

THE 'YOUNG MUSLIM MAN' IN AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Through an analysis of two highly mediatised recent events in Australia this article seeks to interrogate the intersections of gender, ethnicity and culture in the construction of Australian national identity. A series of gang rapes in the early 2000s attracted widespread public outrage and the harshest ever condemnation of acts of sexual violence in Australian history. Linked to these events, in December 2005 a series of riots at the Sydney beachside suburb of Cronulla led to further questioning of ethnic relations and the state of Australian multiculturalism within media and political discourses. While many of the responses to the gang rapes and the Cronulla riots have drawn on the language of 'women's rights', a closer look at the discourses suggests a different story. Responses to the gang rapes have often characterised the attacks as being against the Australian community, rather than against individual women. It is also interesting to contrast the outrage surrounding the gang rapes with the general silence regarding the increased racist violence committed against Muslim women in recent times. Furthermore, the linking of the gang rapes with a particular religious/ethnic community can be contrasted with the discourses on the alleged gang rapes involving Australian sporting teams, such as the Bulldogs and more recently the Wests Tigers. Finally the manner in which the events of Cronulla have been recast and linked back to the 'threat' posed by young Muslim/Lebanese/Middle Eastern men to Australian women suggests that ethnicity and gender both play an important and mutually reinforcing role in the construction of Australian national identity.

[Keywords: Islam, Australia, Cronulla riots, gang-rape]

Introduction & Background

Muslims in Australia and in particular young Muslim men have held a prominent place in Australian political, media and other public discourses in recent times. Through an analysis of two significant recent events that have attracted extensive public attention this paper proposes to consider the ways in which the young Muslim man is portrayed within Australian public discourse. It is argued that this analysis in turn allows for an

interrogation of the intersections of gender, culture and ethnicity in the construction of Australian national identity.

At this point it is necessary to explain the terminology used in this paper. The interchangeable use of “Lebanese/Muslim/Arab/Middle-Eastern” or combinations of these terms reflects the language used in the discourses. As discussed below, the problematisation of the Lebanese community in Sydney has been an ongoing process over the last decade. Similarly, since at least the first Gulf War in the early 1990s (and arguably before this), the Middle East is imagined as a site of conflict and violence. While the majority of Muslims in Australia are not Arabic and only 38.6% of Lebanese-born Australian residents are Muslim, with the bulk of the overseas born Arab population being Christian¹ the problematised ‘Lebanese/Middle-Eastern man’ is predominantly Muslim within Australian public discourse². There are various possible explanations for this including: Australia’s colonial orientalist legacy; and the significant increase in immigration from the Middle East and Afghanistan. Certainly the events of 11 September 2001, the increased global preoccupation with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the subsequent ‘War on Terror’, which has dominated political discourses have inevitably played a part, with the ‘Clash of Civilisations’ language gaining a new legitimacy³.

It is acknowledged that the majority of the discourses considered in this paper come from conservative, right-wing sources. It is perhaps a reflection of the current political climate in Australia that the public sphere, while a constantly contested space, has been dominated by the right. It must also be acknowledged that there have been prominent dissenters to the dominant discourse on the young Muslim man. However, it is argued that while public discourse will always in fact be composed of competing multiple

¹ Trevor Batrouney, “From ‘White Australia’ to Multiculturalism: citizenship and identity”, in Ghassan Hage (ed) *Arab-Australians today: citizenship and belonging*, Carlton Sth VIC: Melbourne University Press, 2002: 39.

² Human Rights & Equal Opportunities Commission (HREOC) *Isma – Listen, Report of national consultations on eliminating prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australians*, (2004) para. 1.2.1.2 – available at: <http://www.hreoc.gov.au/racial_discrimination/isma/report/chap2.html#2_1>. Accessed 3/11/06.

