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In 1988, historian Nadia Wheatley and indigenous artist Donna Rawlins published their award-winning picture book, *My Place*, a reinterpretation of Australian national identity and sovereignty prompted by the bicentennial of white settlement. Twenty years later, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) commissioned Penny Chapman’s multi-platform project based on this book. The 13 episodes of the television series begin in 2008, each telling the story of a child at a different point in history, and are accompanied by substantial interactive online content. Issues as diverse as religious difference and immigration, wartime conscription and trauma, and the experiences of Aboriginal Australians are canvassed. The program itself, which has a second series currently in production, introduces child audiences to—and implicates them in—a rich ideological fabric of deeply politicised issues that directly engage with vexed questions of Australian nationhood. The series offers a subversive view of Australian history and society, and it is the child—whether protagonist on the screen or the viewer/user of the content—who is left to discover, negotiate and move beyond often problematic societal norms. As one of the public broadcaster’s keystone projects, *My Place* signifies important developments in ABC’s construction of multicultural child citizenship.

The digitisation of Australian television has facilitated a wave of multi-channel and new media innovation. Though the development of a multi-channel ecology has occurred significantly later in Australia than in the US or Europe, in part due to genre restrictions on broadcasters, all major Australian networks now have at least one additional free-to-air channel, make some of their content available online, and utilise various forms of social media to engage their audiences. The ABC has been in the vanguard of new media innovation, leveraging the industry dominance of ABC Online and its cross-platform radio networks for the repurposing of news, together with the additional funding for digital renewal, new Australian content, and a digital children’s channel in the 2006 and 2009 federal budgets. In line with “market failure” models of broadcasting (Born, Debrett), the ABC was once the most important producer-broadcaster for child viewers. With the recent allocation for the establishment of ABC3, it is now the catalyst for a significant revitalisation of the Australian children’s television industry.

The ABC Charter requires it to broadcast programs that “contribute to a sense of national identity” and that “reflect the cultural diversity of the Australian community” (ABC Documents). Through its digital children’s channel (ABC3) and its multi-platform content, child viewers are not only exposed to a much more diverse range of local content, but also politicised by an intricate network of online texts connected to the TV programs. The representation of diasporic communities through and within multi-platformed spaces forms a crucial part of the way(s) in which collective identities are now being negotiated in children’s texts. An analysis of one of the ABC’s *My Place* “projects” and its associated multi-platformed content reveals an intricate relationship between postcolonial concerns and the construction of child citizenship.

**Multicultural Places, Multi-Platformed Spaces: New Media Innovation at the ABC**

The 2007 restructure at the ABC has transformed commissioning practices along the lines noted by James Bennett and Niki Strange of the BBC—a shift of focus from “programs” to multi-platform “projects,” with the latter consisting of a complex network of textual
production. These “second shift media practices” (Caldwell) involve the tactical management of “user flows structured into and across the textual terrain that serve to promote a multifaceted and prolonged experience of the project” (Bennett and Strange 115).

ABC Managing Director Mark Scott’s polemic deployment of the “digital commons” trope (Murdock, From) differs from that of his opposite number at the BBC, Mark Thompson, in its emphasis on the glocalised openness of the Australian “town square”—at once distinct from, and an integral part of, larger conversations. As announced at the beginning of the ABC’s 2009 annual report,

> the ABC is redefining the town square as a world of greater opportunities: a world where Australians can engage with one another and explore the ideas and events that are shaping our communities, our nation and beyond … where people can come to speak and be heard, to listen and learn from each other. (ABC ii)

The broad emphasis on engagement characterises ABC3’s positioning of children in multi-platformed projects. As the Executive Producer of the ABC’s Children’s Television Multi-platform division comments, “participation is very much the mantra of the new channel” (Glen). The concept of “participation” is integral to what has been described elsewhere as “rehearsals in citizenship” (Northam). Writing of contemporary youth, David Buckingham notes that “political thinking is not merely an intellectual or developmental achievement, but an interpersonal process which is part of the construction of a collective, social identity” (179). Recent domestically produced children’s programs and their associated multimedia applications have significant potential to contribute to this interpersonal, “participatory” process.

Through multi-platform experiences, children are (apparently) invited to construct narratives of their own. Dan Harries coined the term “viewser” to highlight the tension between watching and interacting, and the increased sense of agency on the part of audiences (171–82). Various online texts hosted by the ABC offer engagement with extra content relating to programs, with themed websites serving as “branches” of the overarching ABC3 metasite. The main site—strongly branded as the place for its targeted demographic—combines conventional television guide/program details with “Watch Now!,” a customised iView application within ABC3’s own themed interface; youth-oriented news; online gaming; and avenues for viewser to create digital art and video, or interact with the community of “Club3” and associated message boards.

