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International Journal of Cultural Studies 2001 4: 131

DOI: 10.1177/136787790100400201

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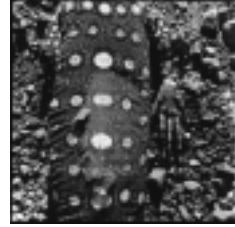
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Popular media as public 'sphericules' for diasporic communities

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ABSTRACT ● The dynamics of 'diasporic' video, television, cinema, music and Internet use – where peoples displaced from homelands by migration, refugee status or business and economic imperative use media to negotiate new cultural identities – offer challenges for how media and culture are understood in our times. Drawing on research published in *Floating Lives: The Media and Asian Diasporas*, on dynamics that are industrial (the pathways by which these media travel to their multifarious destinations), textual and audience-related (types of diasporic style and practice where popular culture debates and moral panics are played out in culturally divergent circumstances among communities marked by internal difference and external 'othering'), the article will interrogate further the nature of the public 'sphericules' formed around diasporic media. ●

KEYWORDS ● diaspora ● ethnic minorities ● media ● public sphere

The research team that authored *Floating Lives: The Media and Asian Diasporas* (Cunningham and Sinclair, 2000) mapped the mediascapes of Asian diasporic communities against the background of the theoretical and policy territory of understanding media use in contemporary, culturally plural societies. In this article, I will take further than *Floating Lives* the nature of the public spheres activated around diasporic media as a specific form of public communication, by engaging with public sphere debates and assessing the contribution that the research conducted for *Floating Lives* might make to those debates.

The public sphere, in its classic sense advanced in the work of Jürgen Habermas (1989 [1962]), is a space of open debate standing against the state as a special subset of civil society in which the logic of 'democratic equivalence' is cultivated. The concept has been used regularly in the fields of media, cultural and communications studies to theorize the media's articulation between the state and civil society. Indeed, Nicholas Garnham claimed in the mid-1990s that the public sphere had replaced the concept of hegemony as the central motivating idea in media and cultural studies (Garnham, 1995). This is certainly an overstatement, but it is equally certain that, almost 40 years since Habermas first published his public sphere argument, and almost 30 years since it was first published in outline in English (Habermas, 1974), the debate continues strongly over how progressive elements of civil societies are constructed and how media support, inhibit or, indeed, are coterminous with such self-determining public communication.

The debate is marked out at either end of the spectrum by those, on the one hand, for whom the contemporary western public sphere has been tarnished or even fatally compromised by the encroachment of particularly commercial media and communications (for example, Schiller, 1989). On the other hand, there are those for whom the media have become the main, if not the only, vehicle for whatever can be held to exist of the public sphere in such societies. Such 'media-centric' theorists in these fields can hold that the media actually *envelop* the public sphere:

The 'mediasphere' is the whole universe of media . . . in all languages in all countries. It therefore completely encloses and contains as a differentiated part of itself the (Habermasian) public sphere (or the many public spheres), and it is itself contained by the much larger semiosphere . . . which is the whole universe of sense-making by whatever means, including speech . . . it is clear that television is a crucial site of the mediasphere and a crucial mediator between general cultural sense-making systems (the semiosphere) and specialist components of social sense-making like the public sphere. Hence the public sphere can be rethought not as a category binarily contrasted with its implied opposite, the private sphere, but as a 'Russian doll' enclosed within a larger mediasphere, itself enclosed within the semiosphere. And within 'the' public sphere, there may equally be found, Russian-doll style, further counter-cultural, oppositional or minoritarian public spheres. (Hartley, 1999: 217–18)

Hartley's topography has the virtue of clarity, scope and heuristic utility, even while it remains provocatively media-centric. This is mostly due to Hartley's commitment to the strictly textual provenance of public communication, and to his greater interest in Lotman's notion of the semiosphere than Habermas' modernist understanding that the public sphere stands outside and even against its 'mediatization'.

I will complicate that topography by suggesting that minoritarian public spheres are rarely subsets of classic nationally bound public spheres but are none the less vibrant, globalized but very specific spaces of self- and community-making and identity (see, for example, Husband, 1998). I agree with Hartley, however, in his iconoclastic insistence that the commercial realm must be factored into the debate more centrally and positively than it has been to date. Diasporic media entrepreneurs and producers are mostly uninterested in or wary of the state, in part because the copyright status of much of their production is dubious.

