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Author/s:

Martin, F; Rizvi, F

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Localities [...] are temporary negotiations between various globally circulating forms. They are not subordinate instances of the global, but in fact the main evidence of its reality.
– Appadurai 2013: 69

Introduction

Recent scholarship across media studies, cultural geography, migration studies, cultural anthropology, sociology and architecture has sought to understand how people's relationships with place are increasingly produced by their interactions with electronic entertainment and communications media (Bailey, Georgiou & Harindranath 2007; Berry, Kim & Spigel eds. 2010; Couldry & McCarthy eds. 2004; Coyne 2010; Dayan 1999; Metykova 2010; Moores 2012; Nunes 2006; Nyíri ed. 2005; Perkins & Thorns 2012; Robins & Aksoy 2006). This scholarship underlines how new forms of media circulation enable new kinds of imaginative work, which in turn produce new formations of culture, belonging and locality (Appadurai 2013: 61-69). Such insights are particularly suggestive in relation to mobile populations like international students, who engage with modes of communication and social networks across a wide range of geographic scales.

Globally, international students constitute an extremely significant mobile population: over 4.1 million studied outside their home country in 2010 (OECD 2012: 360). In Australia, the number of international students has now exceeded half a million. A majority of these students are aged between 20 and 30 (ABS 2011) and as a result could be regarded as digital natives, having grown up in the era when digital media and communication systems constitute a taken-for-granted aspect of everyday experience (Prensky 2001; Tomlinson 2007: 94; Zhang 2010). Chinese and Indian students are currently the two largest groups of international students in Australia, and their transnational communicative connections have been highlighted in recent years when racist attacks on members of these student communities ignited virtually instantaneous responses in news and social media back in India and China (Graycar 2010; Dunn, Pelleri & Maeder-Han 2011; Dong 2012). Less attention has been paid,

however, to the micro-level transnational media connectivity that sustains the everyday life-worlds of these students during their overseas stays. In this paper, we draw on original qualitative research to analyze how international higher education students from China and India experience Melbourne through the mediation of transnational (and some local) media. Following Moores's call for a 'non-media centric media studies' that richly contextualizes media use as among a range of everyday practices that produce place as a practical and emotional accomplishment, we focus on how these students' media interactions feed into their place-making in (and of) Melbourne (Moores 2012; see also Morley 2009). The study of Chinese students' experience comprised in-depth semi-structured interviews, mainly in Mandarin, with 15 tertiary students from the People's Republic of China conducted by Martin in Melbourne during 2012. The material on Indian students' experience is drawn from Rizvi's multiple qualitative studies on Indian students in Australian higher education over the past decade.

On one hand, people's interactions with transnational media may appear to enable an unprecedented transcendence of local place. Watching a favorite TV drama via internet streaming just hours after its broadcast in China while chatting with friends back home on Renren, the Chinese Facebook-style platform, an international student may, at moments, subjectively feel as if she were back in China. But on the other hand, media use always happens *in place*, and itself constitutes one of the embodied practices of habitation through which the meaning of place is accomplished. As Doreen Massey argues, a place is constituted, in part, by 'the lines of its engagement with elsewhere,' meaning that places can be seen as 'articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself' (Massey 2007: 13; 28; see also Hannerz 2000; Giddens 1991:18-19; Andersson 2012; Moores 2012: 45). Thus, even as the media content that our hypothetical student consumes affords her a heightened sense of connection with 'back home,' we argue that in using her laptop in an apartment in Melbourne she is simultaneously working on her experience of Melbourne as a place—and at certain moments, the concrete there-ness of Melbourne inevitably asserts itself (for example when she gazes out the window, or when her access to a Chinese media download site is blocked due to her IP address's location outside China). What emerges from this transnational

‘hybridization of physical and digital experiences’ (Lee 2010: 267) is a complexly syncretic sense of place, as bits and pieces of ‘back home’ materialize through laptops and smartphones within the wider geographic and experiential space of ‘out here’ in Australia, *and contribute to the constitution of ‘here.’* Both ‘out here’ and ‘back home’ become fragmented and deterritorialized, woven in and through each other, as the Melbourne that this generation of international students inhabit is fundamentally conditioned by the fluctuating mediated co-presence of elements of ‘back home.’ Such a proposal goes beyond arguments about media’s doubling or pluralization of places (Scannell 1996; Moores 2012) to suggest a more fundamental transformation in the very meaning of place itself as a result of the experiential ubiquity of transnational media connections. Our article begins, then, by presenting the superficially ‘obvious’ picture of international students’ media use as a communicative oscillation between ‘out here’ and ‘back home,’ only to complicate this binary paradigm in the following sections by proposing syncretism as a more appropriate alternative to notions of the hybridization or pluralization of place.

