

# The public sphere on the beach

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**ABSTRACT** This article discusses the idea of a ‘cultural public sphere’ together with related notions of ‘the’ public sphere, ‘counterpublics’ and ‘discourse publics’. It argues that the cultural public sphere emerges from cultural sources (e.g. ethnic identity) rather than political ones and is organized through private pursuits such as music, domestic life and leisure or entertainment venues. The article investigates the formation of a cultural public sphere by using the December 2005 ‘race riots’ on Australian beaches as a case study. It argues that culture interacts with politics as ‘new’ media interact with mainstream news; and that counterpublic spheres interact with the cultural public sphere as ‘internal’ communication coexists with ‘external’. The role of mainstream media in reporting and commenting on extreme displays is in part to stage conflict so that the general public can think through cultural-political issues via the theatrics.

**KEYWORDS** *Australian cultural studies, counterpublics, Cronulla, cultural public sphere, Denmark, discourse publics, racial conflict, the beach*

## Staging cultural conflict

On a hot Saturday in December 2005, Cronulla Beach, part of the Sutherland Shire just south of Sydney, erupted into what appeared to be race-fuelled violence. National and international media were shocked by racist slogans, angry faces and the bashing of youths of ‘Middle-Eastern appearance’ by Anglo-Celtic ‘locals’ who had gathered on the beach. Australia’s treasured leisure domain had become a site of political action. Cronulla Beach had become a site for the ‘cultural public sphere’, a place where the politics of the private realm are brought into the glare of the political public sphere. The Cronulla riot provides a case study to think through the formation of such a cultural public sphere, a site that exists in opposition to ‘the’ public sphere, the place for political debate. Displayed via private



pursuits such as music, sport, domestic life and leisure or entertainment venues, including – particularly in Australia – the beach, the cultural public sphere develops more or less out of sight of ‘the’ public sphere, and its ‘citizens’ communicate using media that are equally invisible to the mainstream. Its occasional but spectacular eruption into view of the news media and the political public sphere points to the ways in which culture interacts with politics, and ‘new’ media interact with mainstream news. The mainstream media report and comment on these extreme displays almost to the point of staging them. The theatrics serve to represent conflicts within a given cultural domain via the most extreme examples – in this case, racial tensions in suburban Sydney were explored by coverage of racist violence. Such coverage functions at least in part to assist the ‘missing middle’ of politics, i.e. the general public who actually live everyday life and the culture of the ordinary (which, by definition, remain unnewsworthy), and to think through issues that are normally beyond the pale of rational public debate but are generated within the experience of identity and culture.

### **The cultural public sphere**

If there is a cultural public sphere then it may need to be distinguished from ‘the’ public sphere. The public sphere in Habermas (1989[1962]) or Richard Sennett (1977) is something akin to a political ‘reading public’, devoted to engagement with journalism, current affairs and occasionally face-to-face criticism of government or establishment actions (Hartley, 1996; Hartley and McKee, 2000). By contrast, the cultural sphere invokes the realm of private life and leisure pursuits (Gray, 2006, ch. 4). But as it has been noted often, this distinction only holds as a kind of principle. In practice, the private world of culture gives rise to its own forms of politics – not decision-maker politics and the state, but identity politics and social movements.

According to Alan McKee (2005: 21), minority groups united by identity politics now demand ‘the right to have . . . their own distinctive cultures recognized within the public sphere’. Cunningham lists such distinctive cultures as feminist and gay counterpublics, ethnic diasporas and ‘international public sphericules constituted around environmental or human rights issues’ (2001: 133–4; see Cunningham and Sinclair, 2001). Such communities are bound together by personal, private and cultural attributes and affinities, not by their co-subjectivity in ‘the’ public sphere as traditionally understood. In 2006, the year marked by the death of Betty Friedan, it may be well to remember how the irruption of feminism into the political process in the 1960s seemed literally outlandish, to both mainstream political players and political ‘science’. Successive irruptions of the cultural and personal into the public and political have characterized western politics from then to now; and still there is a sense that some fundamental dualism is being breached. So a concept such as the cultural



public sphere may be useful because it holds these apparent opposites together, allowing consideration of the political dimension of cultural life (see Figure 1, top).

This model of a cultural public sphere is not new. Recently, Jim McGuigan (2005) has posited a similar model, noting that the potential for a cultural public sphere is contained within Habermas' own original formulation, which distinguished between the political public sphere and the literary public sphere. While the former was constrained by journalism, the latter was not, and McGuigan proposes an expansion of the literary public sphere into a cultural public sphere that includes a range of media and popular culture. Hartley's discussion of the increasing importance of 'journalism of the private sphere' (1996: 145) proposes a similar potential for a counterpart to the political public sphere based on cultural politics. The same notion is contained in Rita Felski's proposal of a feminist counterpublic sphere formulated around an 'affirmation of specificity in relation to gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual preference' (1989: 166).