The profiles created by members of Club3 are moderated and proscribe any personal information, resulting in an (understandably) restricted form of “networked publics” (boyd 124–5). Viewser profiles comprise only a username (which, the website stresses, should not be one’s real name) and an “avatar” (a customisable animated face). As in other social media sites, comments posted are accompanied by the viewser’s “name” and “face,” reinforcing the notion of individuality within the common group. The tool allows users to choose from various skin colours, emphasising the multicultural nature of the ABC3 community. Other customisable elements, including the ability to choose between dozens of pre-designed ABC3 assets and feeds, stress the audience’s “ownership” of the site. The Help instructions for the Club3 site stress the notion of “participation” directly: “Here at ABC3, we don’t want to tell you what your site should look like! We think that you should be able to choose for yourself.”

Multi-platformed texts also provide viewser with opportunities to interact with many of the characters (human actors and animated) from the television texts and share further aspects of their lives and fictional worlds. One example, linked to the representation of diasporic communities, is the Abatti Pizza Game, in which the player must “save the day” by battling obstacles to fulfil a pizza order. The game’s prefacing directions makes clear the ethnicity of the Abatti family, who are also visually distinctive. The dialogue also registers cultural
markers: “Poor Nona, whatsa she gonna do? Now it’s up to you to help Johnny and his friends make four pizzas.”

The game was acquired from the Canadian-animated franchise, *Angela Anaconda*; nonetheless, the Abatti family, the pizza store they operate and the dilemma they face translates easily to the Australian context. Dramatisations of diasporic contributions to national youth identities in postcolonial or settler societies—the UK (*My Life as a Popat*, CITV) and Canada (*How to Be Indie*)—also contribute to the diversity of ABC3’s television offerings and the positioning of its multi-platform community.

The negotiation of diasporic and postcolonial politics is even clearer in the public broadcaster’s commitment to *My Place*. The project’s multifaceted construction of “places,” the ethical positioning of the child both as an individual and a member of (multicultural) communities, and the significant acknowledgement of ongoing conflict and discrimination, articulate a cultural commons that is more open-ended and challenging than the Eurocentric metaphor, the “town square,” suggests.

**Diversity, Discrimination and Diasporas: Positioning the Viewer of *My Place***

Throughout the first series of *My Place*, the experiences of children within different diasporic communities are the focal point of five of the initial six episodes, the plots of which revolve around children with Lebanese, Vietnamese, Greek, and Irish backgrounds. This article focuses on an early episode of the series, “1988,” which explicitly confronts the cultural frictions between dominant Anglocentric Australian and diasporic communities. “1988” centres on the reaction of young Lily to the arrival of her cousin, Phuong, from Vietnam. Lily is a member of a diasporic community, but one who strongly identifies as “an Australian,” allowing a nuanced exploration of the ideological conflicts surrounding the issue of so-called “boat people.” The protagonist’s voice-over narration at the beginning of the episode foregrounds her desire to win Australia’s first Olympic gold medal in gymnastics, thus mobilising nationally identified hierarchies of value. Tensions between diasporic and settler cultures are frequently depicted. One potentially reactionary sequence portrays the recurring character of Michaelis complaining about having to use chopsticks in the Vietnamese restaurant; however, this comment is contextualised several episodes later, when a much younger Michaelis, as protagonist of the episode “1958,” is himself discriminated against, due to his Greek background.

The political irony of “1988” pivots on Lily’s assumption that her cousin “won’t know Australian.” There is a patronising tone in her warning to Phuong not to speak Vietnamese for fear of schoolyard bullying: “The kids at school give you heaps if you talk funny. But it’s okay, I can talk for you!” This encourages child viewers to distance themselves from this fictional parallel to the frequent absence of representation of asylum seekers in contemporary debates. Lily’s assumptions and attitudes are treated with a degree of scepticism, particularly when she assures her friends that the silent Phuong will “get normal soon,” before objectifying her cousin for classroom “show and tell.” A close-up camera shot settles on Phuong’s unease while the children around her gossip about her status as a “boat person,” further encouraging the audience to empathise with the bullied character. However, Phuong turns the tables on those around her when she reveals she can competently speak English, is able to perform gymnastics and other feats beyond Lily’s ability, and even invents a story of being attacked by “pirates” in order to silence her gossiping peers. By the end of the narrative, Lily has redeemed herself and shares a close friendship with Phuong.

*My Place*’s structured child “participation” plays a key role in developing the postcolonial perspective required by this episode and the project more broadly. Indeed, despite the record project budget, a second series was commissioned, at least partly on the basis of the overwhelmingly positive reception of viewers on the ABC website forums (Buckland). The intricate *My Place* website, accessible through the ABC3 metasite, generates transmedia intertextuality interlocking with, and extending the diegesis of, the televised texts. A
hyperlinked timeline leads to collections of personal artefacts “owned” by each protagonist, such as journals, toys, and clothing. Clicking on a gold medal marked “History” in Lily’s collection activates scrolling text describing the political acceptance of the phrase “multiculturalism” and the “Family Reunion” policy, which assisted the arrival of 100,000 Vietnamese immigrants. The viewer is reminded that some people were “not very welcoming” of diasporic groups via an explicit reference to Mrs Benson’s discriminatory attitudes in the series.

