-warming and invited the people in her little street to attend, extending personal invitations to the two old ladies. The ladies were delighted at the invitation. One lady brought a fruit cake to the house-warming, the other a tray of sandwiches, obviously carefully and thoughtfully prepared. The three are now firm friends. They always call out a hello to one another, Teresa drops in on them to 'borrow sugar' or such like (an excuse to check up on them) and they drop by with some 'spare' fruit cake, just baked, or have a chat over the fence if the opportunity arises. Teresa sometimes helps out with things around their homes, but emphasised to me that it is not a one-way relationship. She said she feels a real sense of belonging and is very pleased they seem to like her and appreciate her neighbourliness and she enjoys the small ways in which they reciprocate her kindness.

### **Red Packets and Little's Chemist**

Despite some of the comments reported earlier in the paper, social networks between Asian shopkeepers and the Anglo elderly are not entirely absent. There are a few shops, such as the Chinese-owned chemist shop and the Vietnamese bread shop that appear in the narratives of Ashfield's elderly over and over again. The shopkeepers in these shops appear to go out of their way to act as mediators and social links with their non-Asian customers and they are known to pass on cultural knowledge to Anglo elderly in particular which seems to have an important flow on effect in terms of long-term resident's perceptions of cultural change in the area.

The following account from Betty is a good example. At 75, she has lived in Ashfield, indeed, in the same street, her entire life.

*I will say a ni how (how are you), to them, to the Asian places. When it was gong xi fatt choy (Chinese New Year) in February, I had heard from Mary and Edward, the Chinese couple who run the chemist, about the little red bags they give in China, with*

*money in it. And I knew the gold was popular. So I went to Tek (the \$2 discount shop, also Chinese owned) and I got some little red bags, paper ones. And I got some gold foil paper, and I cut a couple of strips and I put a few dollars in and gave to Mary and Edward and the Chinese fellow who does my massage, and the Vietnamese lady in the bread shop.*

Betty's interaction with the chemist owner, her Chinese masseur and the Vietnamese lady in the bread shop are such that cultural difference is experienced in a friendly, interactive way. She uses what she's learnt from the Chinese pharmacists Mary and Edward about red packets and Chinese New Year to establish friendly relations in return in a way that produces forms of belonging across difference.

David Cheal (1988) has written extensively about what he calls the 'gift economy'. He argues that gifts are used to construct certain kinds of voluntary social relationships (Cheal 1988: 14) and should be viewed as 'symbolic media for managing the emotional and interpersonal aspects of relationships'. In 'complex and multifractal social systems' such as contemporary culturally diverse cities, those living in close proximity are not likely to be constituted by 'strong ties', as actor network theorists would characterise them. However, in Cheal's view, gifts, in such contexts, 'have a kind of "free floating" presence within a moral economy of interpersonal relations, and facilitate types of interaction that might otherwise be only weakly institutionalised' (Cheal 1988: 19). Betty's story—and a number of the other vignettes recounted here—demonstrates that gift exchange and relations of reciprocity are undervalued and potentially offer real possibilities in ethnically diverse communities. However, reciprocity is not the only means of connecting across difference. Another theme to emerge during my project was the importance of certain non-ethno-specific forms of social space that facilitated togetherness in difference.

### **Dancing at the Ashfield Seniors Fair**

Sometimes there are those magical moments that unexpectedly produce intercultural relationships. During my ethnography I had a place on the council's stall at the annual Ashfield Seniors Spring Fair, organised by the aged and disability officer. The fair was held in the Ashfield Town Hall and all the seniors groups—Anglo as well as all the ethnic seniors organisations—were invited to set up a stall to raise funds for their respective groups. They were selling the usual array of jams, crafts, home grown pot plants, knitted and crocheted things. The Greek and polish ladies were selling cultural handicrafts and second-hand items and the Chinese stalls were selling imported trinkets of the kind you might find at markets the world over. The fair ran for the whole day, the crowd ebbing and flowing in size, from the bustle of the morning rush to the quieter flow of the thin afternoon crowd. Over the day the various ladies visited one another's stalls to inspect their respective wares and eventually little conversations emerged across the room between the various stall holders of different cultural backgrounds. Meanwhile, the council had hired a Greek piano accordion player for the day and he was wandering around the room playing

