Creativity, Culture and Cosmopolitanism: Community arts in multicultural Sydney

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines how community arts in Sydney, Australia, have created new narratives of multiculturalism, focusing on the everyday diversity found in Sydney’s disadvantaged western suburbs. These narratives respond to the post-9/11 demonization of western Sydney and its multicultural communities, particularly Muslim and Arab-Australians. In contrast to the largely symbolic multiculturalism of the gentrified inner-city, western Sydney-based artists argue that theirs is a genuine, living, and breathing multiculturalism. This paper provides a case study of Information and Cultural Exchange, a community arts organization that has contributed to the rebranding of Western Sydney as a cosmopolitan hub, brimming with untapped creativity and the untold stories of multicultural Australia.

KEYWORDS: Multiculturalism, Community arts, Western sydney

JEL CLASSIFICATION: Z1

1. INTRODUCTION
What role can creativity play in reshaping perceptions of maligned urban areas and their communities? In Sydney, Australia, community arts have responded in creative and innovative ways to the demonization of ethnic minorities, particularly Arab and Muslim-Australians, and the western suburbs in which they are concentrated. In the post-9/11 era, these communities have fallen outside of the positive narrative of Australian multiculturalism, being blamed for crime, mistreatment of women, and accused of being a threat to social cohesion and national security. This paper examines how Western Sydney-based community arts have responded by depicting their region as the true face of Australian multiculturalism, and an area brimming with creative innovation, drawn from the genuine cosmopolitanism of everyday life.

This paper provides a case study of Information and Cultural Exchange (ICE), a community arts organization based in Western Sydney. It is based on a three year research partnership between ICE and researchers at the University of Technology, Sydney. The researchers engaged in participant observation of numerous ICE programs, and in-depth interviews with key personnel from the organization and the Western Sydney community arts sector.

2. MULTICULTURAL SYDNEY: DIVERSITY AS AN ASSET AND A THREAT
Australia was one of the first countries in the world to officially adopt a policy of multiculturalism. Since the 1970s, there has been broad support for multiculturalism from mainstream political parties,

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and the population at large. Multiculturalism, which acknowledges and celebrates cultural diversity, is generally seen as an important part of contemporary, cosmopolitan Australia. In 2011, announcing a new multicultural policy, then immigration minister, Chris Bowen, lauded what he called the “genius of Australian multiculturalism”, arguing that the Australian model was unique, built on “respect for Australian values”, citizenship and bipartisan support (ABC, 2011).

However, the official acceptance of multiculturalism in Australia has always coexisted with uneasiness about certain minority groups. In the 1990s, Asians were targeted as a threat to social cohesion, as witnessed in the rise of the right-wing One Nation Party, and its leader, Pauline Hanson. In her 1996 maiden speech to parliament, Hanson warned that Australia was being “swamped” by Asians. According to Hanson, Asians “have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate” (Australia Network, 2011).

Since the 2000s though, anxiety about Asians has been eclipsed by a much more virulent opposition to Arabs and Muslims. In fact, in the wake of 9/11 and the War on Terror, public debates on multiculturalism have been largely reduced to the “Muslim question”. A recent news story broadcast on the Nine Network’s 60 Minutes program is emblematic of this reduction. “…[R]ight now nothing divides opinion like multiculturalism”, the show’s introduction explains. “But let’s be frank here”, it continues, “This debate isn’t so much about race as religion and a fear of one in particular – Islam” (Usher, 2011). Muslim communities in Australia, who have a long history in the country, have become suspect, accused of failing to integrate into mainstream society, mistreating women, and harboring “home-grown terrorists”.

In Sydney, the tension between official praise for multiculturalism and ongoing anxiety about minorities is played out in the city’s geography. The “global city” image of Sydney that governments are so keen to propagate is largely restricted to the inner-urban areas. As Turner (2008) argues, the wealthy inner-city areas pride themselves on their cosmopolitan characteristics, seen, for example, in the diversity of cuisines available on fashionable high streets. This type of multiculturalism through consumption, or “cosmo-multiculturalism”, as Hage (1998) calls it, is a largely middle class phenomenon, enabled by economic globalization as much as immigration.