I will also stress another neglected aspect of the public sphere debate developed by Jim McGuigan (1998: 92) – the 'affective' as much as 'effective' dimension of public communication, which allows for an adequate grasp of entertainment in a debate dominated by ratiocinative and informational activity. McGuigan speaks of a 'rather softer' conception of the public sphere than is found in the work of Habermas and others (1998: 98) and develops these ideas around the significance of affective popular politics expressed through media mobilization of western responses to poverty and aid campaigns. Underdeveloped, though, and tantalisingly so, is the role played by the entertainment content of the media in the formation and reproduction of public communication (McGuigan, 1998: 98, quoting Garnham, 1992: 274). This is the domain on which such strongly opposed writers as McGuigan and Hartley might begin to at least share an object of study.

Todd Gitlin has posed the question as to whether we can continue to speak of the ideal of *the* public sphere as an increasingly complex, poly-ethnic, communications-saturated series of societies develop around the world. Rather, what might be emerging are numerous public 'sphericules': 'does it not look as though the public sphere, in falling, has shattered into a scatter of globules, like mercury?' (Gitlin, 1998: 173). Gitlin's answer is the deeply pessimistic one of seeing the future as the irretrievable loss of elements of a modernist public commonality.

The spatial metaphor of fragmentation, of dissolution, of the centre not holding, assumes that there is a singular nation-state to anchor it. Thinking of public sphericules as constituted beyond the singular nation-state, as *global narrowcasting of polity and culture*, assists in restoring them to a place – not necessarily counter-hegemonic but certainly culturally plural and dynamically contending with western forms for recognition – of undeniable importance for contemporary, culturally plural societies and any media, cultural and communication studies claiming similar contemporaneity.

There are now several claims for such public sphericules. One can speak of a feminist public sphere and international public sphericules constituted around environmental or human rights issues. They may take the form of 'sub-altern counterpublics', as Nancy Fraser (1992) calls them, or they may be termed taste cultures, such as those formed around gay style (which doesn't

of course exclude them from acting as 'counterpublics'). As John Hartley and Allen McKee put it in *The Indigenous Public Sphere* (2000: 3), these are possibly peculiar examples of public spheres because they are not predicated on any nation that a public sphere usually expresses – they are the 'civil societies' of nations without borders, without state institutions and without citizens. These authors go on to suggest that such public spheres might stand as a model for developments in late modern culture generally, with do-it-yourself citizenship based on culture, identity and voluntary belonging rather than based on rights derived from, and obligations to, a state.

My present argument is in part a contribution to the elaboration of just such a project. However, there are still undeniably relations of dominance, and 'mainstreams' and 'peripheries'; the metaphor is not simply a series of sphericules, overlapping to a greater or lesser extent. Although this latter explanatory model goes some distance in explaining the complexity of overlapping taste cultures, identity formations, social commitments and specialist understandings that constitute the horizon of many if not most citizens/consumers in post-industrial societies, there are broad consensus and agenda-setting capabilities that cannot be gainsaid in enthusiasm for embracing *tout court* a 'capillary' model of power. The key, as Hartley and McKee identify, is the degree of control over the meanings created about and within the sphericule (2000: 3, 7) and by which this control is exercised.

In contrast to Gitlin, then, I argue that ethno-specific global mediated communities display in microcosm elements we would expect to find in 'the' public sphere. Such activities may constitute valid and indeed dynamic counter-examples to a discourse of decline and fragmentation, while taking full account of contemporary vectors of communication in a globalizing, commercializing and pluralizing world.

Ongoing public sphere debates in the field, then, continue to be structured around dualisms which are arguably less aids than inhibitors of analysis: dualisms such as public–private, information–entertainment, cognition–affect or emotion, public versus commercial culture and – the 'master' dualism – public sphere in the singular or plural. What follows is no pretence at a Hegelian *Aufhebung* (transcendence) catching up these dualisms in a grand synthesis, but rather a contribution to a more positive account of the operations of media-based public communication – in this case, ethno-specific diasporic sphericules – which place a different slant on highly generalized debates about globalization, commercialization and the fate of public communication in these contexts.

The ethno-specific mediated sphericule

First, they are indeed 'sphericules'; that is, they are social fragments that do not have critical mass. Nevertheless, they share many of the characteristics

of the classically conceived public sphere – they provide a central site for public communication in globally dispersed communities, stage communal difference and discord productively, and work to articulate insider ethno-specific identities – which are by definition 'multi-national', even global – to the wider 'host' environments.