favourite tunes to create a bit of atmosphere and to try to attract passers-by in from the street outside. At one point toward the end of the day when the crowd had all but gone, the accordion player began to play the 'Zorba'—or some variation of it—in front of the Greek women's stall. They jumped up, linked arms and began to dance in the middle of the hall. The Anglo ladies were very much enjoying this, clapping along to the familiar yet foreign tune, the Polish ladies joined the dance, then unexpectedly, the Chinese ladies got up and joined in, some dancing, some clapping, and before long all the different groups were on their feet and clapping along. The accordion player kept playing different songs, from Greek tunes to 'Waltzing Matilda' which everyone sang along to. It was magical and seemed to produce this space of exchange between mutually shy and suspicious seniors—who by the end of the day were new friends—and parted with genuine joy and warmth for one another.

What I think worked about this space was the fact that it was a non-ethno-specific space, the participants were all there in support of their individual groups yet sharing a common fundraising cause. The music had ethnic roots yet joyfully translated across a myriad of ethnic lines, and the participants were spurred through this joy to connect across their differences.

### **Conditions of Possibility for an Intercultural Hopeful Belonging**

It is my argument that common to all these exchanges were certain forms of manners, recognition, gratitude and hospitality, which have the capacity to facilitate the development over time of forms of interethnic belonging, security and trust. Such interethnic social capital, as I term it, is an essential prerequisite for the creation of dispositions of the open, joyful and hopeful kind, full of possibilities for opening up to otherness.

Cultural theorists have often viewed community as always about closure, about closing off, as always a process of making insiders and outsiders, of producing boundaries (see Amit and Rapport 2002). But I argue there are other forms of community which are looser affiliations, or articulations, reproduced through mechanisms such as manners of a *certain* kind that can create a mutual opening up to one another, and possibility of recognising the stranger. What are manners in the end but hopeful gestures which aim, or hope to smooth and hopefully open up encounters with others. Smiling at familiar faces in the garden along the route of an evening walk, nodding to the old Greek couple who sit on their front veranda each evening. Saying thank you to the shopkeeper, giving the neighbour a wave. They are ways of opening up to the other, a way of opening lines of communication. Giving and receiving such gestures of recognition creates a kind of open orientation to the suburb and the strangers that share the place and reduces the feeling of anonymity that can emerge in complex societies and neighbourhoods. Inhabitants do not need to know neighbours intimately or even wish to become friends, but the evidence from my ethnographic research indicates that gestures of care and recognition, however fleeting, can create a feeling of connection to the diverse people who share the place,

and this is especially so for the elderly whose lives are frequently defined by their immobility, isolation and sense of having little value in the world.

Related to hope and manners, Hage refers briefly to the notion of 'gratitude', as developed by Simmel (Zournazi and Hage 2002) and offers a useful means of thinking about such gestures. By gratitude I don't by any means mean the lopsided gratitude of the host/guest relationship where the migrant is expected to feel eternally grateful to the white hosts. The gratitude I refer to instead can be read as a bodily affect and rests on a basis of mutuality and reciprocity. Gratitude, as Simmel characterises it (1950: 388) 'is an ideal living on of a relation which may have ended long ago, and with it, the act of giving and receiving'. He argues that although it is a purely personal affect '... gratitude's thousandfold ramifications throughout society make it one of the most powerful means of social cohesion' (Simmel 1950: 388). As he says, 'it creates innumerable connections, ideal and concrete, loose and firm, among those who are filled with gratitude toward the same giver' (388). Moreover, he argues, importantly, that it is not simply thanking a person for what they do. It can be an exchange of recognition and gratitude for one another's existence. Simmel, for this reason, calls gratitude the 'moral memory of humankind' and characterises it as 'an ideal bridge which the soul comes across again and again, upon provocations too slight to throw a new bridge to the other person, it uses to come closer to them' (388). In this way it embodies two important aspects, for me, of intercultural living, which is mutual hospitality and recognition, which together can produce a flow-on effect. I think we can see in the vignettes just described, a few common characteristics of hospitality, recognition, manners for interaction and enduring and flowering gratitude which have the capacity to translate from the concrete to the abstract other. It is these things that have produced moments of intercultural exchange which can be described as micro moments of hope, on the side of life.

