Declaration of Existence for Constructing Cultural Identities (CCI) Group

April 2005

“The expectation of this place (Adelaide) is as a centre of excellence and not just as somewhere that you have to leave if you want to succeed at the highest levels of your profession. After all, if Shine proves nothing else, then it could stand alone for this very reason: that it shows in its own way how it is possible to take ideas of quality from Adelaide, and to astonish the world with them”.

Scott Hicks

Introduction

Culture has recently been defined as “a way of being, relating, behaving, believing and acting which people live out in their lives and which is in a constant process of change and exchange with other cultures”. Taken from another perspective, the notion of culture has also been viewed in terms of “the application of intelligence to the difficult imbroglio of not being able to live alone upon the earth” (Powys, 1930: 274-275). As researchers from diverse cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds, we recognise that the path of solitary research endeavours can sometimes be an onerous and lonely one. As members of the Flinders Humanities Research Centre for Cultural Heritage and Cultural Exchange, we have the opportunity to follow collegial as well as individual research pathways.

In our discussions, we have embarked collectively on a course of action to explore the interdependence of and create cooperative models for our many and varied research activities. In so doing, we acknowledge the need to communicate the interrelatedness of the bodies of knowledge that we carry within ourselves and, through our scholarly investigations, make provision for engaging in dynamic collaborative practices and undertakings in the future.

The research theme, Constructing Cultural Identities, recognises the vital and ongoing intercultural dialogue that exists between colleagues across a variety of disciplines and aims to foster new research partnerships and directions, encourage the development of projects of international status and enhance the research strengths and commitments of all stakeholders. As individuals we express our sense of identity and heritage. As researchers we inhabit different interdisciplinary spaces of teaching, learning and understanding.

Our domains of study are broad and constantly evolving: “Humanistic disciplines overlap with the social sciences at some points and at others have a greater affiliation with aesthetics and art; and all are concerned centrally with beliefs and values. As foci of research, they explore how we communicate; choose; make intellectual, social and moral sense of our lives; learn to think critically and creatively; and adapt to change”

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1 Excerpt from a speech given at Flinders University, April 15 1997, on the occasion of Scott Hicks receiving a Doctor of Letters honoris causa.

Thus our proposals will be shaped by the range and diversity of perspectives that are found in our different fields, for example, the creation and/or analysis of texts in a variety of media, including the creative arts, drama, public performance, debate, historical investigation, field-work, the study of both indigenous and introduced cultures. While we accept that there is no such thing as a unitary human identity, we work on the assumption that mutual and fluid conceptions of identities provide a better model for understanding humans in culture than the fully deconstructed notion of fragmented subjectivities.

To date, expressions of interest in the theme group *Constructing Cultural Identities* have been made by twenty-seven researchers from the following disciplines:

Archaeology  
Australian Studies  
Education/ESL  
English  
Languages  
Legal Studies  
Philosophy  
Professional English  
Screen Studies  
Sociology

The value of this discussion paper will emerge from the way in which we all engage with it in creating opportunities for coordinated research activities, encouraging exchange, building new partnerships and exploring potential projects as a focused thematic group.

**Culture: A Global Perspective**

The events of September 11 stressed the urgency for an ‘intercultural dialogue’ (Matsuura, 2001:1) among nations. The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) was written as a first step in UNESCO’s action plan to achieve this end. The Declaration represents an attempt to reject the mounting scepticism evident in the belief that the ultimate outcome for humanity will be a situation in which cultures will clash and civilisations will be destroyed (Matsuura, 2001). The Declaration emphasises culture as a shared heritage in which ‘each individual must acknowledge ‘otherness in all its forms’ and ‘the plurality of his or her own identity, within societies that are themselves plural’ (Matsuura, 2001:1).