The audience research for *Floating Lives* was conducted in communities in Australia. Although Australia is, in proportional terms, the world's second-largest immigrant nation next to Israel, the relatively low numbers of any individual group (at present, more than 150 ethnic groups speaking over 100 different languages) has meant that a critical mass of a few dominant Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) groupings has not made the impact that Hispanic peoples, for example, have made in the United States. No one non-Anglo Celt ethnic group has, therefore, reached 'critical mass' in terms of being able to operate significantly as a self-contained community in the nation. For this reason, Australia offers a useful laboratory for testing notions of diasporic communities that need to be 'de-essentialized', adapted to conditions where ethnicities and sub-ethnicities jostle in ways that would have been unlikely or impossible in their respective homeland settings or where long and sustained patterns of immigration have produced a critical mass of singular ethnicities.

Sinclair et al.'s (2000) study of the Chinese in *Floating Lives* posits that the sources, socioeconomic backgrounds and circumstances of Chinese immigrant arrivals in Australia have been much more diverse than those of Chinese communities in the other great contemporary immigrant-receiving countries such as the United States, Canada, Britain and New Zealand, or earlier immigrant-receiving countries in Southeast Asia, South America, Europe and Africa. To make sense of 'the' Chinese community is to break it down into a series of complex and often interrelated sub-groupings based on geographical origin – mainland (PRC), Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore), Taiwan, Indochina (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia), Hong Kong – together with overlapping language and dialect use.

Similarly, Cunningham and Nguyen's (2000) Vietnamese study shows that there are significant differences among quite a small population along axes of generation, ethnicity, region of the home country, education and class, and recency of arrival and conditions under which arrival took place. And for the Fiji Indians in Manas Ray's work (2000), if it was legislated racial discrimination that compelled them to leave Fiji, in Australia they find themselves 'othered' by, and othering, the mainland Indian groupings who contest the authenticity of Fiji Indian claims to rootedness in Indian popular culture.

The formats for diasporic popular media owe much to their inscription within such 'narrowcast' cultural spaces and share many significant attributes: karaoke, with its performative, communal and de-aestheticized performative and communal space (Wong, 1994); the Vietnamese variety music video and 'Paris/Sydney/Toronto by Night' live show formats; and the

typical 'modular' Bollywood film and accompanying live and playback music culture.

Against the locus of examination of the 'diasporic imagination' as one of aesthetically transgressive hybridity produced out of a presumed 'ontological condition' occupied by the migrant subject, these are not necessarily aesthetically transgressive or politically progressive texts. Their politics cannot be read off their textual forms, but must be grasped in the use to which they are put in the communities. In *Floating Lives* we see these uses as centring on popular culture debates – where communities contend around the politics, identity formations and tensions of hybrid popular forms emerging to serve the diasporas.

Much diasporic cultural expression is a struggle for survival, identity and assertion, and it can be a struggle as much enforced by the necessities of coming to terms with the dominant culture as it is freely assumed. And the results may not be pretty. The instability of cultural maintenance and negotiation can lead, at one extreme, to being locked into a time warp with the fetishized homeland – as it once might have been but no longer is or can be; and, at the other, to assimilation to the dominant host culture and a loss of place in one's originary culture. It can involve insistent reactionary politics and extreme overcommercialization (Naficy [1993: 71] cites a situation in 1987 when Iranian television in Los Angeles was scheduling more than 40 minutes advertising an hour) because of the need to fund expensive forms of media for a narrowcast audience; and textual material of excoriating tragedy (the [fictional] self-immolation and [actual] atrocity scenarios played out in some, respectively, Iranian and Croatian videos), as recounted by Naficy and by Kolar-Panov (1997).

Second, there is explanatory pay-off in pursuing the specificity of the ethno-specific public sphericule in comparison with other emergent public spheres. Like the classic Habermasian bourgeois public sphere of the café society of 18th- and 19th-century France and Britain, they are constituted as elements of civil society. However, our understanding of civil society is formulated out of its dualistic relationship to formal apparatuses of political and juridical power. Ethno-specific sphericules constitute themselves as potentially global civil societies that intersect with state apparatuses at various points (immigration law, multicultural public policy and, for the irredentist and the exilic, against the regimes that control homeland societies). It follows that ethno-specific public sphericules are not congruent with international taste cultures borne by a homogenizing global media culture. For diasporic groupings were parts of states, nations and polities and much of the diasporic polity is about the process of remembering, positioning and, by no means least, constructing business opportunities around these pre-diasporic states and/or nations.