As Turner describes, from the 1970s, Sydney’s inner-city transformed from urban slum to sophisticated bourgeois village. Residential housing was renovated, café strips with alfresco dining appeared, and “European-styled village centres emerged” (Turner, 2008, p. 572). The signs of multiculturalism “became the achievement of cosmopolitanism”, offering “the opportunity to exercise a self-conscious bourgeois lifestyle connoisseurship” (Turner, 2008, p. 572). The refurbishment of the inner-city coincided with the globalization of the Australian economy, bringing greater access to consumer commodities, cheaper international travel and global communication, facilitating “globalised”, cosmopolitan middle-class lifestyles.

Ironically, the gentrification of these inner-city areas led to the exodus of older generations of working class immigrants, who had been concentrated in these previously industrial regions. As the inner-city became fashionable, older immigrants, particularly those from Southern Europe and the Mediterranean, were priced out of the market, no longer able to afford escalating rents. The factories and warehouses that previously employed them had also succumbed to the same fate. As Turner (2008, p. 573) writes, “Those who poured the cappuccinos in the inner city cafes were forced out to the next

1 “Arab” and “Muslim” are regularly conflated in Australian public debates, reflecting the numerical dominance of Lebanese and other Middle Eastern-origin immigrants within the Australian Muslim population. However, the conflation is often misleading, ignoring the large numbers of Muslims from elsewhere, including Turkey, Indonesia and the Indian subcontinent.

2 This paper uses the terms “cosmopolitanism” and “multiculturalism” largely interchangeably, although “multiculturalism” is favored because this is the more common term used in political debates in Australia. “Cosmopolitanism” is used to denote cultural diversity and a general openness to cultural difference, rather than in the more traditional philosophical meaning of “citizen of the world”. In this sense I am using “cosmopolitanism” as a descriptive term rather than one with moral implications.
ring of suburbs, to live outside the inner city”. The middle classes who replaced them have been largely Anglo-Australian, joined by some second generation immigrants. The cosmopolitan image of the inner-city therefore sits uneasily with the actual decline in cultural diversity among the local population.

Multiculturalism is viewed very differently in the areas of Sydney that are in fact the most culturally diverse, namely the western suburbs. Western Sydney, home to two million residents, is Sydney’s working-class heartland. It has long been considered the “other” Sydney (Collins and Poynting, 2000), geographically and symbolically distant from Sydney’s usual icons – the glittering harbor, the Opera House, beautiful beaches and vibrant metropolis. Generations of immigrants have settled in Western Sydney, attracted to its cheaper housing, blue collar jobs, and established immigrant communities. In 2011, according to the Census, a third of Western Sydney residents were born overseas, and 39 per cent spoke a language other than English, with the most common languages being (in order): Arabic, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tagalog and Hindi (WSROC, 2013). Meanwhile the fastest growing religions in Western Sydney were Islam and Hinduism (WSROC, 2013).

However, in much public debate, Western Sydney’s cultural diversity is not viewed as an asset, but as a threat. In these working-class suburbs, the strong presence of immigrants is often associated with sensationalist fears of “ethnic gangs” and crime, immigrant “ghettos”, and youth delinquency. While globalization has been associated with new service industries for the city centre, in Western Sydney, it has meant the disappearance of manufacturing jobs, as factories have relocated offshore. The decline of manufacturing has been most acutely felt in the suburbs hosting the highest numbers of immigrants, particularly in south-west Sydney, which continues to suffer from higher rates of poverty, unemployment, and relative disadvantage. Turner (2008, p. 574) highlights the structural economic disadvantage experienced particularly by Arabic-speaking youths in south-west Sydney, where the unemployment rate is as high as 41 percent. Class and ethnicity therefore intersect to produce a powerful perception of an undesirable and even menacing region.

In the last decade or so, Arab and Muslim-Australians, who are geographically concentrated in Western Sydney, have been at the centre of such concerns. Poynting et al’s book, Bin Laden in the Suburbs (2004) provides a useful account of how these areas and their communities have become simultaneously radicalized and criminalized. In particular, a series of gang rapes in the 2000s committed by Muslim-Australian men, allegedly targeting “Aussie” women, provided one of the catalysts for a sustained moral panic about “ethnic crime”, Muslims’ mistreatment of women, and “cultural clashes”. These gang rapes followed an earlier high profile youth murder and the drive-by shooting of the Lakemba police station in 1998.

These crimes were seen as evidence of a cultural pathology among Arabs and Muslims, with social problems reduced to a single cause – ethnic “culture”. “Ethnic villains” were inscribed as “morally culpable on the basis of their ethnicity” (Poynting et al., 2004, p. 576). Arab and Muslim men were viewed as inherently violent, anti-social, and prone to gang activity. Entire suburbs were represented as “ganglands”, places ruled by “organized ethnic gangs” who had “secret signs” such as “sucking on colored straws or wearing red necklaces – signatures of the new criminal fraternity which was increasingly occupying territory across Sydney” (Poynting et al., 2004, p. 16).