Irruptions of the cultural (identity) into the political can come from both extremes of politics, Left and Right. On the Left, 'counterpublics' are identified generally with left-wing activism such as environmental, ethnic, gender, peace and youth movements. Examples include the protests at the 1999 Seattle and 2005 Hong Kong meetings of the World Trade Organization, and also those that follow the World Economic Forum. The Seattle protests took organizers by surprise, with conservative estimates putting the numbers at 40,000; this is thought to be the 'coming out' of the anti-globalization movement.<sup>1</sup> José Bové became a countercultural superstar after he dismantled a McDonald's restaurant in France in 2001. An Australian example would be the mobilization of 'techno-circus' and protest theatre by the 'feral' movement. Drawing on 'do-it-yourself' (DIY) traditions inspired by UK techno sound system development, 'the social aesthetic of the dance party' is mobilized to intervene in and expose 'the affairs of state and capital', a tactical intervention whereby 'a range of media is employed to rupture existing sites, institutions and corporations, to create an opening to heterogeneity, to generate dialogue with others, to "make a difference" and to subvert the proper places of power' (St John, 2005: 7).

Few commentators extend the notion of the 'counterpublic sphere' to right-wing activism. However, cultural identity can lead to political expression at either extreme of politics. For example, ethnic identity can fuel racial supremacism and, in turn, that 'counterpublic sphere' uses cultural pursuits such as music to call together its own 'discourse public', such as the neo-Nazi music movement embodied by Nazi rock, Nazi punk and what the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)) refers to as 'National Socialist black metal'. Right-wing and white power music culture provides an ongoing rallying point for the expression of particular 'countercultural' politics. This culture gives rise to protest in the form of the Rock against Communism concerts in the UK in the 1980s which in



turn spawned the 'Blood & Honour' white power networks (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_Socialist\\_black\\_metal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Socialist_black_metal); [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock\\_Against\\_Communism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock_Against_Communism); [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blood\\_and\\_Honour](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blood_and_Honour)). More recently, in 2004, 12-year-old twin sisters Lamb and Lynx Gaede from California caused a stir when they were launched as 'white pride' band Prussian Blue, who 'hope to help fellow Whites come to understand that love for one's race is a beautiful gift that we should celebrate' (see [www.prussianblue.net/bio.htm](http://www.prussianblue.net/bio.htm)).<sup>2</sup> McGuigan points out that cultural politics and the politicization of art figured prominently in the Nazi campaign in 1930s Germany. He points particularly to the 'degeneration' of Leftist art by the Nazis and the belief that 'Germany had the right to appropriate and possess the great European heritage of art, since the Third Reich represented the pinnacle of civilisation' (McGuigan, 2005: 430–1).

Not surprisingly then, the ultra-nationalist Australia First Party and Patriotic Youth League tried to co-opt the Cronulla riots as a platform to spread their political agenda. Just as they turn up at football grounds, rock concerts and to national memorial events such as Anzac Day, so they saw the beach – and the 'discourse public' gathered there – as their territory. Mainstream news played up their presence in the immediate aftermath, but later on began to distinguish these activists from the ordinary Australians in the crowd (*ABC News Online*, 2006; Carter, 2006).

### **Communication and the cultural public sphere**

Under the radar of news media – precisely the opposite of newsworthy – can be found routine, ordinary, locality-based everyday life, within which self-representing communities may develop. Such communities may be mainstream and fully integrated (e.g. communities of interest around sport, arts and crafts, music) or excluded and marginal. The latter may include ethnic and religious activism (neo-Nazis, Islamist organizations), culture-jamming (from anti-globalization to animal liberation), as well as subcultures and youth cultures. In addition, of course, they may overlap, as is notoriously the case with sport, racism and music. Such communities of interest tend to develop more or less out of sight of 'the' public sphere, often using forms of communication that are equally invisible to the mainstream media. But occasionally they burst into spectacular public visibility, sometimes to the great surprise of those, including politicians and columnists, whose attention is routinely held by 'the' public sphere and mainstream political communication. On such occasions a cultural public sphere comes into being.

Rita Felski (1989) has written of a 'feminist public sphere' which runs counter to 'the' public sphere. In a counterpublic sphere a subordinated social group can invent and circulate discourses that resonate with their own status, interests and needs. Such counterpublic spheres deliver both



'internal' and 'external' communication. They allow the 'citizens' of the counterpublic to come together and speak to each other (e.g. via specialist magazines addressed to 'co-subjects'), while other forms broadcast the group's political agenda back to the public sphere from which they feel excluded (e.g. via 'consciousness raising').

Counterpublic spheres are multiple and heterogeneous, and they articulate alternative or oppositional values to those held by the public sphere. Thus, within the counterpublics that they represent they appeal to the same sense of universality as the Habermasian public sphere. For 'external' communication they tend to use a directly political and 'rational' or news-oriented media. Activist organizations such as Greenpeace seek to provoke mainstream media coverage, and so in practice a considerable element of countercultural activism is theatrical and spectacular (irrational theatrics for rational causes). But whether it comes from the Left (feminism) or the Right (Prussian Blue) it does not amount to a cultural public sphere until it intersects with society-wide media and culture – at which point, a cultural public sphere may be formed. So, it may be argued that the counterpublic sphere is to the cultural public sphere as internal communication is to external communication. But what is important about external communication in this case is that it is not controlled by the countercultural group itself, but erupts in a mainstream media over which none of the participants has control. There it 'represents' cultural identities, values and conflicts that are present in the mainstream but are not counted as political in 'the' public sphere.