³ See Scott Poynting, Greg Noble, Paul Tabar, Paul & Jock Collins *Bin Laden in the Suburbs: Criminalising the Arab Other*, Sydney: Sydney Institute of Criminology Series 2004, and Jock Collins, Greg Noble, Scott Poynting & Paul Tabar, *Kebabs, kids, cops & crime*, Annandale NSW: Pluto Press 2000, for detailed accounts of the progressive problematisation of Middle-Eastern and Muslim populations in Australia in the context of national and international events.

discourses, the extent to which certain discourses on the young Muslim man have become 'common sense' and utilised by those who exercise a great deal of power in the public sphere legitimises some of the broader conclusions drawn in this paper.

“Talking Race not Racism”

Gang Rape, Cronulla & The Young Muslim Man

The Sydney Gang Rapes

In mid 2001 a series of gang rapes became the source of intense media attention. The headlines, “70 Girls Attacked by Rape Gangs”, “Police warning on new race crime” and “Caucasian women the targets” appeared on the front page of the *Sun-Herald* on 29 July 2001 with details of rapes that had been committed approximately a year before. Commentators wasted little time in identifying a ‘racial’ aspect to the crimes, reporting that the rapes had been committed by men who were “Lebanese/Muslim”⁴ or “of Middle Eastern extraction”⁵ against “white/Australian” women and quoting alleged racist remarks made during the attacks⁶. A *Lateline* report on 22 August 2001 stated, “Reports of Lebanese men preying on young Caucasian women, gang-raping them in planned, horrific attacks, has caused an outcry, leading all the way to the highest levels”⁷.

“Out-of-control Ethnic gangs” had formed a fairly consistent part of political and media discourses in New South Wales throughout the previous decade and Collins et al. (2000) have documented the increased problematisation of the “Lebanese/Middle-Eastern /Muslim man” since the mid 1990s, using the example of a highly mediatised attack on a Korean schoolboy and a shooting at the Lakemba police station in 1998 to demonstrate the association within public discourses of young men of Lebanese/Middle-Eastern backgrounds with violence and crime⁸. However the gang rapes offered a new sexualized aspect to this violence and the identification of the victims as ‘white’

⁴ Alan Jones, 30 July 2001.

⁵ Miranda Devine *Sun Herald*, 12 August 2001 cited in *Mediawatch*, “Criminal Gang or Islamic Gangs?” ABC, 9 September 2002 - transcript available at <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/090902_s2.htm>. Accessed 3/11/06.

⁶ Naomi Toy, & Lorna Knowles, “Pack rapists’ racial taunts” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 August 2001.

⁷ *Lateline*, “Ethnic Crime under Sydney Scrutiny” ABC, 22 August 2001 – transcript available at <<http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/s351038.htm>>. Accessed 1/10/07.

⁸ Collins, Noble, Poynting, & Tabar (2000).

(despite the fact that in reality they came from various backgrounds including Aboriginal⁹) provided the basis for what various commentators have identified as a 'moral panic' in the sense used by Stanley Cohen in his seminal text, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*¹⁰.

While the alleged racist remarks¹¹ were not considered by the trial judge to be of great significance to the rapes¹² and a number of commentators and experts working in the area of sexual violence hastened to reject the racialisation of these rapes and the risk of rape generally¹³, these remarks became an opportunity for linking the gang rapes with broader anti-immigration and anti-multicultural discourses. As journalist Janet Albrechtsen put it, this was "talking race not racism"¹⁴. In July 2001 in his radio programme on the radio station 2GB Alan Jones described the rapes as, "*first signs of Islamic hate against a community which has welcomed them...*"¹⁵. The rapes ceased to be the abhorrent actions of individuals and became the responsibility of an entire community (indeed an entire religion) whose members were all implicated. In the words of Miranda Devine, columnist for the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

Yes, it is unfair that the vast bulk of law-abiding Lebanese Muslim boys and men should be smeared by association. But their temporary discomfort may be necessary so that the powerful social tool of shame is applied to the families and communities that nurtured rapists, gave them succour and

⁹ According to Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales, of the seven victims, two were Italian Australians, one was Greek Australian and one was of an Aboriginal background - Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales *Race for the Headlines: Racism and media discourse*: Report launched 13 February 2003 - available at <<http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/adb.nsf/pages/raceheadlines,p57,n87>>.