Back home / out here: Digital nostalgia in the making of Melbourne

Among our interviewees, one notable pattern that emerged was their characterization of certain kinds of media use as enabling a feeling of ongoing connection with places and networks in India or China, even at times creating the sense that the user returned ‘back home’ through her or his media interactions.ⁱ The desire for such mediatized connection with the migrant’s country of origin is described by Silvia Mejía Estévez as digital nostalgia: ‘the quest for continuity of space and time through the simultaneity offered by digital media’ (2009: 405). For example, Xiaoxu,ⁱⁱ a 19-year old from Fujian who—like all but two of the other Chinese students quoted below—was studying in a prep program toward entry into an undergraduate Commerce degree, stated that ‘connecting to [Chinese] TV [via Internet download] gives you the feeling of having returned home.’ 19-year-old Shanghainese Shuling, meanwhile, told an illustrative story about a transnationally media-linked trip to buy a pair of shoes: ‘I went to Nike and Adidas to get my shoes. And I [took] photos and sent it through [smartphone app] WeiXin to my parents to see if these shoes are good enough. And they said, it’s pretty. And they said OK, get [a pair].’ⁱⁱⁱ Shuling’s phone enables the ‘telepresencing’ of her parents in Shanghai so that effectively, they accompany her on her shopping trip in Melbourne (Tomlinson

2007: 111). Such accounts echo Paddy Scannell's influential theorization of radio and television as enabling the media user, magically, to be 'in two places at once': physically here, in the place of the media interaction, and emotionally there, in the distance place of events represented (1996: 91-92; see also Morley 2000: 9).

Indian students in Melbourne similarly suggest being in two places at once. A PhD student, Raj, believed that he could only write effectively with a digital radio playing Hindi film songs in the background: 'I find it comforting to know that my culture is not too far away, and that I can be in New Delhi at the same time as I am living here in Melbourne'. The notion of being comfortable in Melbourne through simultaneous engagement with 'back home' indicates the plurality of Raj's connectivity, which was underpinned not only by his passive reception of culturally familiar music on a digital radio but also by his active connection and emotional engagement with the lives of friends and family through almost daily use of Skype.

But lest we mistake such experiences for a straightforward suppression of local material place by transnational mediated place, it is worth noting that what stood out in many interviewees' accounts was precisely the partial and temporary character of that feeling of being transported 'back home', the unsettling moments when *here* interrupts *there*. For example Ying, a 20-year-old from Hebei, discussed her emotional response when, in Melbourne, she encountered Chinese file-sharing sites that blocked her attempts to stream or download content due to her geographic location outside China. She related:

When that happens I'm heartbroken. I feel: Aiya! I'm really in Melbourne! Because I often just feel as if I'm living in some city back home, but when [a download block] happens, it's like oh, I'm in Melbourne! Oh, I'm out here! [...] In that moment, I feel as if I've been abandoned by back home (*bei guonei yiqi*).

What stands out for Ying is the emotional jolt when the limits of transnational media connection are reached and geographic location reasserts itself. While Ying's transnational media use is, in part, what enables her to feel at times as if she is 'living in some city back home,' paradoxically, it is also through her interactions with Chinese media that the here-ness of her Melbourne location makes itself felt. Her experience of Melbourne as a place seems constituted by an affective circuit

oscillating unstably between the feeling of ‘back home’ and the feeling of ‘out here.’

While Indian students did not point to problems associated with download blockage, they were keenly aware of the fact that their technologically mediated relations were restricted largely to those in India who had access to the internet: another form of technological blockage linked with geographic location. For Suresh, his capacity to remain connected with his grandparents who lived in a village was severely constrained by the fact that they did not own a computer and could only talk to him while visiting his parents in a metropolitan area. On the other hand, his friendships with those who are regularly on Facebook and Twitter had grown in ways that he did not anticipate. He found it frustrating that access to technology appeared to determine whom he could and could not be friends with in India. This repeatedly reminded him that he was living in Melbourne, and that technology was unable to bridge the irreducible social distance that geographical distance creates.