It is out of these realities that the assumption grows that ethnic minoritarian publics contribute to the further fragmentation of the majoritarian

public sphere, breaking the 'social compact' that subsumes nation and ethnicity within the state; a process that has been foundational for the modern nation state. Irredentist politics and 'long-distance' nationalism, where the prime allegiance continues to be to an often-defunct state or regime, are deemed non-progressive by most commentators – classically captured by Susan Sontag in her celebrated essays on the Cubans in Florida. However, a focus on the popular culture of diasporas and its place in the construction of public sphericules complicates these assumptions, as it shows that a variety of voices contend for recognition and influence in the micro-polity, and great generational renewal can arise from the vibrancy of such popular culture.

Sophisticated cosmopolitanism and successful international business dealing sit alongside long-distance nationalism – the diasporic subject is typically a citizen of a western country, who is not stateless and is not seeking the recognition of a separate national status in their 'new' country, like the prototypical instances in the European context such as the Basques, the Scots or the Welsh. These sphericules are definitively transnational, even global in their constitution but are not the same as emerging transnational polities and cultures of global corporate culture, world-spanning non-governmental organizations and international bodies of governments.

Perhaps the most consistent relation, or non-relation, that diasporic media have with the various states into which they are introduced concerns issues of piracy. This gives another layer to the notion of civil cultures standing against the state, where 'public' is irreducible to 'official' culture. Indeed, given that significant amounts of the cultural production exist in a para-legal penumbra of copyright breach and piracy, there is a strong desire on the part of the entrepreneurs who disseminate such products to keep their distance from organs of the state. It is apparent that routinized piracy makes of much diasporic media a 'shadow system', as Kolar-Panov (1997: 31) dubs such minority video circuits as they are perceived from outside. They operate 'in parallel' to the majoritarian system, with few industry linkages.

Third, they reconfigure essentialist notions of community and reflex anti-commercialism. These sphericules are communities in a sense that goes beyond the bland homogeneous arcadia that the term community usually connotes. On the one hand, the ethno-specific community assumes an importance that is greater by far than the term usually implies in mainstream parlance, as the community *constitutes* the markets and audiences for the media services – there is almost no cross-over or recognition outside the specific community in most cases of diasporic cultural production. The 'community' therefore becomes an economic calculus, not only a multi-cultural demographic instance. The community is to an important extent constituted *through* media (see Hartley and McKee, 2000: 84) in so far as media performance is one of the main reasons to meet together, and there is very little else available as a mediator of information and entertainment.

These media and their entrepreneurs and audiences work within a de-essentialized community and its differences as a condition of their practice and engagement.

Diasporic media are largely commercially driven media but are not fully fledged markets. They are largely constituted in and through a commercial culture but this is not the globalizing, homogenizing commercialism that has been posed by neo-Marxist political economists as threatening cultural pluralism, authenticity and agency at the local level. With notable exceptions such as global Chinese popular cultural forms such as cantopop and Hong Kong cinema, which has experienced significant cross-over into both dominant and other emerging contemporary cultural formations, and the Indian popular Bhangra music and Bollywood cinema which is still more singularly based in Indian homeland and diasporic audiences, this is small business commercialism that deals with the practical specificities of cultural difference at the local level as an absolute precondition of business viability.

The spaces for ethno-specific public communication are, fourth, media-centric, and this affords new configurations of the information-entertainment dualism. Given the at times extreme marginalization of many diasporic groupings in public space and their lack of representation within leaderships of influence and persuasion in the dominant forums of the host country, ethno-specific media become, by default, the main organs of communication outside of certain circumscribed and defined social spaces, such as the Chinatowns, Koreatowns, the little Saigons, the churches and temples, or the local video, spice and herb parlours.