## Discourse publics

Michael Warner (2002) identifies the participants within 'the' (Habermasian) public sphere as self-organized, discursive agents using a form of address that creates relations among strangers. This helpfully describes the communicative function of the cultural public sphere. He argues that publics are created by 'the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse' formed by the 'concatenation of texts through time' (2002: 62). As such, central to the historical formation of the public in modern Europe (and in Europe's plantation societies) was

the appearance of newsletters and other temporally structured forms oriented to their own circulation: not just controversial pamphlets, but regular and dated papers, magazines, almanacs, annuals, and essay serials. They developed reflexivity about their circulation through reviews, reprintings, citation, controversy. These forms single out circulation both through their sense of temporality and through the way they allow discourse to move in different directions. I don't speak just to you; I speak to the public in a way that enters a cross-citational field of many other people speaking to the public. (Warner, 2002: 66)



For Warner, discourse is crucial to the very existence of the public:

A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists *by virtue of being addressed*. (2002: 50, emphasis in original)

Here, Warner is describing a reading public – which one of us has identified also as the historic basis for the public sphere (Hartley, 1996; Hartley and McKee, 2000). However, Warner updates the notion of ‘reading’ by identifying what he calls a ‘discourse public’ – although it is not a familiar or felicitous term, it is more accurate because it encompasses all forms of communication, not just writing. And whereas the term ‘reading’ has attracted some normative evaluative baggage in the era of print literacy, the idea of a discourse public supposes no hierarchy of media platforms or formats in which discourse may be communicated properly, from advertising to the Xbox.

Early modern nations were formed around the idea that the nation and the reading public were one and the same thing, and that both were independent of the state or government. But to make any such assumption is increasingly unwise. Warner again:

The strangeness of this kind of public [one formed around texts, even advertising or the ‘chattering of a DJ’] is often hidden from view because the assumptions that enable the bourgeois public sphere allow us to think of a discourse public as a people and, therefore, as an actually existing set of potentially enumerable humans. A public, in practice, appears as *the* public. It is easy to be misled by this appearance. Even in the blurred usage of the public sphere, a public is never just a congeries of people, never just the sum of persons who happen to exist. It must first of all have some way of organizing itself as a body and of being addressed in discourse. And not just any way of defining the totality will do. It must be organized by something other than the state . . . A public organizes itself independently of state institutions, law, formal frameworks of citizenship, or pre-existing institutions such as the church. (2002: 51; emphasis in original)

This independence is necessary for the public to be free from state control and thus be able to fulfil the democratic role of citizens who are (in principle) sovereign over the state.

Warner’s description of publics seems helpful still further because of the thin distinction that he draws between publics and counterpublics. Despite the asserted oppositional stance of the latter, they are formed through the production of discourse such as the former. But the very conditions that enable a discourse public to emerge also ensure that there will never be just one of them. Indeed, ‘the’ public sphere is a convenient



fantasy, for discourse publics form around many different nodes, differentiated by language, culture, locality, etc. At best there are many 'public sphericules' (Cunningham, 2001; Gitlin, 1998), some of which may coalesce into a cluster that seems more or less unitary. But others will barely intersect with 'the' public sphere or its discourses at all. The more excluded, marginal or extreme that a given community of interest is, the more likely that its 'public sphericule' will be invisible to others, although it is only a click away on the internet.

Counterpublic spheres (or sphericules) are associated with communication channels and media that are invisible to mainstream news media. Diasporic communities circulate videos from home or elsewhere in a global network; individuals use email, the internet and even faxes and photocopiers where the official media are state-controlled, as in late New Order Indonesia and China post-Tiananmen Square. Historically, radical movements have shown a persistent tendency to adopt the newest available media of communication, and to use them earlier and more imaginatively than mainstream media. A recent example is the Indymedia network (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indymedia>), formed in 1999 for participants in the anti-globalization movement to report on the protests against the Seattle World Trade Organization meeting.

Counterpublic spheres are not the same as the cultural public sphere, but the latter, when sparked into existence by circumstances, is characterized similarly by informal modes of communication. Where it exists, the cultural public sphere comprises a discourse public gathered by means of non-canonical media in places far away from politics (whether mainstream or counter).

## The beach

The beach occupies an important and multivalent place in Australia itself and also in Australian cultural studies. The *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies* (1983–7) – which later became the American-edited, London-published *Cultural Studies* – nominated the beach as a 'cultural motif' (along with the barbeque) in its opening description of the aims and scope of the journal. The beach fascinated John Fiske, who marked his own arrival in Australia with an analysis of Perth's Cottesloe beach, in 'Surfalism and Sandiotics' (Fiske, 1983). The odd title, an homage-parody of Terence Hawkes' influential *Structuralism and Semiotics* (1977), was meant to demonstrate that sand and surf could be 'read like a text'. Later, in collaboration with Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner, Fiske produced a book that sought to include the beach as part of 'Australian mythology':

The beach's centrality to the culture is won by its appropriation of those attitudes most closely related to an Australian mythology while placing itself in opposition to those that are excluded . . . [W]hile drawing so heavily on the



natural, it manages to fit so seamlessly into its urban context (culture) without losing its potential for its primary meaning (nature). (Fiske et al., 1987: 54)