Several other interviewees also described a sense of intense disorientation, even distress, that was produced by disconnection from media and communication links to those ‘back home.’ For example, Shujuan, a 20-year-old from Shenzhen, related the following story:

For the first week I was here, for various reasons I had no internet access, and for some reason I had no mobile phone either, I guess it wasn’t connected yet. I couldn’t contact anyone, and I was here all alone, and semester hadn’t started yet. I felt pretty sorry for myself! [laughs] Pretty miserable. But then semester began and I met a lot of Chinese classmates, and I got internet access, and I felt a lot better. [...] Because you can go to Chinese websites, and it feels no different to being back home.

Shujuan’s account again echoes the ‘two places at once’ idea discussed above. A similar story told by 19-year-old Mianmian from Zhejiang, meanwhile, highlights the affective importance of the ‘ambient virtual co-presence’ of distant friends and family that is enabled by mobile telephony on a transnational scale (Ito & Okabe 2005: 264-266):

For the first few days after I arrived, I didn’t eat anything – I couldn’t eat. [...] It was because when I came, I didn’t bring my mobile phone, because my Dad

said I should open an account here. I didn't have the internet, and I didn't have a phone, I didn't know anything! I was completely cut off from the world! I couldn't sleep at all, either. I'd get up really early in the morning. I missed home a lot, I missed my Mum, and my Dad, and I thought, oh, there's such good stuff to eat back home, and I have so many good friends. I had no friends at all here. Then later after I got a phone account and got the internet on, ahhhh, my life gradually got back to normal. [...] Usually, I go online to chat with my Mum and things like that. And with the phone, I'll go online and look at entertainment news and celebrity gossip, and keep up with things back home a bit, which tends to cheer you up. [...]. I could chat about how I was feeling; you feel different when you've got someone to talk to. I could hear my Mum and Dad's voice, and feel, ah, Mum and Dad are with me here all the time.

This story provides an arresting account of the extent to which the capacity for transnational communication is experienced by mobile digital natives like Mianmian as a condition of a place's inhabitability. The temporary lack of a mobile phone and internet connection disrupted Mianmian's basic somatic functions: she could literally neither eat nor sleep until connectivity was restored. In a strong sense, for Mianmian (to paraphrase Gertrude Stein) there was simply 'no there there' in Melbourne until communication with back home could be re-established. She became a node without a network, 'completely cut off from the world' in a city that could not be experienced as a place at all (Wellman 2002). The restoration of a mobile phone connection and the concomitant sense that 'Mum and Dad are here with me all the time' lends weight to the argument that 'miniaturized mobilities' such as mobile phones, even when not activated, function in important part to contain the anxieties associated with hyper-mobile lives (Elliott & Urry 2010: 36; Morley 2003: 452). The seriousness of the bodily symptoms of disconnection that Mianmian describes also underlines Elliott and Urry's larger point about the implication of digital communication technologies in the constitution of selfhood:

The individual self does not just 'use,' or activate, digital technologies in day-to-day life. On the contrary, the self—in conditions of intensive mobilities—becomes deeply 'layered' within technological networks, as well as reshaped by their influence. Indeed, [...] not only are mobile lives lived against the

digital backdrop of miniaturized mobilities, but such portable technical systems give specific form to the self's relations with affect, anxiety, memory and desire. (Elliott & Urry 2010: 30)

In her emotionally super-charged interactions with her mobile phone and internet connection, Mianmian negotiates the very constitution of her subjectivity. Indeed, the severity of the symptoms attending her disconnection implies that for this mobile subject, transnational digital connectivity is a *condition* of viable subjecthood, as well as of inhabitable place.

