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Locals Only!

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Proceedings, Macquarie University 28-29  
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# Locals Only!

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On the morning of December 11, 2005 I'd been surfing the beach-breaks at Cronulla. There wasn't much swell - summer's not too crash hot in delivering waves - so a lot of the local surfers headed off to the pub. They're very tight knit group because they surf a lot of dangerous waves together - Cronulla has plenty of them. The fear, joy, relief and pride brought about by surfing these waves tie them together. Some of the locals ended up taking part in the demonstration to chase away the 'gangs' of men from the Western Suburbs of Sydney, while others just wanted to relieve the boredom brought about by no swell.

The way the demonstration escalated into a riot was surprising to me, but the fact that some of the locals wanted to chase off 'outsiders' didn't. As a surfer I'm used to such blokes defending 'their' turf against others. People regularly say to me that nobody owns the beach and that it's a space shared by those who turn up. But my surfing mates disagree. The egalitarian nature of Australian beaches is a myth. Rather, what we have are complex sandy games of assimilation and exclusion, where the dominant imaginary remains white and male (Gibson, 2001). Every day people jostle for privilege at the beach, and a piece of turf. Some groups wind up with the best trees for shade while others are consigned to a sandy desert. Beaches like Cronulla are carved up through a cultural know-how of the space. This know-how, and the policing of its rules and the territory they operate in, is a process surfers call 'localism'.

My aim in this article is to draw on over two decades of surfing and provide an insider's perspective on how localism operates, and show how some of its features contributed to what happened on December 11, 2005. My focus is on explaining how the masculine bonding that localism fosters led to some local surfers - a key group at Cronulla - participating in the violence that took place, even though some of them may not have intended to be racist. The bonding I discuss is a form of mateship that functions as a type of care. It's a way of doing care that doesn't exempt violence, so it can become ugly at times. My reason for this focus on the everyday practices, bonding and care of localism is that I want to show how it works as a site within which larger communal, national and international issues are played out.

I want to be clear, it wasn't just surfers who ganged up on Australian-Lebanese people at Cronulla. Many participants came from outside Cronulla, for example white pride organizations. Further, many residents who did not participate directly in the riot regarded it as a legitimate protest that encoded their anger. The localism expressed and practiced by the surfers at Cronulla on December 11 2005, and that others also practiced, was fed into by a complex array of bodies, cultural meanings and social-political institutions.

Criminologist Scott Poynting (2006) argues that the government's and media's portrayal of Middle-Eastern people as the Arab/Muslim Other of contemporary Australia was a cause of the Cronulla Riots. According to Poynting the Cronulla riots

offer a “clear-cut causality” between racial vilification in the media and racial violence (86). Poynting argues, “racism was a major causal factor of the riot” (89). But racism and racial vilification alone did not feed into the localism.

Myths surrounding the Australian beach and Australian identity were also weaved into the localism. The beach has become a space through which to construct what it means to be Australian (Drewe, 1993). It has been constructed as a place of racial purity (Rodwell, 1999). The Australian beach has also been established as a ‘frontline against the incursion of a new threat in the form of refugees and asylum seekers ... [and] ... reimagined as the homeland in the context of the war on terror’ (Perera, 2005, para. 41).

Further, a discourse on Australian masculinity fed into the localism. According to Kay Saunders since the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century there has been a shift from the bushman to the digger to the surf lifesaver as the ‘continuing image of Australian masculinity – able-bodiedness, heroic sacrifice and racial purity’ (1998, p. 96). This icon of manhood has been set up as the guardian of the beach. Surfing tradition reifies the image of manhood Saunders describes (Evers, 2004).

The young men of Cronulla came to function as the representatives of Australian masculinity and inherited the role of guardians of Australian turf – the beach, values, and even women. These men also became the embodiments of collective sentiments about reclaiming what it means to be Australian in the face of immigration and multiculturalism. As one Cronulla resident claimed ‘This place has changed in the past 30 years and now the young ones are taking it back’ (War of Words, 2005, p. 4).

It’s within this context that the surfer’s practice of localism at Cronulla takes on importance as a site within which Australia, and what it means to be an Australian local, was contested. So what I have to say here about localism and youth cultures has ramification beyond the surfing culture, and only acts another piece in the jigsaw puzzle that makes up what happened in December 2005.

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Surfers have a long tradition of spray-painting ‘Locals Only’ on footpaths and rock walls to let people know that particular beaches and pieces of turf are ‘theirs’. And Cronulla has a long history of localism because its surfing culture runs deep. Paddle out at the wrong surf-spot and you’ll be told in no uncertain terms to ‘Fuck Off!’