The ethno-specific sphericle is mediacentric but, unlike the way that mediacentricity can give rise to functionalist thinking (media are the cement that forms and gives identity to the community), it should be thought of rather as 'staging' difference and dissension in ways that the community *itself* can manage. There are severe constraints on public political discourse among, for example, refugee-based communities such as the Vietnamese. The 'compulsive memorialisation' (Thomas, 1999: 149) of the pre-communist past of Vietnam and the compulsory anti-communism of the leadership of the Vietnamese community are internalized as unsavoury to mainstream society. As part of the pressure to be the perfect citizen in the host society (Hage, 1998: 10), there is considerable self-censorship in the expression of public critical opinion. This filtering of political partisanship for external consumption is also turned back on itself in the community, with attempts by members of the community to have the rigorous anti-communist refugee stance softened (by the mid-1990s, only 30 percent of the Vietnamese community in Australia were originally refugees) met with harsh rebuke. In this situation, Vietnamese entertainment formats, discussed below, operate to create a space where political and cultural identities can be processed in a self-determining way, where voices other than the official, but constitutive of community sentiment, can speak.

Mediacentricity also means, in this context, a constant blurring of the information–entertainment distinction, giving rise to a positive sense of a 'tabloidized' sphericule wherein McGuigan's affective as well as effective communication takes on another meaning. The information–entertainment distinction – usually maintained in the abundance of available media in dominant cultures – is blurred in the diasporic setting. As there is typically such a small diet of ethno-specific media available to these communities, they are mined deeply for social cues (including fashion, language use and so on), personal gossip, public information as well as singing along to the song or following the fictional narrative. Within this concentrated and contracted informational and libidinal economy, 'contemporary popular media as guides to choice, or guides to the attitudes that inform choices' (Hartley, 1999: 143) take on a thoroughly continuous and central role in information and entertainment for creating a negotiated *habitus*.

The Vietnamese

The Vietnamese are by far the largest refugee community in Australia. For most, 'home' is a denigrated category while 'the regime' continues in power, and so media networks, especially music video, operate to connect the dispersed exilic Vietnamese communities. As Cunningham and Nguyen (2000) argue in our chapter in *Floating Lives*, there are obviously other media in play (community newspapers, Hong Kong film and video products) but music video carries especial significance and allows a focus on the affective dimension of public communication. Small business entrepreneurs produce low-budget music videos mostly out of southern California (but also Paris), which are taken up within the fan circuits of the United States, Australia, Canada, France and elsewhere. The internal cultural conflicts in the communities centre on the felt need to maintain pre-revolutionary Vietnamese heritage and traditions; find a negotiated place in a more mainstreamed culture; or engage in the formation of distinct hybrid identities around the appropriation of dominant western popular cultural forms. These three cultural positions or stances are dynamic and mutable, but the main debates are constructed around them, and are played out principally within variety music video formats.

Although by no means exhausting the media diet of the Vietnamese diaspora, live variety shows and music videos are undeniably unique to it, as audio-visual media made specifically by and for the diaspora. These media forms bear many similarities to the commercial and variety-based cultural production of Iranian television in Los Angeles studied by Naficy in his benchmark *The Making of Exile Cultures* (1993), not least because Vietnamese variety show and music video production is also centred on the Los Angeles conurbation. The Vietnamese grouped there are not as numerous or as rich

as Naficy's Iranians and so have not developed the business infrastructure to support the range and depth of media activity recounted by Naficy. The business infrastructure of Vietnamese audiovisual production is structured around a small number of small businesses operating on very low margins.

To be exilic means not, or at least not 'officially', being able to draw on the contemporary cultural production of the home country. Indeed, it means actively denying its existence in a dialectical process of mutual disauthentication (Carruthers, forthcoming). The Vietnam government



Figure 1 Asia Video 21, 'Songs from the Era of Wartime'. A 1998 music video compilation by Asia Productions. Remembrance of the heroic loss of the Vietnam War remains a normative element of Vietnamese diasporic popular culture. Reproduced with kind permission.

proposes that the *Viet Kieu* (the appellation for Vietnamese overseas which carries a pejorative connotation) are fatally westernised. Ironically, the diasporic population makes a similar counter-charge against the regime, proposing that the homeland population has lost its moral integrity



Figure 2 Paris by Night 36. A high production value 1996 release, 'Houston' (based on one of the regular live shows throughout the diaspora, this time in Houston), by the main Vietnamese production house in the United States, Thuy Nga Productions. Reproduced with kind permission.

through the wholesale compulsory adoption of an alien western ideology – Marxism-Leninism.