Emergent transnationalisms: Diasporic mediasphere

Our discussion to this point indicates that the circuit between 'back home' and 'out here' that is activated by digital nostalgia and the telemediatization of international student experience materializes the 'here' of Melbourne as a place that is fundamentally conditioned by the ubiquitous co-presence of mediated fragments of 'back home.' This account has remained essentially binary in structure (back home / out here). In the following sections, we focus on examples where the heterogeneity of place is revealed as more complex, including elements at a range of different scales from the immediate environment to the city to the nation to transnational space. As we will show, the complex interactions between such disparate elements within and across geographic and imagined place tend to irrevocably complicate the here / there dialectic, rendering a far more complexly heterogeneous experience of habitation and place. Following Marcos Becquer and Jose Gatti, we describe this more complex spatial experience as *syncretic* rather than *hybrid* in character (Becquer & Gatti 1991). Becquer and Gatti use the term syncretism to refer to 'the tactical articulation of different elements' such that these form 'a heterogeneous front of distinct [elements] in altered relations to each other' (1991: 69-70). As Martin has proposed elsewhere, syncretism is for many examples of contemporary transnational culture 'a more productive concept than hybridity, which invokes a reproductive rather than a political metaphor and risks assuming the pure origins of the hybridized elements' (Berry & Martin 2003: 89). In this section we explore international students' syncretic place-making in Melbourne by means of their linkage into diasporic communicative circuits.

Interviews with Indian students demonstrate how subjecthood is partly shaped,

over time, by the digitally mediated links that can be created and sustained not only with friends and family at home, but increasingly also with the Indian diaspora around the world. A number of Indian students noted, for example, that being away from home in Melbourne had encouraged them to get in touch with their distant relatives and other Indian students studying in other parts of Australia and indeed around the world. Many of them actively read diasporic websites and electronic bulletin boards, followed prominent Indians on Twitter, and consumed satellite and cable television. Modes of transnational communication involved not only passive consumption, but also active participation in various chat forums, videoconferencing and other forms of information sharing.

For the two years he was studying at a university in Melbourne, Iqbal, a student in design and animation, produced weekly video-clips to share with other Indian international students around the world on a Youtube channel that he created in 2010. The clips showed many different aspects of life in Melbourne, inviting comments on similarities and differences experienced in other parts of the world. For Iqbal, digital connectivity not only enabled him to maintain everyday social life at a distance, especially with members of family in India, but more importantly to create new transnational networks, build social capital and extend career opportunities. According to Raelene Wilding (2006: 137), ‘although ICTs serve to maintain transnational relationships, different forms of communication have different consequences for the relationships they sustain’. As the example of Iqbal’s Youtube channel demonstrates, specific ICTs have the potential to transform such relationships, and thereby shape the representations of localities in mobile populations’ constantly emerging transnationalism (Vertovec 2009).

Increasingly, Indian and Chinese students in Melbourne view themselves as part of transnational communities with a similar pattern of emotional ties to India or China. This suggests the emergence of ‘virtual’ or ‘cyber’ communities converging towards syncretic forms of transnational cultural identity (cf Yang 2003; Ang 2001: 57-60). Spaces of digital connectivity could be seen as exemplary sites where subjects are composed from variable sources, different materials and many locations—refuting the notion of subjectivity as stable, singular or pure. The idea of syncretism points to in-between spaces that are formed out of cross-cultural exchange, resulting in new social forms and practices that are qualitatively different from their contributing components.

As plausible as the idea of syncretism appears, the assumption that digital communication *always* produces syncretic practices is nonetheless misleading, for it is also possible for such communication to result in searches for cultural authenticity by subjects in diaspora. For example, the case of an Indian student of Sikh background, Premjeet, shows how it is possible for digital practices to produce an emotional attachment to a sense of religious purity. When he first came to Melbourne to study finance, Premjeet had no interest in Sikhism and was deeply ambivalent towards religious practices. His feelings of isolation in Melbourne, however, led him to begin consulting websites for information on Sikhism. Within months, he became an active member of a chat forum that was coordinated from San Diego in California. For Premjeet, sociality online was not, however, sufficient to express his newly discovered religious devotion. The internet had provided him a space in which he was able to engage in ‘communicative process of building trust, of self-disclosure’ and of exploring the other in relation to his ‘reflexively constructed needs and desires’ (Ray 2007: 134), but it also became a starting point for offline relationships in Melbourne. He began to attend the local Sikh *gurdwara* (temple) on a regular basis, and his engagement with Melbourne became largely shaped by the social networks he was able to develop with Melbourne’s Sikh community.

Syncretic habitations: media↔city

To develop our line of enquiry about syncretic habitation in relation to international students’ media use in Melbourne, in this section we present an example that illustrates in detail how an international student’s interactions with local and transnational media interweave with and transform her spatial practices of the city. The syncretism we propose here, then, is a syncretism of forms as much as of content, as media and city inflect each other to produce new spatial and experiential contexts, and ultimately a new form of locality (Appadurai 2013: 67).