Localism is a process of dominating a territory, and policing its cultural laws. It works with the same logic as nationalism in that it creates an us and them situation in which the them is never as good or as right as we are (Swoboda, 2001). Localism operates from a paranoia that surf-spots are under siege from outsiders and a key feature is hostility to those outsiders (Scott, 2003).

At Cronulla local surfers will try to protect ‘their’ waves from others, and their rights to the best ones. To do this they use verbal and physical intimidation. No rules are posted so locals can be despotic and aggressive to get across the message that they’re at the top of the pecking-order, and you’re not. And this territorial process and policing of the pecking-order spills over onto the land, it’s done so for decades.

From the 1950s to 1970s tension arose between surfers and members of surf lifesaving clubs – ‘clubbies’. Fights between surfers and clubbies occurred over use of the beach, such as who got to surf where. In the 1960s ‘sharpies’ would arrive at Cronulla via the South-West train-line. They were from inland suburbs. Their hair was spiked on top and long at the back, and they wore black pinstripes pants, black shirts, and suede shoes. Surfers used to recruit each other and converge on Cronulla station where they would throw stones at, or beat up, the sharpies. But the sharpies gave as good as they got.

Over the last few years it’s been the Lebanese-Australian men’s turn. They travel to Cronulla in cars and on trains, and also favour particular sports, food and ways of dressing. Even their bodily posture is read for its cultural coding: how they stand, walk and sit. What’s radically different is that racial, ethnic and cultural differences have become the easiest markers of difference. This racial and ethnic otherness has been compounded by September 11, Iraq, Tampa, the London bombings and the Bali Bombing. Discourses around these events have constructed these men as ‘dangerous others’ whom our backyards must be protected against (Betts and Healy, 2006; Poynting et al, 2000). Somehow Muslim has been conflated with terrorist with Middle-Eastern with Lebanese Men.

The effect of this otherness means that when these blokes arrive at Cronulla Beach they’re under a watchful gaze as they negotiate the complex unwritten rules of a very White beach. Cronulla is one of the whitest parts of Sydney (Verghis, 2005; Forrest and Dunn, 2006). It becomes very hard not to step on anyone’s toes.

It’s different for me, I know how to read the waves and rips, what to wear, who I’m allowed to look at and how to look at them, and how to avoid stepping on someone else’s turf. When I paddle around the surf or walk along the beach, nobody questions what I’m doing there. I grew up on the beaches of the Gold Coast, which are very White as well. But if I was a girl without a ‘perfect’ figure, a tourist family, or one of these Lebanese-Australian blokes it wouldn’t all seem so obvious. The unwritten rules of this local area could seem strange and frightening because they’re rules made by others. Ideas about where you walk, swim, surf, how you dress, what kind of games you play and food you eat on Cronulla Beach have evolved to fit a particularly Anglo-Australian view of the world. Inexperienced beachgoers and people from other backgrounds transgress the beach rules, often unintentionally, because these practices are unfamiliar.

Now this is very different to locals who’ve had many years to become intimate with the complex rules of the territory. They’ve soaked the cultural know-how into their skin and have developed an approved persona, tastes and values. The rules feel ‘natural’ even though they’re not, and appear to be the only way things can be done even though they aren’t.

As a local you build a vested interest in how your fine-tuned know-how sets up who belongs because it affords you privileges, and as such you’ll work to protect these privileges, often without thinking that they’re privileges but rights. For example, in my home turf we’ll claim rights to car parks, park benches and girls. If people move too close to where we’re hanging out we’ll begin talking in a loud and offensive manner. Sprawling over a large area is also a useful marker of turf.

Interestingly though, some of the Lebanese-Australian blokes used a similar method to set up a space that they could feel comfortable in and where their know-how would be privileged. In some cases they intentionally contested rules, like what sports could be played where. The processes of localism I describe are also present in very similar forms amongst other groups of men and women. Mateship, localism and bonding aren't the preserve of White Australians either. According to Randa Kattan (2006), the executive director of the *Arab Council of Australia*, there is an old Arabic saying: 'Me and my brother against my cousin, me and my cousin against the world'. Locals began to feel like a fish out of water in their own backyard. Some of the Lebanese-Australian blokes even used racist taunts to invert the gaze and authority of the locals. It was the same racist tactic some locals were using to exclude them. I can't help think that it must have been bloody frustrating for the Lebanese-Australian blokes as they had no say in the rules and routines, hence this behaviour that demanded to be heard.

Of course, as a dominant local you'll feel provoked by such behaviour and believe that you have to put these 'upstarts' in their place. And to do so some local crew at Cronulla banded together to 'fight back', as Sydney talkback radio hosts Steve Price and Alan Jones of 2GB encouraged them to. Localism tends to be most pronounced when a group faces a common threat. That threat can be imagined or real.