'The beach' most often imagined in Australia tends to be urban – Bondi, Cottesloe, St Kilda, Glenelg – as opposed to the remote beaches beloved of hardcore surfers and tourist brochures but rarely visited by the general public, prompting Fiske and his colleagues to pursue a city/ocean, culture/nature opposition to explore its importance in the imagination of Australia. The interplay of culture and nature is an important myth-generating mechanism to address the plight of contemporary Australian existence. Fiske and colleagues (1987) connect the rising importance of the beach in Australian culture to the rise of urbanization, which made redundant older myths of the bush, the bush ranger (symbolized by Ned Kelly) and an isolated hideaway. Instead, suburban-dwelling Australians brought nature into culture and vice versa, by means of the beach. The characteristically Australian beach is:

urban *and* natural, civilised *and* primitive, spiritual *and* physical, culture *and* nature. The meaning of any one beach is a particular example of this paradigm, as either culture or nature is subordinated in favour of its opposite. (Fiske et al., 1987: 55; emphasis added)

However, Meaghan Morris (1992, 1998) points out that 'the' beach in Australian culture (and cultural studies) is not representative of national identity so much as of nationalism. It is mobilized as a site of foundation myths for Anglo-Australia, either celebratory (in the case of Horne's *The Lucky Country*; 1964), or critical (as found in a poem by John Forbes; 1988). For Morris, the idea of the beach as a founding myth of 'Australian Ordinarity' is itself devoid of self-reflexivity, either about the historical location of the images constructed or of their white, male and totalizing exclusivity. Simultaneously, she identifies the beach as an often-compelling object utilized by Australian cultural studies to develop its project (Morris, 1992), full of excess signification for Australian cultural studies to reveal. Problematizing it as a site where national myths are written and discussed, Morris locates the beach as one where anxieties about national culture and the Antipodean experience are explored.

The 2000 conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australia (CSAA) took up the challenge of this theme. Titled 'On the Beach' (in contradistinction to the 1997 CSAA conference, which had gone 'In Search of the Public'), it called for papers about this 'quintessential Australian icon', 'Australianness', 'whiteness' and 'the end of the world' (referencing Nevil Shute's novel *On the Beach* (1966[1957]; but see Nairn, 2005), Stanley Kramer's 1959 film of the book and a subsequent TV mini-series). Centring on images, ideas and utilizations of the beach, the conference invited papers about Australian texts (*Puberty Blues* (1981),



surf magazines), pastimes (surfing or tanning), the body and Australian cultural studies. Not surprisingly, the beach was found to be a 'privileged site' for the exploration of Australian national identity (Bonner et al., 2001: 270). Traditionally, Australian identity had been located in the 'red centre' and the bush, which have enjoyed the status of being an 'authentic, timeless, pristine and past' site for considering the 'grand narratives' of Australian national identity. By contrast, Bonner et al. (2001) present the beach as 'more ordinary, everyday, tacky, familiar, mixed'. The beach is:

an important site for thinking about Australia: as a privileged metaphor for thinking about our nation; as a site where gender identities can be worked out – either unclothed and ordinary, or clothed and attempting to reject a relationship with the United Kingdom . . . an image of Australia which is not counter-cultural, but proudly mainstream and proudly feminized. (Bonner et al., 2001: 275)

Taking a cue from Meaghan Morris (1992, 1998), Mark Gibson (2001) remarks on the Anglo-whiteness of Australian beaches. Whiteness is often central to the 'semiotic cluster' that represents Australian beaches as the antithesis of English ordinariness. Gibson notes that Morris presents the Australian beach as a place of constancy:

In the discourse of Australian ordinariness, the significance of the beach is not as a site of escape but, on the contrary, of a certain inertia; it is a place where things can be trusted to *endure*. (Gibson, 2001: 282; emphasis in original)

Cultural studies has never really given up on the beach, which has proven to be a machine for thinking about identity, the body, desire and nation. Such topics were well suited to the 'politics of pleasure' phase of cultural studies, but locating them on the beach had the effect of casting that site as 'cultural' in the sense of 'not political' as well as 'not natural'. As an interzone between nature and culture, as in Fiske et al.'s (1987) surf/beach/road/city continuum, straightforward political actions and meanings were not sought on the beach – it was a 'cultural motif', not a political hotspot. It may have displayed signs of a very partial and ethnocentric mythic imaginary, but it was not understood as part of the public sphere (which in any case has remained a contested term in cultural studies: see Cunningham, 2001; Gray, 2006).

## **Australia turns ugly**

So far we have argued that a cultural public sphere, representing an interzone between culture and politics, calls together a discourse public (not a counterpublic sphere), often by novel means of communication, to express values and identities that are not found generally in the public sphere of



rational debate about the real. We have shown that 'the beach' holds a special place in the Australian imaginary, both popularly and intellectually. This is why one of them suddenly became newsworthy around the world for all the wrong reasons. As the London *Observer* noted:

It is supposed to be the lucky country, where the beach culture more than any other phenomenon symbolises all that is breezy, open and inclusive about Australia. But the cocktail of fear, alienation and youthful anger spawned by the worst racial violence ever seen here now threatens the traditional Christmas of sun, sand and surf . . . The civil unrest gripping Australia's biggest city began two weeks ago after two teenage lifeguards at North Cronulla Beach, in south Sydney, were attacked by a Lebanese Australian gang. There had been anecdotes of sporadic violence and intimidation at Cronulla by groups of Lebanese Australians over several years, but this attack on the lifeguards, the most iconic of Australian symbols, went too far for many people. (O'Riordan, 2005a)<sup>5</sup>

One British newspaper said that 'Australia was last night in the grip of its worst race clashes since independence'. The BBC reported that it was among Australia's 'worst racial violence in history' (BBC News, 2005; O'Riordan, 2005b). The contrast could be hardly more stark, or more mythical. Here was a story of The Fall; the instant transformation from 'sacred' paradise to profane vale of tears. Let the *New York Times* mark the change, from this:

Because 90 percent of Australia's population lives within 30 miles of the coastline the beach is the hub of the nation's culture. To visit Sydney's beaches, or any beach in Australia, is to step onto sacred ground. It is where the people go to worship the sun and sea, to satiate their thirst for hedonism and to shed the trappings of everyday life. At Bondi Beach, on the city side of the harbor, lawyers and business people spread their towels beside tattooed laborers. At Cronulla, farther south, bare-breasted women sun themselves beside children in floppy hats. (Kovacs, 1989)

To this:

Thousands of drunken white youths attacked people they believed were of Arab descent at a beach outside Sydney on Sunday in one of Australia's worst outbursts of ethnic violence. The attack [was] apparently prompted by reports that Lebanese youths had assaulted two lifeguards. (*New York Times*, 2005)

In the Brisbane *Courier-Mail*, Matthew Condon likened the rioters to that 1970s icon of larrikin Aussie identity, Barry McKenzie (the fictional character in films by Bruce Beresford and Barry Humphries). Something



that had been lurking inside 'Australian Ordinarity' for decades turned 'evil' and political at once:

Barry McKenzie was there at the Cronulla riots late last year, swilling beer and shouting his 'Australianness' in that distinctive national twang of ours. He was there in the mindless, drunken mobs that reeled around Sydney's beachside suburbs looking for 'non-Australian' victims. Each summer and winter the new, evil Barry is in the grandstands watching football and cricket, hurling racist slurs from the fence line. (Condon, 2006; see also Moore, 2005)

From the start, everyone knew what it was about. *The Australian* painted Cronulla as 'a white, Anglo-Celtic, Christian heartland', a 'white sanctuary', ominously 'hemmed in by the great Middle Eastern melting pots of Sydney: suburbs such as Bankstown, where half the residents are from non-English-speaking backgrounds' (Overington and Warne-Smith, 2005: 17). Cronulla Beach is the meeting point where groups of men from these differing backgrounds ultimately face each other, skin to skin. Media around the world were quick to sense the significance of the 'biffo' that ensued.

## **Conflict and the beach**

As a settler society that has experienced successive waves of immigration, Australia is no stranger to intercommunal violence based on race; for example those 'targeting Chinese on the goldfields in the 19th century and Italian and Slav workers in Western Australia in the 1930s' (Inglis, 2006), alongside a much longer history of settler or Indigenous violence. The irruption of 'culture' into 'politics' via liminal leisure destinations such as the beach also has antecedents, for example mods versus rockers in Britain and the Bodgies and Widgies in Australia in the 1960s (Stratton, 1992). The 'ugly' side to Australia's much-vaunted egalitarian 'mateship' culture has long been acknowledged also (Hornadge, 1975; see also Moore, 2005).

The Cronulla rioting brought a new political dimension to an old story. It was not a 'riot' in the usual sense; it was not directed against establishment institutions or state forces. It was straightforward communal violence, featuring mutual attacks by 'Anglo-Celtic' (white) and 'Lebanese' groups (the latter extended to anyone 'looking Middle-Eastern', or people who appeared to be Muslims). But this conflict had little to do with the traditional cause of interracial strife, namely economic competition among 'have-nots' for resources such as land or jobs. It would be wrong to discount an economic motive underlying any 'white trash' racism; recall, for example, the Hansonite line:

You know how they say 'The rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer.' They forgot to add that the rich are becoming Asian, and the poor are becoming Australian. (quoted in Hage, 1998: 215)



However, this was not the main issue at Cronulla, which was all about identity – a fight about different ways of being Australian:

In contrast [to confrontations based on competition for land or labour], as the use of the Australian flag, the national anthem, and rioters' appeals to other national icons and the Australian way of life indicate, the contemporary challenge involves *ownership and access to membership in the nation and its culture*. (Inglis, 2006; emphasis added)

What was at stake in the confrontation was culture – the use of the beach and the right way to 'be' Australian. The lead up to the 11 December 2005 riot was marked by reports about cultural use and misuse of the beach at Cronulla. An attack on two North Cronulla lifeguards on patrol on 4 December was identified widely as the immediate catalyst for the violence (Overington and Warne-Smith, 2005). While it was reported that they were attacked by four men in what may not have been an unprovoked event (*AAP Australian National News Wire*, 2005a; Lawrence, 2005), it was editorialized by the *Daily Telegraph* (2005) as 'an attack on us all'. A spokesman for Surf Life Saving Sydney described the attack as part of ongoing antagonism between lifeguards and 'gangs' of youths who regularly came from outside of the community to have a good time by engaging in what is 'by community standards . . . nothing more than harassment and intimidation' (Ravens, 2005).