Above, we discussed Shuling’s transnationally mediated shopping trip, where from a retail outlet in Melbourne she consulted in real-time with her parents in Shanghai regarding her choice of sneakers. While this could be seen as an example of a hybrid spatial experience, where ‘out here’ interweaves with ‘back home’ via the telepresencing of Shuling’s parents, Shuling’s further discussions of her media use also included some far more complex examples. For example, when questioned about her use of local media in Melbourne, Shuling related the following narrative, where

media use links organically to spatial practice and cultural identification in Melbourne's central city area:

I read the newspaper [*mX*], when it is, on the [train]. [...] I have that experience, like, I am an Australian, reading that newspaper. And people may regard you as an Australian. [...] But deep in my heart I am a Chinese I know. [...] And when I walk along the street in the city, and maybe people ask me the way, how to get there, to Chinatown, I feel, ohh, they treat me as an Australian. Even when sometimes, they will speak Shanghainese, and I will feel really like I am back to my home. [...] When they are discussing the road, how to get there, and I hear them I say 'Can I help you?' in Shanghainese. And they say 'Ohh, you are Shanghainese,' or whatever. [...] They are tourists, but when they see me they feel really like [I am] their relative.

What is fascinating in Shuling's narrative is the complexity of her sense(s) of cultural belonging and affiliation, and the organic links between these and her media use and practices of place. Prompted by Fran's question about whether one's use of Australian media could inspire any sense of local belonging, Shuling concedes that it can: the act of reading the free newspaper *mX* on the subway can produce a sense of identification with 'Australian-ness', both in her own view of herself and in the way she imagines others might see her. Yet, if she feels in those moments somewhat 'Australian,' she also remains (at what she feels to be a deeper level) 'Chinese.' Local media are articulated to questions of belonging, so far, at the abstract level of the imagined nation and a binary system invoking institutional identities of 'Chinese' versus 'Australian' (albeit that Shuling makes a hybrid identification with both of these terms). But Shuling's recollection of the urban train journey propels an extension of her spatial story: she emerges from the subway into the city streets where, when people treat her as a local by asking her directions (to Chinatown), she once again feels 'Australian.' Perhaps the most interesting twist comes in what follows. In Shuling's imagined trajectory along the city street, her interlocutors begin speaking Shanghainese, and her sense of local belonging that a moment earlier was articulated with feeling Australian is now transferred to a different sense of belonging as she experiences herself as Shanghainese, and feels she has been transported 'back to [her] home' and is recognized as 'like [the] relative' of the Shanghainese tourists.

Extending beyond abstract, macro-level conceptualizations of nation and nationality, Shuling's identification as Shanghainese through her encounters on a Melbourne city street fatally complicates a straightforward here / there binary. Her sense of Shanghainese is developed through her simultaneous sense of spatial belonging in Melbourne. Both are connected with the comfortable sense of knowing where one is in the city: Shuling's feeling of being at home in the Melbourne street links with her sense of at-homeness in her Shanghainese identity, another city-based category of belonging. This story neatly illustrates the materialization of the Melbourne street as a *translocality*—‘a place whose social architecture and relational topologies have been refigured on a transnational basis’—and Shuling herself as inhabiting a *translocal subjectivity*: that ‘multiply-located sense of self amongst those who inhabit transnational social fields’ (Conradson & McKay 2007: 168). Figuring her as simultaneously ‘Australian,’ ‘Chinese,’ ‘Shanghainese’ and (implicitly) ‘Melburnian,’ Shuling's narrative materializes a fundamentally syncretic city, media use, and subjectivity.

However, lest such an account appear to reproduce a depoliticizing “happy hybridity” thesis (Lo 2000), we must also pay attention to moments when students' sense of belonging in the city was interrupted. The commonest cause of such interruption was experiences of racism in the city's public places. For example, 18 year-old Lingling from Wuhan related:

When I first arrived, I ran into a few bad people, and at times it prevented me from finding that sense of belonging. [...] For example, once I was on the *tram*, and some old drunk guy said something not very nice to me. [...] Something more or less along the lines of, ‘you're a bastard’ (*zazhong*). Directed just at me. I felt it was a bit racist. [...] It really did make me quite upset, because I'd just arrived.