I've experienced this first hand at my local turf. Even if we think someone is trying to change the rules or claim they have as much right to a picnic bench, a wave, or is chatting up a local girl my mates will stare down the intruder. It's an intimidating prospect because we'll all rise at once to back each other up if we need to. We don't do this because we're some violent hyper-masculinity. We do it because of what our bodies have gone through together. We have developed a form of care that doesn't exclude violence. It's a misguided form of care perhaps, but care nonetheless.

The surf sessions, afternoons at the pub, fights, and so on that my mates and I experience as a 'local crew' are collaborative. They're a mixed assortment of touch, smell, sight, sound, and taste that spill all over each other (Leonard, 1997). A sensual economy of masculinity is built that ties us together, and teaches us how to behave in situations. We share interest, excitement, enjoyment, fear, shame, pride, anger and so on. When we surf we experience varying combinations of these feelings that keep us coming back for more, but so does the sharing of these feelings with each other. It reaches the point where it's as if my mate's blood is the same as mine. The brotherly love that you feel is physical - as long as the touching stays in the 'right' places. Homophobia is rife in the surfing culture.

This bonding makes me feel strong, comfortable and in command. My mates and I will share morning toast, borrow wax on rocky headlands, talk of waves and sit together in the surf. Surfers form a sensory relationship with the local weather patterns, sea-floors, jetties and rock walls. Surfers' bodies intermingle with the coastal morphology, and it can be hard to tell where the local's body begins and the local environment ends. Knowing how to ride 'with' a wave at a particular spot is a clear marker that you're a local and works as a way to signal ownership of a space in an increasingly crowded surfing world. The environment and how it works becomes so ingrained that a local should be able to tell the different surf seasons by the way their body feels. We bond with the geographical turf, and we will band together to

fight dodgy development approvals, sewage outfalls, and anyone else who wants a piece of it.

The bonding local blokes go through means that they're expected to stick up for each other to chase off outsiders – people their mates claim need to be taught a lesson. Blokes tend to hate who their mates hate, and when their bodies have bonded they will sometimes act first and think later. At Cronulla the distress of the locals and those of their families were real, they felt that they're way of life was truly under threat because they were beginning to feel like a fish out of water in their own backyard. The locals were not used to feeling uncomfortable and they didn't like the change. Taking part in what happened at Cronulla was a way for local blokes to express care for and protect the bodies, beliefs, practices and territory they had built connections with. It meant backing each other up to chase off these 'dangerous others'.

In fact all the men involved in the Cronulla Riot and Revenge attacks were expressing care in this way when they acted out the role of guardian of women's safety. A common phrase expressed was: 'protecting our women'. This position functioned in a paternalistic and patronizing way. After the riot local men said that they wanted to get revenge for harassment of their women (Four Corners, 13/03/2006). Anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiment had also been rising since a series of gang-rapes in Sydney's west by some Arabic-speaking men (Collins, 2005). Urban myths claim violent and rapist attitudes are endemic to Lebanese or Arab or Muslim culture.

While locals complain about sexual harassment and the safety of women at Cronulla, there was little concern displayed for women from non-English speaking backgrounds. During the Cronulla riots one young woman had to shelter in a kiosk as a mob outside chanted 'Aussie Aussie Aussie' (Barclay and West, 2006) Muslim women were abused, many were spat on and had their scarves removed by force (O'Brien, 16 December, 2005, The Australian). As such, the Australian-Lebanese drew on the same trope of caring for 'their' women: "We had to respond ... Your mum, your sisters and all that, they're going to be scared to walk in the street. Because there's no-one to protect them" (Four Corners, 13/03/2006).

There was little, if any, reflection by the men involved on overarching behaviours and attitudes toward women, which regularly includes misogyny, sexism, and sexual harassment by many different groups of men at Cronulla.<sup>i</sup>

The problem is that the form of care, whether for women or each other, perpetuated by localism does not exclude violence. And shame is used to make sure you know this. If you don't care for those bodies, turf, beliefs and practices you've bonded with and are meant to you'll be made to feel ashamed. And this shame is meant to make you think about your belonging and to get a sense of what not belonging would feel like. The aim is to make you 'fix' your behaviour and make sure you back the boys up in future.

It feels good to belong, so you don't want to lose this feeling. Some of us get tattoos to mark our belonging. The sense of unity my mates and I enjoy also provides us with a sense of authority that we don't have in other places, like in the workplace. We'll spend years earning our 'right to belong' until the day when we get a pat on

the back from a revered older bloke to let us know that we do belong. It can feel like you're getting a bloody knighthood (Carroll, 2006). This is the sensual economy of masculinity at work. Blokes use touch, looks, nods and so on to transfer respect, trust, shame, pride, and so on.