Seen as an attack on an Australian icon and tradition,<sup>4</sup> the assault on these lifeguards challenged the 'white' way of using the beach. Labelling the incoming groups 'Arabs', a chronology of the events leading up to the riot in *The Australian* details the breaches of beach culture reported to have upset the locals:

[Cronulla locals] allege the men taunt the lifesavers by stealing equipment and kicking balls at them. They annoy other beachgoers by claiming large sections of sand, from the water to the beach stairs, as a football pitch. They force people who are sunbaking to move by kicking up sand around them. They park illegally, blocking people's driveways, and tread all over people's towels. Or so it is alleged by local officials and beachgoers. (Overington and Warne-Smith, 2005: 17)

*The Australian's* editorial also reports 'seething resentment' at the treatment of young girls who are 'harassed, ogled, leered and whistled at while they sunbake'. Once disturbed, these girls, 'especially young girls, of Anglo-Saxon appearance', report Middle-Eastern youths making 'appalling suggestions about how they might pass the time on the beach, offering to have sex with the girls and asking if they are virgins'. The *Daily Telegraph* claimed that the presence of such gangs 'turn Cronulla Beach into a war zone' (McIlveen, 2005a). After a week of simmering



tensions, the beach was set for an act of 'reclamation'. On 11 December 2005, 5000 white people gathered at Cronulla Beach, many of whom were drunk, draped in Australian flags, some with racist slogans painted on their skin and some singing 'Waltzing Matilda' maliciously (Pearlman et al., 2005). They were said to have been called to the beach by means of racially antagonistic mobile phone SMS (text) messages and emails. The rally turned violent in the afternoon when the mob beat up a number of Middle-Eastern Australians who were unlucky enough to be there.

Two days later, in the wake of the violence, up to 100 Middle-Eastern youths drove to a neighbouring suburb and damaged 60 cars in retaliation (*Sunday Times*, 2005). The police cracked down on the area, stopping and searching cars, confiscating weapons and making some arrests. The next day, 16 youths were charged. Their release on bail caused more disappointment and anger in the community. On 14 December 2005, a Catholic primary school was sprayed with gunfire and two church buildings were vandalized. Racist text messages inciting retaliation were intercepted in other states including Western Australia and Queensland.

### **The mainstream media wade in**

The riot was contextualized in the media as an escalation of simmering tensions. The background causes named included the attacks on the US on 11 September 2001, the *Tampa* incident (during an 'illegal immigrant' crackdown by the Australian government) and gang rapes by 'Lebanese' gangs in south-west Sydney between 2000 and 2002. An unsuccessful high court appeal by the perpetrators of the most brutal of these had featured prominently in the media in the weeks leading up to the Cronulla riots. It was cited by commentators as one of the contributing causes, even though the convicted perpetrators were not Lebanese. An ABC-TV *Four Corners* report shown in the wake of the sentencing for these crimes attributed the intense scrutiny of Australia's Lebanese and Arab communities, particularly their young men, to 'anti-Muslim backlash from September 11 and the refugee debate' (McDonell, 2002).

The Cronulla riot seems to be further evidence of what Graeme Turner has identified as 'the completion of the conservative redefinition' (2003: 413) of Australia's imagined community. Turner argues that the repeated moral panic against Lebanese and Muslim-Australians played out in the Australian press, across talk radio and in some government policies, works consistently to deny Muslim-Australians membership in the Australian community. Indeed, the slogan 'I grew here, you flew here', reportedly seen painted on a rioter (Rintoul, 2006; Zreika, 2006), aggressive singing of 'traditionally Australian' songs such as 'Waltzing Matilda', and passionate displays of the Australian flag would seem to support Turner's conclusion that:



Australia is now a community overwhelmingly defined by the necessity of exclusion, and increasingly marked by the revival of a nostalgic, even sentimental, refutation of the pluralism that informed the ethics of multiculturalism. (2003: 413)

In other words, the private domain of cultural identity has attained the status of high politics – the cultural public sphere.

### **A 'discourse public' formed by SMS and talk radio**

The Cronulla riots relied on a medium of communication that was invisible to mainstream media attention. Calls for people from both sides of the confrontation to assemble in particular places and times were passed around via word of mouth and SMS (text) messaging (McIlveen, 2005b). Racist texts on mobile phones were duly filmed for television news, but *The Age* also stressed that an anti-racism campaign was organized via SMS in response to text messages calling for support at the racist rally:

When Tim Longhurst read about a racist SMS campaign calling people to Cronulla Beach last weekend, he decided to start his own campaign to promote a more positive message about Sydney's racial diversity. (Frew and Jackson, 2005: 4)

And although no 'copycat' incidents eventuated from the messages that later appeared in Queensland and Western Australia, simply reporting their appearance successfully raised the spectre of a cultural movement taking place outside of channels controlled by 'the' public.

The police made a number of arrests in relation to the appearance of videos on white supremacist websites such as Stormfront ([www.stormfront.org](http://www.stormfront.org)) celebrating the violence of the riots (*AAP Australian National News Wire*, 2005b). An alleged white supremacist arrested on weapons charges in the days following the riot was revealed to have set up a website inciting continuation of the violence. Linking his counter-cultural identity with new-media savvy, *The Australian* reported that he had led another life as an 'international cyber hacker . . . well known in the cyber world', who claimed to have developed a computer virus (Baker, 2005: 2). The paper revealed that although only 25, his offline identity was better known in connection to bomb threats made against the offices of the Australian Republican Movement in 1999.

The other important medium for disseminating the rallying cries of the 'Australian' rioters (as opposed to the Lebanese retaliators) was talk radio. This form of mediation was once considered to be well beyond the limit of the rational public sphere. However, it has become a favoured 'antenna' for politicians such as Australian prime minister John Howard to sample and gauge public opinion. It has successfully conjoined a cultural and a



political discourse public within the Australian polity and elsewhere (see Mickler, 1992). As Turner points out, 'a new politics of identity has become embedded in the Australian national imagery' that invokes an 'Australian identity that is agreed, singular and established', threatened by destruction from 'outside' forces (Turner, 2003: 415). Turner identifies talk radio as a site where such an identity is resoundingly rehearsed. It provides a more stable location than the beach for these politics to be debated.