Together, the dispersed geography and the demography of a small series of communities frame the conditions for ‘global narrowcasting’ – that is, ethnically specific cultural production for widely dispersed population fragments centripetally organized around their disavowed state of origin. This makes the media, and the media use, of the Vietnamese diaspora fundamentally different from those of the Indian or Chinese diasporas. The last revolve around massive cinema and television production centres in the ‘home’ countries that enjoy international cachet. By contrast, the fact that the media uses of the Vietnamese diaspora are globally oriented but commercially marginal ensures that they flourish outside the purview of state and major commercial vectors of subvention and trade.

These conditions also determine the small business character of the production companies. These small enterprises run at low margins and are constantly undercut by piracy and copying of their video products. They have clustered around the only Vietnamese population base that offers critical mass and is geographically adjacent to the much larger ECI (entertainment-communications-information) complex in Southern California. There is evidence of internal migration within the diaspora from the rest of the United States, Canada and France to Southern California to take advantage of the largest overseas Vietnamese population concentration and the world’s major ECI complex.

During the course of the 20 and more years since the fall of Saigon and the establishing of the diaspora through flight and migration, a substantial amount of music video material has been produced. Thuy Nga Productions, by far the largest and most successful company, organizes major live shows in the United States and franchises appearance schedules for its high-profile performers at shows around the global diaspora. It has produced more than 60 two- to three-hour videotapes since the early 1980s, as well as a constant flow of CDs, audio-cassettes and karaoke discs, in addition to documentary specials and re-releases of classic Vietnamese movies. The other companies, between them, have also produced hundreds of hours of variety music video (see Figures 1 and 2).

Virtually every overseas Vietnamese household views this music video material, most regularly attend the live variety performances on which the video material is based, and a significant proportion have developed comprehensive home libraries. The popularity of this material is exemplary, cutting across the several axes of difference in the community: ethnicity, age, gender, recentness of arrival, educational level, refugee or immigrant status, and home region. It is also widely available in pirated form in Vietnam itself, as the economic and cultural ‘thaw’ that has proceeded since the government’s so-called Doi Moi policies of greater openness has resulted in extensive penetration of the homeland by this most international of Vietnamese

forms of expression. As the only popular culture produced by and specifically for the Vietnamese diaspora, these texts attract an emotive investment in the overseas communities which is as deep as it is varied. The social text that surrounds, indeed engulfs, these productions is intense, multi-layered and makes its address across differences of generation, gender, ethnicity, class and education levels and recentness of arrival.

The key point linking attention to the textual dynamics of the music videos and media use in the communities is that each style cannot exist without the others, because of the marginal size of the audience base. From the point of view of *business* logic, each style cannot exist without the others. Thus, at the level of both the individual show/video and company outputs as a whole, the organizational structure of the shows and videos reflects the heterogeneity required to maximize the audience within a strictly narrowcast range. This is a programming philosophy congruent with 'broadcasting' to a globally spread, narrowcast demographic: 'the variety show form has been a mainstay of overseas Vietnamese anti-communist culture from the mid seventies onwards' (Carruthers, forthcoming).

In any given live show or video production, the musical styles might range from precolonial traditionalism to French colonial era high modernist classicism, to crooners adapting Vietnamese folksongs to the Sinatra era and to bilingual cover versions of *Grease* or Madonna. Stringing this concatenation of taste cultures together are comperes, typically well-known political and cultural figures in their own right, who perform a rhetorical unifying function:

Audience members are constantly recouped via the show's diegesis, and the anchoring role of the comperes and their commentaries, into an overarching conception of shared overseas Vietnamese identity. This is centred on the appeal to . . . core cultural values, common tradition, linguistic unity and an anti-communist homeland politics. (Carruthers, forthcoming)

Within this overall political trajectory, however, there are major differences to be managed. The stances evidenced in the video and live material range on a continuum from 'pure' heritage maintenance and ideological monitoring; to mainstream cultural negotiation; through to assertive hybridity. Most performers and productions seek to situate themselves within the mainstream of cultural negotiation between Vietnamese and western traditions. However, at one end of the continuum there are strong attempts both to keep the original folkloric music traditions alive and to keep the integrity of the originary anti-communist stance foundational to the diaspora, through very public criticism of any lapse from that stance. At the other end, Vietnamese-American youth culture is exploring the limits of hybrid identities through the radical intermixing of musical styles.