It is equally important, however, to recognise that there is no neat division between 'good multiculturalists' and 'bad racists'. The 'hopeful' dispositions embodied in the case studies outlined so far do not necessarily represent the 'eternal point of view' of those research participants. People's views and experiences of 'Otherness' are inevitably fluid and contextual. Thus, the majority of those elderly residents who participated in this study would, even in the course of a single interview, shift between positive views about their culturally different neighbours, and more negative assessments of their interactions at, for example, the high street shops. The challenge is to unravel the relationship between these sometimes competing dispositions.

An important relationship is that between the abstract and the concrete other. Unsurprisingly narratives about neighbourliness tend to be much more fluid and circumspect, due to the simple fact that, as neighbours, they see one another often and in unthreatening contexts. In shops, Chinese are simply Chinese as a collective, as the abstract other, rather than the concrete individuals that neighbours often become. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss in much detail, the study revealed that much of the interethnic discomfort among Anglo-Celtic seniors had to do with cultural differences around manners, modes of embodied interaction with

Chinese shopkeepers and shoppers, differing taste cultures around colour and signage, spatial qualities and the layout of Chinese shops. These cross-cultural discomforts, combined with age-related social isolation, marginalisation and change fatigue sometimes had the effect of inhibiting the formation of positive forms of mutual recognition and gratitude, producing dispositions more receptive to negative collective assessments of the Chinese other. These in turn would filter through broader representational regimes on Asian migrants. The ultimate challenge in some ways is how to translate the positive assessments of the concrete other (the caring neighbour) to the realm of imagined collective, who are in turn imagined as part of a broader moral community both at the level of locality and nation.

Ghassan Hage has made the argument that a kind of pathological, paranoid nationalism, unable to accommodate difference, has emerged in Australia as a direct result of the dissolution of state forms of 'care'. He calls this, amusingly, the 'lost art of the well-administered national cuddle' (Hage 2003: 22). At risk of over simplifying his cleverly crafted Spinozan–Kleinian polemic, Hage argues that where the state fails in its caring responsibilities to its citizens, in particular, in terms of the distribution of hope, it produces insecure citizens who substitute 'a national belonging based on the defence of a good national life they cannot access . . . for a national belonging based on the enjoyment of such a good life' (Hage 2003: 30). The latter relation to the state represents a more hopeful and open disposition than the former.

This argument has clear relevance to the Ashfield ethnography and it is a theme that has obvious resonance with the narratives that emerged during the study. It casts some light on why it is that elderly Anglo-Celtics in Ashfield are most likely to feel defensive about local otherness. They experience in very direct ways, the state's failure in its responsibilities to 'care' for them. Many face a day-to-day struggle to survive because of the lack of services, the social isolation they experience in a fast-paced, youth-oriented capitalist society, they experience poverty, they are front line victims of our declining public health system. It is in some ways unsurprising that their experience of social decline that results, in many cases, is the kind of paranoid nationalism to which Hage refers. But I want to argue that while the relationship to the nation-state is ever present, these people also exist at the local level, which forms a significant, embodied, related but additional layer of belonging. The neighbourhood layer of belonging can, of course, produce similar forms of paranoia stemming from the lack of local 'care', a decline in local amenity and services for example, and the lack of national care will also filter down to produce defensive local relations. Yet I wish to argue that it is the very fact of locality that provides the *possibility* for non-state, neighbourhood level relations of care, be they in the shopping centre or between neighbours. And it is the very corporeal, material and contained quality of such local relations that embodies the power to become a counter-relation to a more paranoid national discourse. The challenge in a sense is how to leverage the hopeful possibilities of the local in order to undermine national discourses, or at least provide a counterbalance—a critical space of local care across difference—from which those on the ground can draw some sense of comfort, care and belonging.