**Critical and Visual Literacy**

Cultural research in Australia emphasises this notion of ‘otherness’ (Lo Bianco, Liddicoat and Crozet, 1999) with one example notably observed in the domain of critical literacy. Critical literacy supports the view that literature, both visual and written, to be fully appreciated, needs to be connected to the social and cultural generatives that influenced the creators of the texts (McKay, 1999 cited in Browett, 1999:2).
Critical literacy likewise stresses that the many shades of meaning to be found in text represent a ‘reading of cultures’, with the reader exploring ‘around, behind, underneath, alongside, after and within the text’ (Luke, Comber and O’Brian, 1996:3 cited in Browett, 1999:2). Each reader engages and interprets text individually and ‘preferred’ readings rely on appropriate cultural knowledge’ whilst ‘alternative’ readings occur as a result of the differences in the cultural experience of the creator and the reader (Curriculum Corporation, 1994: 8-9; Lo Bianco, Liddicoat & Crozet, 1999:184-185).

**Postcolonial Approaches**

One particular focus of attention for research that brings together many of the members of this group is an on-going interest in postcolonial approaches that not only help us understand the crucially shaping effects of Australian culture’s colonial origins but also “signals an activist engagement with positive political positions and new forms of political identity” (Young 2001: 58).

Such postcolonial approaches help us theorise many contemporary discursive traditions: linguistics; fiction; film; dramatic writing; life writing; political journalism; environmental writing; food writing; history; literary criticism and ethnography. Such eclecticism is one of the strengths of the perspectives informed by postcolonial studies, bringing together research interests that deal with many issues of concern in a globalising world: social justice; neo-colonialism; indigenousness; representation; ethnicity; multiculturalism; centres and margins; migration; transculturation; displacement; diaspora; authenticity; environmentalism; racism; ethnic nationalism and cultural conflict.

**The Role of CCI**

The *Constructing Cultural Identities* theme group offers a unique mix of research talents and multilingual versatility across fields of interest that are of local and international significance. The ongoing dialogue generated by the group and its “declaration of existence” marks a first step in the creation of a structured forum for tempering discipline-based barriers and focusing energies on the development of new and meaningful collaborative research endeavours.

The way forward for members of CCI is to identify potential areas of interest that will lead to the development of significant projects. Suggestions for grouping members of CCI along broad themes could include the following:

1. The role of literature and creative writing in the construction of cultural identity.
2. Postcolonial approaches and the construction of cultural identity.
3. The exploration of language and cultural identity.
4. Indigenous and introduced cultures and the construction of cultural identity.
5. The role of film and the creative arts in creating cultural identity.
Members of CCI could also consider self-descriptions of groups and projects, for example, life writing, migration studies, Anglo-Australian identity, twentieth-century hispanophone literature, literary genre studies. This list would be empirical rather than synoptic in scope, and subject to constant revision depending on what particular projects were underway.

**Research interests of CCI participants**

The research interests of participants in *Constructing Cultural Identities* are very distinctive. Giselle Bastin is examining gendered discourses, Gothic and Australian literature and contemporary literary theory. Kate Douglas is also interested in Australian literature, as well as contemporary modes of self-representation and life narrative studies, twentieth and twenty-first century literatures in English and post-colonial literature and theory. Rick Hosking is engaged in research in South Australian literary and cultural history, the literature of Empire, contact history, contemporary historical fictions and nineteenth century popular fiction (both British and Australian). He is also interested in postcolonial studies, Indian writing in English in particular, and travel writing, especially nineteenth century Australian writing.

Creative writing is an area of special focus for Jeri Kroll, who is also active in the pedagogy of creative writing, creative work as research, contemporary poetry and prose (primarily Australian and American) and Australian children's literature. Maria Elena Lorenzin writes fiction and is conducting research in fast fiction, microfiction, humour, parody and eroticism in Spanish American literature, distance learning technology and interactive online teaching. Steve Evans is exploring contemporary poetry and prose and is an active creative writer and teacher of writing (creative and professional), as well as a consultant in creative and professional writing.

Robert Phiddian’s research interests include Jonathan Swift, late seventeenth and early eighteenth century literature and culture, the theory and practice of literary parody, deconstruction and Australian political satire. Graham Tulloch’s many research interests include Sir Walter Scott and James Hogg, nineteenth century Scottish literature, the history of the Scots language, Scots Bible translation, Scottish writers in Australia and South Australian writing. Graham also edits Scottish and Australian texts.