The Fiji Indians

In a remarkably short time, essentially since the coups of the late 1980s which pushed thousands of Fiji Indians out of Fiji and into diaspora around the Pacific Rim in cities such as Vancouver, Auckland and Sydney, the community in Sydney has fashioned a vibrant popular culture based on consumption and celebration of Hindi filmdom and its associated music, dance and fashion cultures. It is an especial irony that a people 'extracted' from mainland Indian polity and culture a century or more ago – for whom the relationship with the world of Hindi film is a purely imaginary one – should embrace and appropriate such a culture with far greater strength than those enjoying a much more recent connection to the 'homeland'.

Manas Ray's analysis of the Fiji Indian public sphericule in *Floating Lives* (2000) is structured around a comparison with the expatriate Bengalis. The two groups are contrasted on a caste, class and cultural consumption basis, and Ray stresses that, given that there is no critical mass of sub-ethnicities within the Indian diaspora in Australia, cultural difference is definitional. The Bengalis are seen as locked into their history as bearers of the Indian project of modernity which they assumed centrally under the British Raj. The once-unassailed centrality that the educated, Hindu Bengali gentry, the *bradralok*, had in the political and civic institutions of India has been challenged in the decades since independence by the subaltern classes:



Figure 3 *Fiji Times*, February and March 1999. The most popular free magazine among Fiji Indians in Sydney. Reproduced with kind permission.

It is from this Bengal that the *bradralok* flees, either to relatively prosperous parts of India or, if possible, abroad – to the affluent west, taking with them the dream of a nation that they were once so passionate about and the cultural baggage which had expressed that dream. (Ray, 2000: 142–3)

The Bengali diaspora, argues Ray, frames its cultural life around the high culture of the past, which has become a 'fossilized' taste culture (2000: 143).

In startling contrast to the Fiji Indian community, which is by far the highest consumer of Hindi films, for the Indian Bengalis, Indian-sourced film and video is of little interest and is even the subject of active disparagement. The literature and other high cultural forms, which once had 'organic links to the independence movement and to early post-independence hardship and hope', have fossilized into a predictable and ageing taste culture that is remarkably similar whether the Bengali community is in Philadelphia, Boston, London, Düsseldorf, Dubai or Sydney (Ray, 2000: 143). The issues of inter-generational deficit as the young turn to western youth culture are evident.

The politics of popular culture are fought out across the communal fractions and across the generations. The inter-communal discord between mainland Indians and Fiji Indians, which are neither new nor restricted only to Australia – where many mainland Indians continue to exhibit deeply entrenched casteist attitudes and Fiji Indians often characterized mainland Indians with the same kind of negativity they were wont to use for ethnic Fijians – are often played out around media and film culture. There are elements of fully blown popular culture debates being played out. At the time of a particularly vitriolic controversy in 1997, the editor of the mainland *Indian Post* argued that while the Fiji Indians are 'good Hindus' and 'they are the people who spend', their 'westernised ways' and 'excessive attachment to filmy culture' bring disrepute to the Indian community as a whole (Dello, 1997). The resolution to these kinds of issues is often found in the commercial reality that Fiji Indians are the main consumers of the products and services advertised in mainland Indian shops (see Figure 3)!

Despite virtual slavery in the extraction period and uprootedness in the contemporary period, the affective dimension of the Fiji Indian public sphericule is deeply rooted in Hindu belief and folklore. The central text of Hinduism, 'The Ramayan', thus was used to heal the wounds of indenture and provide a cultural and moral texture in the new settlement. A strong emotional identification to the Ramayan and other expressions of the Bhakti movement – a constrained cultural environment, continued degradation at the hands of the racist white regime, a disdain for the culture of the ethnic Fijians, a less hard-pressed post-indenture life and, finally, a deep-rooted need of a dynamic, discursive site for the imaginative reconstruction of motherland – were all factors which, together, ensured the popularity of Hindi films once they started reaching the shores of Fiji. This was because

Hindi film deployed the Ramayan extensively, providing the right pragmatics for 'continual mythification' of home (Ray, 2000: 156).

As a result, second-generation Fiji Indians in their twice-displaced settings of Sydney, Auckland or Vancouver have developed a cultural platform that, although not counter-hegemonic, is markedly different from their western host cultures. In contrast, 'the emphasis of the first generation Indian Bengali diaspora on aestheticised cultural forms of the past offers to second generation very little in terms of a home country popular youth culture with which they can identify' (Ray, 2000: 145).

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