The capacity of such encounters to block a sense of identification with Melbourne as a locality seemed even more pronounced for 18-year old Shufen from Beijing. She recalled two incidents, one in which a bus driver had been impatient and rude to her friend and she had suspected anti-Chinese racism as the underlying reason, and one in which another young female friend had been subject to racial abuse and kicked by a man on a tram. Shufen reflected:

I don't feel that I've really integrated into the society here. Because recently there have been quite a few [unpleasant] events, which make me feel it's difficult to integrate. [...] I used to imagine that here, [society] was extremely, utterly harmonious; that there could never be anyone who would reject people on the basis of their race, because I thought Australia was itself already a very multi-racial society. I thought that such problems would not occur here. But now they are happening, and it's pretty serious. And it's getting more and more common. So now I feel it's harder [to integrate].

Before 2010, most Indian students were deeply ambivalent about pointing to their experiences of racism in Melbourne. Many chose to remain silent for the fear of being tainted as 'trouble-makers', while others compared their experiences in Melbourne to an equally difficult history of racism in India, especially around caste and religious differentiations. This changed in 2009-2010 with a number of highly publicized attacks on Indian (and some Chinese) students, which led the Indian students to well-planned acts of political mobilization. Since 2010, Indian students—like the Chinese students quoted above—have been much more ready to name racist acts: there has emerged a desire to 'locate race' (Schueller 2009) in its spatio-temporal specificities. This illustrates that, for all the translocal syncretism of these students' experience of the city, the sense of belonging that may be experienced in some moments is all too easily shattered when the lines of here / there; we / you are violently reasserted in experiences of racism.

Translocal media as a way in to the city: Weibo in Melbourne

In this section, we continue our discussion of international students' media use and the production of place in the city through a focus on the place-making capacities afforded by the Chinese microblogging platform Sina Weibo. Launched by the Sina Corporation in 2009 and host to over 500 million registered users by April 2013 (Weiji Baike), Weibo was among the most popular social media platforms currently being used by our Chinese interviewees. Within China and beyond, Weibo performs a multitude of social functions, and scholarly interest is particularly strong regarding its political potential as a media public sphere within China (Poell, de Kloet & Zeng, 2014). For our purposes here, though, we focus on the use of Weibo by the Chinese

‘knowledge diaspora’ (Kim 2011) in Melbourne, and especially how international students’ use of it enables *media reterritorialization* by mapping out ways for them to navigate and inhabit Melbourne as a locality.

Migrant communities’ use of online media for the elaboration of local and transnational connections has been studied in different contexts by a number of scholars (Komito & Bates 2009; Komito 2011; Mejía Estévez 2009; Andersson 2012; Moores & Metykova 2009; Metykova 2010). Two opposing tendencies are notable in extant analyses of the relationship between migrants’ transnational online media use and their inhabitation of the local geographic and social world of their ‘host’ societies. On one hand, in their study of media use by Polish migrants in Dublin, Lee Komito and Jessica Bates claim that with transnational new media connectivity, ‘the physical locality in which a migrant lives can [...] become unintrusive background’ (2009: 233):

it is clear that twenty-first century migration is mobility not assimilation, and new social networking technologies are facilitating this mobility. [...] Foreign nationals previously tended to integrate into the societies where they resided [...]. Migrants [...] now live in ‘virtual’ ghettos or enclaves, as they use new technologies to create separate lives within the wider society in which they work and live. (2009: 243)

As we hope our preceding discussion would indicate, we find Komito and Bates’ claims rather overstated. We object to their disparaging characterization of diasporic mediaspheres as ‘virtual ghettos’—not only because of the barely concealed racist implication, but also because such an analysis is inaccurate in its representation of the role of social media in shaping migrants’ relationships with the host city. Such an account underlines the pitfalls of conceptualizing migrants’ media engagements on the binary model of homeland *versus* host land, where each locale is assumed to be fundamentally separate, so that media engagement with ‘there’ logically necessitates disengagement from ‘here.’ Instead, we favour the approach taken by several other scholars who, in Myria Georgiou’s words, see media ‘not just as a way out of place but also as a way in to it.’ (2010: 345). Thus, as Andreas Hepp writes: ‘The different diasporic communicative spaces are not only appropriated by the migrants at specific *localities* but at the same time these communicative flows play their own role in the

construction of these localities.’ (2009: 331, emphasis in original) Along similar lines, Magnus Andersson cautions:

while paying attention to agents’ engagement in disembedding communication technologies and transnational social networks – we should also [...] recognize the ‘socio-cultural thickness of territoriality’. [...] Through practices of different kinds, agents may very well turn culturally ‘thin’ territories into thick ones. Routinized media practices are just but one example of such place-making practices. (2012: 6)