Mike Walsh writes and researches in the areas of Asian cinema, the political economy of Australian cinema and the history of film style. He is a member of the Film Critics Circle of Australia, and is currently a Programming Consultant for the Adelaide International Film Festival. Ruth Vasey is a specialist in American cinema and has published widely in this area. She is also interested in systems of regulation and censorship, Japanese cinema, and the globalisation of screen media. Julia Erhart’s research includes feminist, gender, sexuality studies in media and culture, documentary, independent, and experimental media, and cross-cultural and Indigenous media.

Maria Luz Long has an interest in Spanish language, contemporary Spanish literature, the Spanish Civil War in Spanish literature and contemporary Spanish women writers. Her specialisation is the fiction of Miguel Delibes. Philip Martin-Clark’s work has examined gender and sexuality in the work of Luis Cernuda, and currently focuses on
the work of his fellow poet, Luis López Anglada. In particular, his work examines López Anglada’s portrayal of Spanish society in the 1940s and early 1950s, his relationship to his contemporaries and to Spanish poetry of that and earlier periods, and his expression of personal identity.

Flavia Coassin and Diana Glenn are active researchers in Dante Studies. Flavia has explored, among other things, the function of music and musicality in the Comedy, and thirteenth and fourteenth century Italian poetry and poetics, in addition to twentieth century Italian literature, in particular Sicilian writers. Diana has concentrated on eighteenth century criticism of Dante and the role of women in the Comedy, but is also engaged in research on contemporary Italian narrative and Italian migration studies. Margaret Baker’s research is concerned with the ways in which Italian narrative, in particular that of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, reflects the country’s evolving cultural identity. As this narrative also draws upon earlier Italian literature, she takes an interest in Dante’s Comedy from a contemporary perspective.

Des O’Connor is an expert on the history of Italian settlement in Australia, with special reference to South Australia. Des’ other research interests include Italian and English bilingual lexicography, nineteenth and twentieth century Italian poetry, Italian migrant poetry and Italian language teaching. Eric Bouvet has been focusing on French migration to Australia but his interests also comprise second language acquisition, foreign language reading research and instruction, learning styles, and the methodology of literature instruction. Migrant cultural and linguacultural issues are the focus of Marietta Rossetto’s research interests, more specifically, the lived experiences of minority groups as they influence identity, acculturation and social justice. Her other research interests include language maintenance, second language learning and ESL.

Jenny Burley’s research is focused on the Irish who emigrated to Australia in the early part of the twentieth century. She is primarily interested in the experience of the women who came, their lives in Australia and what, if any, cultural heritage they passed on to their descendants. Dymphna Lonergan’s research interests include Business English, Plain English, Australian English, Hiberno English, Irish language words in English, Anglo-Irish literature, Irish Australian literature and Irish place names in Australia.

Jane Haggis and Susanne Schech’s research is on the social construction of whiteness in contemporary Australia. They are engaged in a joint project, Travelling Whitenesses, exploring racialised constructions of identity amongst overseas born Australians. Pam Smith is an ARC Post-Doctoral Research Fellow and Chief Investigator of the Adelaide Hills Face Zone Cultural Heritage Project funded by a number of industry partners and the ARC.

Steve Hemming is an anthropologist/historian with a museum curator background who is interested in the power relations involved in the ongoing colonial relationships between Indigenous people and Pacific Rim settler democracies. His research applies cultural theory to the practical processes of ‘reconciliation’ and community change. Shannon Dowling’s research interests lie broadly in the field of memory studies, for example, understanding collective memory and how it shapes identities. Shannon’s research thus far has focused on Jewish identities and the Holocaust in Australia, and in the wider diaspora, exploring the sites of/for remembering such as literature, life
writing, film, television, museums and monuments. George Couvalis’ primary research interests include Philosophy of Science, Epistemology and Political Philosophy. One of his long standing research interests is perceptions of identity and their importance. Recently, he has been investigating the meaning of ‘Greekness’ (and ‘romanness’) at various periods in the history of Greek-speaking peoples.
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