

INTRODUCTION

Situating research, situating practice: New voices in cultural research

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This special section follows on from the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia (CSAA) intermezzo symposium 'Doing Cultural Studies: Interrogating Practice'. The symposium was held at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia on the 3rd December 2013 and co-hosted by CSAA and the Swinburne Institute for Social Research. We organised the event in order to provide emerging cultural studies scholars with a space to interrogate both practice, in relation to practice theory, and the notion of 'doing' cultural studies scholarship more generally.

Associate Professor Katrina Schlunke opened the event with a short provocation titled 'Unnatural Practices', to an audience of around sixty scholars at various stages of their academic career. Then postgraduates and early career researchers delivered papers, which addressed a range of issues, from community and location, to gender and creativity. The day ended with a series of roundtable discussions exploring research practice and methodology as well as (perhaps unavoidably, these days), the practice of successfully establishing an academic career.

'Situating research, situating practice' continues this conversation by providing a space for emerging cultural scholars to critically reflect on their own practice as researchers, and on practice more broadly. Subsequently, this collection offers accounts of a diverse selection of social and cultural practices, from surfing to breakdancing, as well as a series of important methodological interventions. Contributors propose new ways to think about institutions, bodies, regions and genders (amongst other things) and show how their own research practices can reveal, alter or impact these concepts, as well as the very practices they are seeking to study. Therefore, in addition to standing as a body of emerging cultural research around practice, this special section also features postgraduate

students and early career researchers critically engaging with their own position as scholars and articulating what it means to ‘practice’ or ‘do’ cultural studies.

In the first article featured this section, titled ‘Regulation and Social Practice Online’, we argue that everyday practices contribute to the regulation of social media platforms. Through case studies of Facebook and Reddit, we show how people tend to defer to established forms of practice on social media, using these norms to guide their interactions with and through the platform. This analysis stands alongside existing studies of platform politics and usefully illustrates the ways in which practice helps to entrench online norms, alongside more formal regulatory structures.

Jonathon Hutchinson continues this examination of social media practices in his article ‘Moving Convergence Culture Towards Cultural Intermediation: Social Media and Cultural Inclusion’. Hutchinson challenges existing scholarly narratives around participation and content creation through a case study of Pool, a participatory website that was run by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). Drawing on his experiences of embedded research as community manager of Pool, Hutchinson reflects on his own role as a cultural intermediary who facilitated and curated the collaborative production of cultural texts, balancing creativity with the institutional requirements of the ABC. This article challenges the idea that participation neatly leads to inclusion and democracy, instead arguing that cultural intermediation is the best conceptual framework through which to ‘ensure authentic participation’ in these spaces.

In ‘Going Surfing/Doing Research: Learning how to negotiate cultural politics from women who surf’, Rebecca Olive offers two novel insights. She firstly shows that relationships between women who surf, form their own form of cultural authority, separate from wholly removed from the wider male-dominated surfing culture. However, Olive also gives an illustrative example of the recursive connections between research practice and identity. She explains that the ethical practices and justifications offered by her research participants helped her develop a framework through which to conduct her own public scholarship. Olive in turn, reflects on her subsequent creation of media texts and finds that her own writing on surfing culture has broadened what was traditionally a male-centric field of endeavour.

Rachael Gunn gives us an alternate way to think through different modes of scholarly practice in her article, 'The 'systems of relay' in doing cultural studies: Experimenting with the 'Body without Organs' in B-girling practice'. She draws on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of the Body Without Organs, to examine how the active body can disconnect from the dominant b-boy image that resides at the centre of breakdancing culture. This analysis is informed by an auto-ethnography of her own experience as a b-girl (or woman breakdancer) in the Sydney breakdancing community. This research method embeds a compelling and productive physicality in her article, in turn allowing Gunn to re-conceive 'what the body can do'.

Natasha Patterson also interrogates the notion of research participation in her article 'Doing Celebrity Studies in the Reality TV Era'. Patterson provides a self-reflexive account of her research practice, and examines how the process of conducting interviews with celebrities from reality TV for a research project. Patterson was a fan of many of the shows her research participants had featured on, and so had to negotiate tensions between her fandom and her scholarly identity. The article is an important meditation on the situated and embedded nature of much cultural research and also offers methodological insights on how to conduct research with celebrities. Central to Patterson's work is a critique of the 'scholar-fan' concept, which she contends needs to incorporate a non-binary notion of identity in order to attend to these sort of methodological negotiations.

The blurring of lines between research and research is also a central concern of Kerryn Drysdale. In 'Doing Sensory Ethnography in Sydney's Drag King Scene', Drysdale draws on her own experiences as well as the memories of others with the goal of analysing Sydney's drag king scene and its relationship to place. She finds that her participants not only recalled the sights, smells, sounds, textures, and tastes of the Sly Fox Hotel, the main venue of Sydney's drag king scene, but that these sensorial experiences were inscribed on the venue itself. For Drysdale, this not only shows that scenes can 'transfigure space' but emphasises the necessity of conducting this sort of sensory ethnography, as place cannot be adequately 'experienced and interpreted outside of their constructed sensory characterisation'.

Finally, Deb Anderson explores the importance of place, both in doing cultural studies research and in Australia's national imaginary. Anderson returns to her rural past in her article 'Doing Cultural Studies in the Deep North of Australia', and explores how living in a cyclone-torn environment forms a cultural site of recycling: not just bringing old objects into a new home, but offering hope for change and renewal in rural communities. In addition, she reflects on how her research both challenges, and is also indirectly influenced, by a tradition of cultural research centred on the urban. In her analysis, Anderson does not just offer up a call for more research on regions, but shows through her own research practice, how difficult it is to actually conduct this sort of research, with the site often 'reduced to a spatial imaginary'. She notes that there are many institutional and practical barriers to moving beyond cultural studies' long-standing bias towards urban research.

As the above papers indicate, the CSAA intermezzo symposium 'Doing Cultural Studies: Interrogating Practice' was not just a place to present new research, but a day where emerging scholars could seriously discuss questions of method, disciplinary focus, and how to situate themselves within their research. The symposium and this special issue, underline the fact that postgraduate and early career scholars are aware of the interconnections between their research process and the disciplinary and conceptual frameworks they are working within. The willingness of these scholars to critically examine both the productive and difficult aspects of these interconnections, in turn suggests a positive future for cultural studies scholarship.