Viewers can “visit” virtual representations of the program’s sets. In the bedroom, kitchen, living room and/or backyard of each protagonist can be discovered familiar and additional details of the characters’ lives. The artefacts that can be “played” with in the multimedia applications often imply the enthusiastic (and apparently desirable) adoption of “Australianness” by immigrant children. Lily’s toys (her doll, hair accessories, roller skates, and glass marbles) invoke various aspects of western children’s culture, while her “journal entry” about Phuong states that she is “new to Australia but with her sense of humour she has fitted in really well.” At the same time, the interactive elements within Lily’s kitchen, including a bowl of rice and other Asian food ingredients, emphasise cultural continuity. The description of incense in another room of Lily’s house as a “common link” that is “used in many different cultures and religions for similar purposes” clearly normalises a glocalised world-view.

Artefacts inside the restaurant operated by Lily’s mother link to information ranging from the ingredients and (flexible) instructions for how to make rice paper rolls (“Lily and Phuong used these fillings but you can use whatever you like!”) to a brief interactive puzzle game requiring the arrangement of several peppers in order from least hot to most hot. A selectable picture frame downloads a text box labelled “Images of Home.” Combined with a slideshow of static, hand-drawn images of traditional Vietnamese life, the text can be read as symbolic of the multiplicity of My Place’s target audience(s): “These images would have reminded the family of their homeland and also given restaurant customers a sense of Vietnamese culture.”

The social-developmental, postcolonial agenda of My Place is registered in both “conventional” ancillary texts, such as the series’ “making of” publication (Wheatley), and the elaborate pedagogical website for teachers developed by the ACTF and Educational Services Australia (http://www.myplace.edu.au/). The politicising function of the latter is encoded in the various summaries of each decade’s historical, political, social, cultural, and technological highlights, often associated with the plot of the relevant episode. The page titled “Multiculturalism” reports on the positive amendments to the Commonwealth’s Migration Act 1958 and provides links to photographs of Vietnamese migrants in 1982, exemplifying the values of equality and cultural diversity through Lily and Phuong’s story. The detailed “Teaching Activities” documents available for each episode serve a similar purpose, providing, for example, the suggestion that teachers “ask students to discuss the importance to a new immigrant of retaining links to family, culture and tradition.” The empathetic positioning of Phuong’s situation is further mirrored in the interactive map available for teacher use that enables children to navigate a boat from Vietnam to the Australian coast, encouraging a perspective that is rarely put forward in Australia’s mass media.

This is not to suggest that the My Place project is entirely unproblematic. In her postcolonial analysis of Aboriginal children’s literature, Clare Bradford argues that “it’s all too possible for ‘similarities’ to erase difference and the political significances of [a] text” (188). Lily’s schoolteacher’s lesson in the episode “reminds us that boat people have been coming to Australia for a very long time.” However, the implied connection between convicts and asylum seekers triggered by Phuong’s (mis)understanding awkwardly appropriates a mythologised Australian history. Similarly in the “1998” episode, the Muslim character Mohammad’s use of Ramadan for personal strength in order to emulate the iconic Australian cricketer Shane Warne threatens to subsume the “difference” of the diasporic community.

Nonetheless, alongside the similarities between individuals and the various ethnic groups
that make up the My Place community, important distinctions remain. Each episode begins and/or ends with the child protagonist(s) playing on or around the central motif of the series—a large fig tree—with the characters declaring that the tree is “my place.” While emphasising the importance of individuality in the project’s construction of child citizens, the cumulative effect of these “my place” sentiments, felt over time by characters from different socio-economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, builds a multifaceted conception of Australian identity that consists of numerous (and complementary) “branches.” The project’s multi-platformed content further emphasises this, with the website containing an image of the prominent (literal and figurative) “Community Tree,” through which the viewer can interact with the generations of characters and families from the series (http://www.abc.net.au/abc3/myplace/).

The significant role of the ABC’s My Place project showcases the ABC’s remit as a public broadcaster in the digital era. As Tim Brooke-Hunt, the Executive Head of Children’s Content, explains,

if the ABC didn’t do it, no other broadcaster was going to come near it. ... I don’t expect My Place to be a humungous commercial or ratings success, but I firmly believe ... that it will be something that will exist for many years and will have a very special place.

Conclusion

The reversion to iconic aspects of mainstream Anglo-Australian culture is perhaps unsurprising—and certainly telling—when reflecting on the network of local, national, and global forces impacting on the development of a cultural commons. However, this does not detract from the value of the public broadcaster’s construction of child citizens within a clearly self-conscious discourse of “multiculturalism.” The transmedia intertextuality at work across ABC3 projects and platforms serves an important politising function, offering positive representations of diasporic communities to counter the negative depictions children are exposed to elsewhere, and positioning child viewers to “participate” in “working through” fraught issues of Australia’s past that still remain starkly relevant today.

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