The use of Weibo as an aid in inhabiting Melbourne provides an excellent example of media as both a ‘way in’ to the city, and a means by which the ‘thickening’ of locality occurs through the investment of meaning into local place.

Several of our interviewees focused on how their use of Weibo opened up new ways of navigating Melbourne. For example, discussing which areas of the city she tended to frequent in her spare time, 24-year-old Master of Accounting student, Wenyi from Guangxi, revealed:

If I’m on campus, it’s less hassle just to go to *Union House*^{iv} [to eat]. When it’s convenient I’ll go to the area around Chinatown. But a lot of the time, on Weibo, there are those [groups], like, Melbourne *Discounts* or Melbourne Let’s Eat, and if I see lots of posts saying, hey this place in Oakleigh is pretty good, then I’ll go there and try it with my friends [...]. When people say somewhere’s good, we’ll go and check it out.

In Wenyi’s account, information gleaned from Weibo extends the geographic range of her activities in Melbourne, taking her out of inner city areas like Chinatown and the metropolitan university campus to more distant suburbs where she might not otherwise have ventured. The exchange below between Qi and her friend Shujuan reinforces Wenyi’s account of Weibo as enabling effective navigation of Melbourne as a local place:

Shujuan: Because there are a lot of Chinese people here, we often use Weibo to exchange information. Like, where is there good food; where is there a sale on;

where is a room available. [...]

Qi: Weibo [...] is for getting information. For example, [the Weibo group] Melbourne Daily News. It helps you understand what's going on around you, including news and things like that.

Weibo's function in enabling ways in to the city, as described by these interviewees, can be seen in the structures within the platform itself. At the time of writing, there were some 117 Weibo groups registered whose titles or descriptions featured the word 'Melbourne' (*Mo'erben / Maoben*), a majority of them peopled by Chinese international students. Categories included food, drink and fun (recommendations for places to go); university affiliation groups (enabling communication among students at specific campuses); groups based on city or provincial affiliation in China (for example Shanghainese in Melbourne); shopping (recommendations for specialty items and discount retail goods); singles (cyberdating); local news and weather; and to-let rooms and apartments. Posts from some of these groups on a particular day in October 2012 included a scanned local newspaper clipping (in English) about a Camberwell pizza restaurant discovered to be breaching food safety regulations; an annotated snapshot of a sculptural installation in Melbourne's central city area; a post about the availability of durian-flavoured pastry puffs at a Box Hill supermarket; and a user's story about the lack of available beds at a Werribee hospital. The focus of these groups on navigating the micro-level of urban and suburban life illustrates Weibo's function as a communicative space producing what Hepp has called a 'diasporic *Heimat*': a sense of 'home' as a certain belonging within the wider physical location of media use (333; see also Morley 2000). Students' mode of use of Weibo supported this: as Wenyi explained: 'You just read post by post on Weibo, you do it in short periods of time, like I use it just for 5 minutes here and there. If I'm really bored on the train, I'll take out [my phone] and have a look. I check it every day.' Its availability via smartphone and piecemeal, abbreviated form mean that Weibo use interweaves with these students' experience of movements through urban and suburban space. It becomes a ubiquitous companion as one traverses the city, manifesting the ambient virtual co-presence of *the mediated city within the geographic city*. Albeit a media platform in the Chinese language and based in China, in all of these ways, for Chinese international students Weibo worked as a way in to Melbourne as a local environment.

Then again, as in the examples discussed above, the ‘Melbourne’ that is materialized through students’ use of Weibo is perhaps more accurately described as a translocality: a locality whose very substance is constituted, in significant part, by transnational connections. Following the discussion quoted above, Shujuan continued:

[Weibo doesn’t] just [give information about] over here, it also gives you information from back home. [...] Wherever there are Chinese people, there are Chinese people using Weibo. [...] We can find out information from all over the world. [...] I have lots of classmates in the UK, the USA and New Zealand, classmates all over the place [using Weibo]. [...] Weibo makes us feel that the distance [between us] becomes shorter.