Anxiety about Arabs and Muslims culminated in the Cronulla beach riots of 2005, which saw thousands of young white men violently attacking anyone of “Middle Eastern appearance”, in an attempt to “reclaim” the beach, and symbolically, the nation. The riots started as a protest against the “un-Australian” behavior of Lebanese men, following the bashing of a lifeguard earlier in the week. This was just the latest in a catalogue of alleged offences, including harassing women on the beach.

3 While Muslims made up 2.2 percent of Australia’s population in 2011 (ABS, 2012), in Western Sydney, the figure was 7.5 percent (WSROC, 2013). And in some western Sydney suburbs, the proportion was much higher, for example, Lakemba, where 52 percent of the population was Muslim (ABS, 2013). Looking at native language, 8 percent of Western Sydney residents spoke Arabic, double the overall Sydney average (WSROC, 2013).
and arriving in large groups and behaving in anti-social ways, for example, playing soccer on the beach instead of swimming (for extensive analysis of the Cronulla riots, see Noble, 2009).

In the post-9/11 era, many have seen Muslims as testing the limits of Australian multiculturalism, or evidence that multiculturalism has “gone too far”. Accordingly, the suburbs hosting the highest numbers of Muslims in Sydney, such as Lakemba, have become viewed as almost a contagion on the body politic of the nation, an alien landscape of mosques and veiled women, unrecognizable to mainstream Australia. Moreover, these areas have been accused of hosting terrorist cells. The title of Poynting et al.’s book was taken from a newspaper headline from the Sydney Telegraph, “TERROR AUSTRALIS: Bin Laden groups in our suburbs” (Poynting et al., 2004, p. 29).

3. WESTERN SYDNEY RESPONSES TO MORAL PANICS

So how have Western Sydney communities responded to these moral panics? Perhaps the most innovative response has been to embrace rather than deny cultural difference, and attempt to rebrand Western Sydney, from criminal ghetto to the cosmopolitan heartland of multicultural Australia. Speaking back to images of Sydney’s western suburbs as hotbeds of crime and deviance, advocates of the area have depicted it instead as possessing an authentic and rich diversity, an area where minority groups from all over the world coexist peacefully and productively. Moreover, it is argued, this cultural mix produces a new identity for multicultural Australia, one in which hybridity and cross-cultural exchange generate an exciting and genuinely cosmopolitan outlook.

Local governments in Western Sydney proudly market cultural diversity as their region’s biggest asset. For example, the council of Fairfield, in south-western Sydney, has adopted the motto, “Celebrating diversity”. On official publicity, virtually all councils in Western Sydney describe their communities by referring to the number of different countries residents hail from. Many councils in the region fund lavish festivals, cultural and food tours, and other initiatives to showcase the cultures that call the area home. For example, the annual four-day Parramasala contemporary arts festival, held in the Western Sydney suburb of Parramatta, celebrates South Asian arts and culture, with a program of music, theatre, dance, film screenings, workshops and talks. As its website asserts, Parramasala is at the forefront of the promotion of Parramatta as a great city in which to live, work and play and of Western Sydney as a region with its own distinct cultural stamp (Parramasala, 2013).

Meanwhile, the Cabramatta Moon Festival, held annually for the past 15 years, has become one of Sydney’s largest Asian cultural events. Each year, more than 90,000 people take part in a celebration of Vietnamese tradition (Fairfield City, 2013), in a suburb that 20 years ago, was viewed as a crime and drug-infested “no-go” zone.

Community organizations in Western Sydney often focus on minority groups for community development programs, aiming to provide an alternative view to the sensationalist headlines. Community arts have been a significant part of this effort, and are ideally situated in certain locations for people to create their own stories and images. Lally and Lee-Shoy (2005, p. 11) describe community arts, or community cultural development (CCD), as a “keystone practice” in Western Sydney. A strong network of arts workers has created a vibrant and locally-grounded cultural sector in the region. As Lally and Lee-Shoy (2005, p. 1) remark, “Western Sydney communities embody cultural forms that span the globe, driving our organizations to connect better with them and constantly seek new ways to understand, promote, and ‘do art’. They explain that the Western Sydney cultural sector is characterized by the combination and hybridization of different kinds of arts practice, including community cultural development, fine art, contemporary practice, cross-artform practice, multidisciplinary programs, heritage, research and development, and issue based social history work (Lally & Lee-Shoy, 2005, p. 10).
4. CASE STUDY: INFORMATION AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE (ICE)