Radio 'shock jocks' such as Alan Jones and Steve Price leapt on the content of the text messages, the community unrest and the disappointments that they voiced (see Nolan, 2005; Topsfield, 2005). In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, David Marr described Jones as 'screaming like a race caller whose horse was coming home', quoting him thus:

'I'm the person that's led this charge here. Nobody wanted to know about North Cronulla, now it's gathered to this.' The riot was three days away and Sydney's top-rating breakfast host had heaps of anonymous emails to whip his 2GB listeners on. 'Alan, it's not just a few Middle Eastern bastards at the weekend, it's thousands. Cronulla is a very long beach and it's been taken over by this scum. It's not a few causing trouble, it's all of them' . . . He assured his audience he 'understood' why that famous text message went out and he read it right through again on air: 'Come to Cronulla this weekend to take revenge. This Sunday every Aussie in the shire get down to North Cronulla to support the leb and wog bashing day.' Daily he cautioned his listeners not to take the law into their own hands, but he warmed to those who had exactly that on their minds. On Thursday Charlie rang to suggest all junior footballers in the shire gather on the beach to support the lifesavers. 'Good stuff, good stuff,' said Jones. (Marr, 2005)

### **'Troublemakers': vital characters in a staged drama**

Conservative commentator Gerard Henderson blamed private communication in his opinion piece:

It is unfair to blame the mainstream media for what happened. For example, a re-reading of Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* indicates that it reported the lead-up to last Sunday's events quite responsibly. Likewise, talkback radio did not spark the violence. Young Australians, of whatever ethnic background, can communicate their messages by mobile phones without using the established media. (Henderson, 2005)

Further, he attempts to remove the public from the frame by signalling the events as a 'police matter' to be 'resolved in the courts':

It is especially serious because the crimes which took place have been motivated by troublemakers, Anglo-Celtic members of the lunar right and alienated cultural Muslims alike. (Henderson, 2005)



'Troublemakers' are just what the mainstream media need, because the representation of the 'cultural' sphere of identity within the political public sphere requires a theatrical staging of conflict, which in turn needs extremes – in this case the 'lunar right' and 'alienated cultural Muslims' alike. Their battles on the beach are not acceptable as 'politics' (which is why they are characterized as 'criminal') but nevertheless they do express deeper tensions within Australian culture. Evidently, the white, Anglo, masculine 'Australian Ordinairiness' that Morris identifies as a fiction rather than a myth embodied by the beach, has been challenged by the representational politics of Muslim-Australians. The Anglo-Australian in the open-necked shirt is struggling to 'endure'. These deeper tensions are exactly the ones with which the political public sphere rarely deals. Prime Minister Howard's statement after the riots, that he did not believe there was a racist undercurrent in Australia, demonstrates how hard it is for the political public sphere to manage conflicts of identity and culture (Murphy and Davies, 2005).

So too is the switch by the mainstream press from speaking as a bastion of the outraged to becoming the champion of law and order. 'Fight for Cronulla – We want our beach back' was the headline that the *Daily Telegraph* ran in the week leading up to the riot. While the accompanying article reported on the 'disgust' at the lifeguard attacks felt by some Sutherland Shire residents, none of these residents made a call to arms. Rather, the beachgoers interviewed indicated they would rather go elsewhere than deal with the trouble on Cronulla Beach (Lawrence, 2005). After the violence, the paper ran a series of special sections featuring large font headers declaring 'Riots: Our Disgrace' and 'Riots: Stop the Violence' (see Day, 2005). These articles detailed the lead-up to and aftermath of the riot. Angered locals were transformed in a day into violent marauders. Their transformation, where cultural politics comes to a head, remains out of the public eye.

The cultural public sphere becomes the stage on which such tensions can be fought out for the edification of the spectator in the general community (see Cunningham, 2001). Thus 'troublemakers' are both provoked (via new media and talk radio) and rebuked (via mainstream media commentary). The role of the mainstream news in reporting and commenting on these extreme displays is at least in part to assist those who are caught in the middle – the public – to think through the issues via the theatrics. The beach can be understood as a stage for the cultural public sphere, where identity politics and matters of representation are drawn from the private realm into the public (see Figure 1, middle).



## The beach goes to Denmark

The cultural public sphere does not have to be violent. Ugliness can be tempered with romance. This happened on a beach near Melbourne barely a month before the events at Cronulla. Veteran observer of nationalism Tom Nairn was there:

On the beach . . . people halfway to emancipation are imagining the rest of the journey, in their own way . . . Democracy is more resourceful than many of its protagonists (and professors) have realised. (Nairn, 2005)

This reflection was provoked by the spectacle of a beach party (complete with 'Vikings', flaming arrows shot into the sea, and plenty of ice-cold