In conclusion, in addition to the theoretical reflections just offered, there are three points I'd like to emerge from the material presented here. The first is that the accusations of 'racism on the rise' (cf. Delaney and Banham 2004; Shaw 2003) stemming from survey-based quantitative data (cf. Dunn and Geraert 2003), and studies of media representation (cf. Jakubowitz and Goodall 1994), while extremely valuable, offer little in the way of detailed insight into grounded and often fluid experiences and responses to otherness. As my paper has shown, understanding the social context of the groups involved (in this case Ashfield's elderly and their age-related physical and social isolation) can offer valuable lessons for theorists and practitioners alike in dealing with interethnic relations. The second point to emerge is that it is as important to describe positive relations as it is to describe the negative. This is not a strategy to erase the existence of racism in our communities and nations, but to offer lessons from real life, lessons from quotidian situations populated by actors who have real agency to act in intercultural situations to try to create new forms of community and neighbourliness. The third point is that each of the ethnographic stories reported in this paper encompass forms of reciprocity and mutual recognition between ethnically different individuals, and it is this that may perhaps form the basis for new forms of 'social integration,' as the policy makers would describe it. This is not integration into some normative mode of pre-existing community, but rather, represents integration as a form of open, emergent community across difference. That is, a true multiculturalism of place-sharing.

### Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the anonymous referees for their valuable comments on this paper and the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University for funding her research through a postdoctoral research fellowship.

### Note

- [1] Ashfield's Chinese-born population exploded during the 1990s due to a unique set of circumstances. The then Hawke Labor government offered permanent residency to some 42,000 Chinese students who were studying in Australia at the time of the Tiananmen Square massacre. These numbers swelled to an estimated 100,000 through the 1990s due to the fact that the original visa holders were able to bring out family from China under Australia's then family reunion migration scheme. Most made Sydney their home and many of these migrants ended up in Ashfield, which is known among them as 'Little Shanghai' due to the large concentration of Shanghai-nese who made the suburb home. See Banham (2003).

### References

- Amit, Vered, and Nigel Rapport. *The Trouble with Community: Anthropological Reflections on Movement, Identity and Collectivity*. London: Pluto, 2002.
- Ang, Ien. *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

- Banham, Cynthia. 'Children of the Revolution.' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26th December, pp. 19 & 22, 2003.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Logic of Practice*. London: Blackwell, 1990.
- Cheal, David. *The Gift Economy*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Delaney, Brigid, and Cynthia Banham. 'Muslims Feel the Hands of Racism Tighten around Them.' *Sydney Morning Herald*, Sydney 2004: 8.
- Dunn, Kevin, and P. Geraert. 'The Geography of "Race" and Racisms.' *GeoDate* 16.3 (2003): 1–6.
- Hage, Ghassan. *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*. Sydney: Pluto, 1998.
- . *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society*. Sydney: Pluto, 2003.
- Jakubowitz, Andrew, and Heather Goodall. *Racism, Ethnicity and the Media*. St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1994.
- Noble, Greg, and Megan Watkins. 'So, How Did Bourdieu Learn to Play Tennis? Habitus, Consciousness and Habituation.' *Cultural Studies* 17.3/4 (2003): 520–38.
- Probyn, Elspeth. 'Everyday Shame.' *Cultural Studies* 18.2/3 (Mar./May 2004): 328–49.
- Shaw, Kim. 'Leaders' Failure on Scourge of Racism.' *The Glebe & Inner Western Weekly*, Sydney 2003: 21.
- Shotter, John. 'Responsive Expression in Living Bodies: The Power of Invisible "Real Presences" within Our Everyday Lives Together.' *Cultural Studies* 18.2/3 (2004): 443–60.
- Simmel, George. *The Sociology of George Simmel*. New York: Free Press, 1950.
- Wal, Jessica ter, and Maykel Verkyuten, eds. *Comparative Perspectives on Racism*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000.
- Zournazi, Mary. *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Zournazi, Mary, and Ghassan Hage. "'On the Side of Life"—Joy and the Capacity of Being: A Conversation with Ghassan Hage.' *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*. Ed. Zournazi Mary. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Zournazi, Mary, and Brian Massumi. 'Navigating Movements: A Conversation with Brian Massumi.' *Hope: New Philosophies for Change*. Ed. Mary Zournazi. London: Routledge, 2002.