This paper provides a case study of one community organization, Information and Cultural Exchange (ICE). ICE is Western Sydney’s largest community arts organization, describing itself as a “creative conduit between Western Sydney and the world” (ICE, 2013). The organization specializes in film-making, music making, performance, graphic art, and blogs (ICE, 2013) and is well-known for its work with young people from minority communities. Part of its success stems from the composition of the organization itself, which is dominated by staff from migrant and refugee backgrounds, who are ideally placed to reach out to the organization’s target groups. From modest beginnings in the 1980s, ICE has grown dramatically over the last two decades, and now boasts a multi-million dollar operating budget, funded by a range of government, community, and corporate bodies. In 2012, its 17 staff members worked with 735 participants and engaged more than 6,000 audience members (ICE, 2012, p. 7).

For more than 25 years, ICE has worked in Western Sydney and has long argued that the region, rather than being a cultural wasteland, is in fact brimming with creativity and dynamism. Multiculturalism is a key part of this narrative. As the first paragraph of the 2009 ICE Annual Report states:

> With over 100 nationalities calling it home, Greater Western Sydney is one of the most culturally diverse communities in the world. This complex region is currently exploding with stories, global influences, fresh interpretations, and new collaborations. It’s here that Australia’s changing multicultural identity is being imagined and realized, and ICE is at the centre of this process (ICE, 2009, p. 4).

ICE argues that it is precisely Western Sydney’s cultural diversity that enables it to represent the “real” multicultural Australia. This is in contrast to mainstream Australian cultural production emanating from more elite areas, which typically fails to capture the diversity of the Australian population. Mainstream images of Australia, as seen, for example, on commercial television or in films, are often highly monocultural, and generations of commentators on multiculturalism have lamented the absence of non-white faces on Australian screens.

ICE programs, on the other hand, often deliberately target culturally diverse participants. This is necessary to cater to the organization’s Western Sydney constituency, and also a part of its strategy to work with disadvantaged communities, who are often non-Anglo-Australian. ICE’s filmmaking, digital storytelling and hip hop programs have been particularly successful in engaging young people from migrant, refugee and Indigenous backgrounds, as seen in programs such as Yallah! What’s your story?, Pacific Specific, Koori Kinnection, and Vietnamese Storyexchange. Other programs, while not targeting particular minority communities, are still typically dominated by non-white participants. Themes of cultural identity, racism and belonging are commonly explored in such programs, with long-running projects like the Urban Music Program and Youth Digital Cultures providing a valuable space for self-expression and skills training.

Western Sydney is another important theme in many of ICE’s cultural productions. Films, songs, digital stories and other productions often express pride in the region and address negative stereotypes. Some of ICE’s projects have focused on particular Western Sydney suburbs, showcasing their unacknowledged cultural life and history. Examples include the Pearls of Granville architectural tour, Scout: A filmmaker’s guide to Parramatta, Remembering Minto: Life and Memories of a Community, One Day in Cabramatta Mobile Story Exchange and Stories from Mount Druitt (for samples of work produced, see http://www.ice.org.au). To view the music clip produced by the Stories from Mount Druitt project, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7dvLb94FDw.

Among programs engaging Arab-Australians, a standout ICE initiative is the Arab Film Festival Australia. Established in 2001, the festival screens films from the Middle East as well as the global Arab diaspora. From small beginnings, this annual festival now tours across Australia, and receives
substantial public and private sponsorship, and broad recognition among the Arab community in Australia and beyond. Its website states that the festival:

Aims to address contemporary misrepresentations of Arab peoples and cultures by reflecting the complexity and diversity of Arab experiences, and providing a critical space presenting alternative representations of Arab subjects, cultures and narratives on screen (Arab Film Festival Australia, 2013).

Individually, these projects are often small in scale, but continually carried out over years and decades, many small-scale projects have a cumulative impact. This is particularly the case when we remember that ICE does not work alone, but rather, is part of a vibrant network of community arts organizations in Western Sydney, all helping to create alternative images of the region and its communities. Other organizations, such as the Auburn Community Development Network, Bankstown Youth Development Service, Powerhouse Youth Theatre, and others, work in similar fields to ICE, though some have specialized in other artistic genres, such as literature and theatre.