I saw this sensual economy working during the Cronulla riot when I was watching the news. Blokes put arms around each other, slapped each other on the back and gave out high-fives. It made sense to me because these actions are used to express pride in your mates for taking part, trust in solidarity, and to confer that you belong.

Of course, if you step out of line localism dictates that you should be mocked, abused or even beaten up. Violence is used as an instrument of power to shape the ways that we see, and thereby come to know, certain things. I got used to this violent process while growing up in the surfing culture. The cruelty acts as a test. It's called 'paying your dues', and is meant to teach your body what is 'right' and 'wrong'. Eventually, you're supposed to develop a script much the same way that a dancer learns their steps - acquiring a biological memory of what behaviour, values and tastes are accepted and what are not.

This feature of localism was all too clear when the Lebanese-Australian blokes transgressed approved protocol. The local blokes wanted to punish them as the localism process dictates. The problem was that the Lebanese-Australian blokes' own rules and values were already deeply ingrained in their flesh, so they didn't want to become the same as the locals. In fact, they couldn't learn the script and would never be able to belong. The rules and values that they'd grown up with had become a part of their flesh meaning that they would have been damn hard to shake even if they had wanted to.

I haven't seen a lot of violence in the surf, although I've been in a few fights myself. But the violence only has to happen sometimes to engender the pain, shame, guilt, humiliation and ridicule that communicates what's allowed to happen and what isn't, and who's where on the pecking-order. Some of the older locals will say that they dislike the violence of localism, but in another will say that it's a necessary evil that keeps in order what could otherwise fray. It works. Since the riot in December many families from non-English speaking backgrounds have been too scared to return to Cronulla Beach. Instead they favour Brighton-le-Sands, a neighbouring beach that 'might as well be on another planet' (Verghis, 2005). Brighton is not a surf beach and is far more racially and ethnically diverse than Cronulla.

To avoid violent retribution from localism there's a rule that says if you turn up at someone else's beach all you have to do is give respect. Richard Marsh, an ex-professional surfer and 'born and bred' local at Cronulla said:

This is our backyard. The day of the incident was simply locals trying to get a respect issue across, regardless of race (Leitch, 2005, p. 39).

The saying goes: if you give respect you'll get it. But that's not really true. The respect is one way because the local way of doing things is considered the authentic or authoritative way. Other cultural and ethnic ways of doing things can be done, but they will be tolerated rather than be on equal footing with the local version. This

tolerance relies on the 'outsider' being subservient to local rules and privilege. In his work *Toleration* (1997), Preston King writes:

There is something intolerable about the concept of 'tolerance'. For if one concedes or promotes a power to tolerate, one equally concedes a power not to tolerate (p. 6).

Localism's version of respect sets locals up as legislators and guardians of their own laws, and perpetuates a very narrow set of rules about how things can be done. Localism does not allow for understanding how others might see and feel things differently, or have different needs. They have no rights unless locals give them some. Those who are seen as most disrespectful are those who begin to develop a will of their own and move beyond the turf that is allotted to them, like the Lebanese-Australian blokes did.

To be honest, I've been complicit in the exclusion of localism because I tend to live by its codes. My familiarity with the rules enables me to get my 'fair share', but the process continues to apportion a fairer share to my mates and I than it does to newcomers. But my shame at what happened at Cronulla has mobilised me to refigure how I conduct myself when I meet others, and how I deal with change. That's why I've unpacked how I do things as a local. I'm hoping to make multicultural politics a very everyday concern by asking all of us to reflect on our long-standing assumptions and 'normal' ways of doing things, practices that can cause problems for others without us even realizing it. In turn we can then open ourselves up to learning new ways of conducting ourselves when we meet others. And one of the key things for me has been to remind myself and my mates use of the original Hawai'ian term for surfing: he'enalu. It means to slip or glide along a wave, but it also means to suspend one's judgement and confer together (Leonard, 1997).

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War of Words (2005) *The Age*, December 12.

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<sup>i</sup> The relationship between local men and women in the surfing culture of Cronulla is documented in the book *Puberty Blues* (1984). This film was based on an autobiographical book of the same name written by Kathy Lette and Gabrielle Carey. It takes place in 1974 and exposed the hidden realities of gendered relations at the Australian beach and in the surfing subculture. Underage sex, harassment, and gang rape were evident. As was the severe restrictions on women's freedoms, such as what not being allowed to surf. While girls now surf little else has changed.