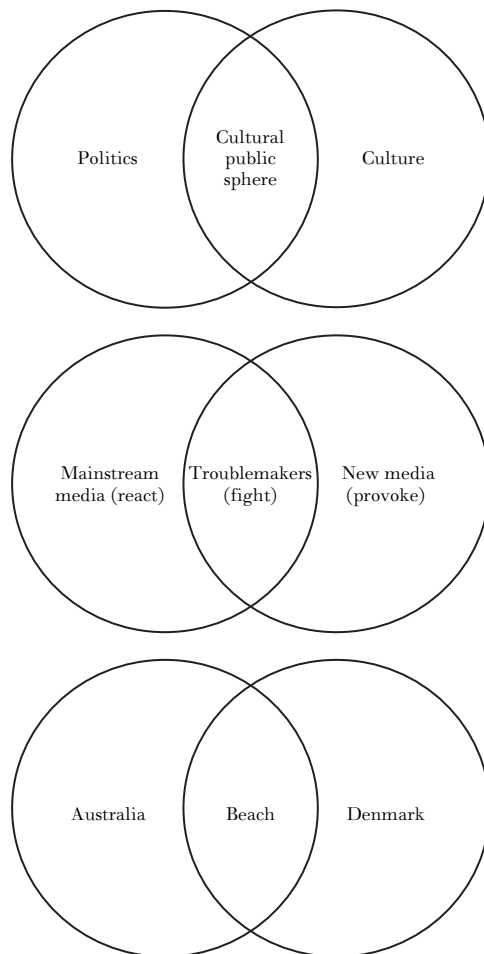


Figure 1 The public sphere on the beach



beer) to celebrate the birth of a son to Princess Mary, who is married to the crown prince of Denmark but originates from Tasmania. Nairn thought that the 'surrogate enthusiasm for an alternative royal show' (to Charles and Camilla) betrayed an 'essential impulse' that has less to do with a love of monarchy than with an Australian love of egalitarian friendliness. The Windsors offer an ugly spectacle that is 'too much like us':

Pommy stodge, braying racist jokes, wearing hopelessly wrong things to fancy-dress balls, Mum not turning up at her own son's wedding, sneering intellectuals and tabloid hysterics. No episode of *Neighbours* could be so awful. (Nairn, 2005)

The alternative is Australian commoner Mary Donaldson marrying a friendly Dane called 'Fred', whom she met in a pub. As Nairn argues: 'Australia is founded on an aspiring commoner mythology – something not so easily realized politically', but somehow an Australian princess 'feels curiously like a confirmation of "the fair go" and egalitarian mateship' (Nairn, 2005). While no government would contemplate switching allegiance from one royal house to another, it is a different matter for Australians on the beach: 'formality isn't what this is about. What is it about? Informal passion – elective democracy of the heart.'

But unfortunately, even the romance of informal 'mateship' and passion has its ugly side. As Nairn points out (in reference to Neville Shute's *In the Wet*; 2000[1952]), 'there was . . . a bit more to White Australia than most now willingly recall'. Falling in love with foreign (Danish) royalty did not extend to sharing the beach with migrant-looking (Lebanese) neighbours. Actually, however, ugly and romantic egalitarianism are two sides of the same coin: 'passion', 'elective democracy of the heart', 'the fair go' and 'egalitarian mateship' can result equally in sentimental backslapping over a beer (Denmark) or an alcohol-fuelled 'biffo' (Cronulla), and both are comfortable on the beach (see Figure 1, bottom). However, none of those affective qualities are comfortable components of the rational public sphere. Romantic 'passion' and racist 'egalitarianism' belong to Cronulla, not Canberra. This is why they are almost invisible to the factual media until something incandescent lights up the cultural public sphere, and a discourse public forms around the values, media and citizens that underlie both royals and riots in the popular imagination. Despite the ugliness, the 'public sphere on the beach' sometimes seems to be a better guide to Australian politics than the better-dressed and better-behaved version in Canberra. The public sphere is a better concept with the cultural added.

## Notes

1. The Wikipedia entry 'WTO Ministerial Conference of 1999' gives a good account of the protests, their organization, activity and aftermath (see



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WTO\\_Meeting\\_of\\_1999](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WTO_Meeting_of_1999) and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jose\\_Bove](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jose_Bove)).

2. But see also <http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/story?id=1231684&page=1>, and a 2004 posting to the National Vanguard website ([www.nationalvanguard.org/printer.php?id=4330](http://www.nationalvanguard.org/printer.php?id=4330)) where the 'lovely and talented' 12-year-olds are interviewed:

*Is there anything cuter than two identical twin twelve-year-old girls who have a band together? How about if they dress in matching plaid skirts – that ups the cuteness quotient, right? And what if they perform folksy versions of classic racist songs by bands like Skrewdriver and Rahowa? Whoa! Now we are heading into the cute danger zone.*

Asked about their name, the cuteness pales beside the racist intent. The twins reply: 'Part of our heritage is Prussian German. Also our eyes are blue, and Prussian blue is just a really pretty color.' There is also the discussion of the lack of "Prussian blue" colouring (Zyklon B residue) in the so-called gas chambers in the concentration camps. We think it might make people question some of the inaccuracies of the "Holocaust" myth'.

3. The news media from which we quote in this article were not selected as a social science sample; we make no claims for their representativeness or statistical significance. The quotations have been chosen to illustrate a particular discursive position or gambit, in order to exemplify the formation of a discourse public.
4. Surf lifesavers in Australia are frequently volunteers, a fact the *Daily Telegraph's* editorial suggests that 'we have all been taught to respect', and that 'in this country we have bred a strain of selflessness so ennobling and so constant [it] is something which every decent Australian regards as a stamp of quality on our national character' (*Daily Telegraph*, 2005).

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