5. THE “ZEST IN THE WEST”: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

The cumulative impact of community arts work in Western Sydney is evident in the gradual change in perceptions of the area. Western Sydney is increasingly acknowledged as a creative and culturally dynamic region. While local residents previously had to travel to the city to visit cultural institutions or participate in cultural events, recent years have seen the opening of numerous galleries, museums and other cultural institutions in the region. In the 2000s, nearly ten major arts centres were established or refurbished in Western Sydney, largely thanks to the New South Wales (NSW) Government’s Western Sydney Arts Strategy (for a more detailed discussion, see Ho, 2012). Major festivals such as the Sydney Festival and the Sydney Writers Festival are increasingly scheduling events in the west, along with other major events that had previously never left the city. We are seeing more partnerships between Western Sydney and Sydney-based organizations, resulting in productions like ICE’s East London West Sydney hip hop dance theatre show, which was presented at the 2011 Sydney Festival.

The NSW government recognizes that the “centre-periphery” perception is no longer so dominant (NSW Ministry for the Arts, 2006, p. 7), and that there has been “increased recognition of the [Western Sydney] region and its unique cultural values and expression” (NSW Ministry for the Arts, 2006, p. 5). Western Sydney has become an “incubator for innovative strategies”, it states, adding that “Cutting edge, hybrid and innovative artistic and cultural practice has featured across a range of art forms, and ‘community cultural development’ has been reinvented in 21st century terms” (NSW Ministry for the Arts, 2006, p. 6). A recent NSW government report notes that many artists and professional arts workers “are now choosing to remain in Western Sydney to live and work” (NSW Government, 2013, p. 2). Importantly, it adds that Western Sydney’s art and cultural sector “can challenge traditional perceptions of disadvantage in the region through the promotion of local arts achievements, prominent artists and the exporting of Western Sydney branded arts product” (NSW Government, 2013, p. 3).

News stories about the cultural renaissance of Sydney’s west now appear regularly in the media, with headlines like The Sydney Morning Herald’s “The zest in the west: Sydney’s sizzling centre” (Pitt, 2010). The item noted that the Western Sydney suburb of Parramatta had transformed itself into a “dining and arts hub”. Local newspapers in Western Sydney have also increased their coverage of arts and culture in the region, often from a very low base line (see Ho, 2012, p. 40).

Obviously many factors have coalesced to shift perceptions of Sydney’s undesirable western suburbs. One important factor though, is undoubtedly the years of work done by community organizations like ICE, who have tirelessly propagated the initially unpopular narrative of the dynamism of multicultural Western Sydney. Organizations like ICE have worked routinely with governments and local councils, lobbying for more policy attention to multiculturalism and the arts, and practical programs for community members. At a more direct level, ICE programs have trained and mentored hundreds of
In its 2013 report on the arts in Western Sydney, the NSW Government highlights the region’s assets, which include, in addition to galleries, museums and the like, “highly-regarded community based arts organizations” and “a diversity of traditional multicultural arts” (NSW Government, 2013, p. 2). It notes the importance of programming that is “community responsive” in developing audiences in Western Sydney, “drawing on local stories to create quality, accessible and sometimes challenging arts and cultural experiences” (NSW Government, 2013, p. 2). The crucial role played by community organizations is a factor that distinguishes cultural activity in Western Sydney, allowing it to be more responsive to diverse local needs, and to produce works that are more experimental and “less mainstream” (NSW Government, 2013, p. 2).

6. CONCLUSION

In a traditionally disadvantaged region, it is perhaps not surprising that community arts, rather than prestigious or commercial art, for example, have played such a big role in the local cultural sector. However, the dominance of community arts in Western Sydney has facilitated the outpouring of non-traditional cultural expression, whose innovation and dynamism is slowly changing the perception of the area. To the extent that community arts have helped to reshape Western Sydney’s image, from ghetto to vibrant multicultural hub, it is fair to say that Australian multiculturalism is being built in a practical way through community arts. Far from the bourgeois consumption-based multiculturalism of the inner-city, Western Sydney’s lived multiculturalism is gaining a new recognition, thanks to local efforts to rebrand the region, and simultaneously demonstrating to the rest of the country, and beyond, what genuine multiculturalism looks like. The experience of this area also points to the possibilities of culture-led urban renewal, which may have implications for other regions in Australia and around the world.

7. REFERENCES