Wenyi concurred. In addition to encouraging her to explore restaurants and shopping throughout suburban Melbourne, she said: ‘Weibo is a window through which I can understand news in China. Because the information comes very fast that way. [...] I feel that through Weibo I am maintaining a *connection* with China.’ For our purposes in this article, what is most interesting is the way in which this mediated diasporic sociality fundamentally transforms experiences of both mobility and place, with Melbourne being experienced as a syncretic social and geographic space, constituted in significant part by its translocal mediatized connections with both China and the worldwide Chinese diaspora (Andersson 2012: 16; Hepp 2009: 345-346).

Conclusion

In this article, we have presented a preliminary exploration of how digital media connectivity is fundamentally transforming international students’ experience of place in Melbourne. Our analysis underlines the importance of moving beyond an understanding of migrants’ experience of place as defined by a binary structure of here / there. Such a schema is inadequate, first, because as we have shown, place-identifications tend to be made across a wide range of scales, from the immediate environment to the city to the nation to the worldwide diaspora, suggesting a complexly gradated model rather than the cleanly binary model of homeland / host land. Moreover, we have argued that the ‘out here’ of such migrants’ experience can no longer—if indeed it ever could—be conceived as experientially distinct from ‘back home.’ Rather, each locale interpenetrates the other such that the experience of ‘out

here' is fundamentally conditioned by—and is in significant part constituted by—the co-presence of 'back home,' as well as of the other locales that are also made present through media connections. These include other localities locally, nationally and/ or internationally where friends and family reside and communicate from, as well as the imagined locations conjured by digitally transmitted entertainment media from overseas (Chinese dramas; Hindi film music). The 'here' of the individual's local life-world becomes less and less a singular or self-present place and more and more a node in a network of connections with 'electronic elsewheres' (Berry, Kim & Spigel 2010). Yet, we have argued, the material there-ness of the immediate locality is not somehow erased by the mediated omnipresence of other places. On the contrary, we have shown that it is through the re-territorialization of electronic elsewheres *in place* that Melbourne is made, *as a material translocality*, in the everyday practices of international student habitation. As Appadurai (2013: 61-69) points out, histories make geographies; hence experiences of global connectivity and circulation in place contribute to the imaginative work of making locality.

It is worth noting, however, that in thinking through the significance of transnational mediascapes, Appadurai's emphasis is firmly on the immaterial work of the imagination. In our analysis, particularly in our sections examining international students' inhabitation of the city, we have supplemented this with perspectives on media use's material embodiment in the everyday life-world. On that point, we have drawn from Morley (2009; 2003), Moores (2012) and other media scholars who have argued that media makes locality as much through embodied media practices in place as by media content's capacity to let us imagine localities. In our consideration of how best to conceptualize the relationship between digital social media's virtuality and the actual locales of its uses by international students, we hope to have contributed to the project of a 'non-media-centric media studies' (Moores 2012; Morley 2009) that supplements attention to the virtual realm with attention to the material issue of media uses in geographic place. In a very real sense, mobile populations actively remake culture in their transnational journeys: they at once remake themselves and their relationships, the media worlds they inhabit, and the specific localities where they reside. Through our example of Chinese and Indian international students in Melbourne, we hope to have offered some insight into how such processes are fundamentally transforming the relations among place, media and social life in the world today.

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Notes

ⁱ The geo-cultural space of China was generally referred to by interviewees as *guonei*, literally ‘inside the [Chinese] nation’: the term implies one’s personal sense of the homeland as experienced at the level of the informal and everyday, as distinct from the official discourse of China as a nation-state (*Zhongguo*). We therefore translate *guonei* colloquially as ‘back home.’ Australia was often referred to with the opposite term, *guowai*, literally ‘outside the [Chinese] nation,’ conceptually aligning it with other locations of overseas study including the USA, New Zealand, Canada and the UK which could be (and were) designated by the same general term. We translate *guowai* as ‘out here.’

ⁱⁱ All interviewee names are pseudonyms.

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview in English, quoted verbatim.

^{iv} Italicized terms in the interviews conducted in Mandarin were spoken in English by interviewees.