¹⁰ Poynting, Noble, Tabar, & Collins (2004), Kate Warner "Gang rape in Sydney: crimes, the media, politics, race and sentencing" *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 37(3), 2004: 344-362.

¹¹ As Poynting et al. point out (2004: 125), the remarks went largely untested during the trial.

¹² The trial judge, Megan Latham stated in her written judgment: "There is no evidence before me of any racial element in the commission of these offences... There is nothing said or done by any of the offenders which provides the slightest basis for imputing to them some discrimination in terms of the nationality of their victims". Cited in Poynting et al. (2004: 131).

¹³ On 22 August 2001 the New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research issued a press release stating that sexual assault figures for the Bankstown area had remained stable since 1995, aside from a period of one month in 1999 when 70 rapes were reported, all of which were believed to have been committed by the same person. The press release also named this person to demonstrate that he was in fact an Anglo-Australian - Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales (2003: 58). See also Eamon Duff "Crisis centre says gang rape a problem across all races" *Sun-Herald*, 21 July 2002.

¹⁴ Janet Albrechtsen "Talking race not racism" *The Australian*, 17 July 2002.

¹⁵ Alan Jones quoted by David Fickling "Racially motivated crime and punishment" *The Guardian* 23 September 2002: available at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/elsewhere/journalist/story/0,7792,797463,00.htm>>. Accessed 29/8/03

brought them up with such a hatred of Australia's dominant culture and contempt for its women...¹⁶

Those who attempted to play down the racial element of the crimes or to dispute the legitimacy of placing the blame on a whole community were accused of allowing misplaced multicultural sentiments and political correctness to "morally blind" them, as it was the gang rapists who were the racists and had failed to show tolerance and respect¹⁷.

It was not only in the discourses of right-wing political and media commentators that links between ethnicity and the rapes were made. In an interview on the ABC's *7:30 Report*, the New South Wales Director of Public Prosecutions, Nicholas Cowdery stated that he considered ethnicity had been "a factor in the motivation of the actions of the perpetrators of offences"¹⁸. The New South Wales Premier Bob Carr also reportedly told a journalism student writing for an Arabic newspaper, "...what these violent rapists said when they committed the crime – they projected race into this argument"¹⁹.

In his book on a group of the gang rapists who became known as the "K Brothers", *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist Paul Sheehan in reporting the "cultural timebomb" defence put forward by one of the defence barristers (that it was an extreme reaction to the cultural differences between sexually conservative Pakistan and sexually liberal Australia that led one of the accused to rape), both dismissed its validity and pondered:

The big question that hung over these proceedings was how many other cultural time bombs were ticking amid the Muslim male population living within the liberality of Australia?... In the previous five years, there had been a dozen proven gang rapes involving young Muslim men in Sydney. There had also been thousands of acts of sexual harassment or intimidation by young Muslims involving young women on or near beaches²⁰.

As a result, the figure of the "Lebanese/Middle-Eastern/Muslim gang rapist" has gained a certain acceptance within Australian public discourse and is revisited frequently in

¹⁶ Miranda Devine "Racist rapes: Finally the truth comes out" *The Sun-Herald*, 14 July 2002.

¹⁷ As Associate Editor of *the Age* Pamela Bone put it; "...multiculturalism requires the goodwill not only of the dominant culture but of all cultures. Tolerance of difference is a two-way street" – "Rape: the debate we have to have" *The Age*, 24 July 2002. See also Albrechtsen (2002), Devine (2001).

¹⁸ ABC *7:30 Report*, 15 July 2002 – transcript available at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/s607758.htm>>. Accessed 14/10/03>.

¹⁹ Anti-Discrimination Board (2003: p61).

²⁰ Paul Sheehan *Girls Like You*, Sydney: Macmillan, 2006: 294.

reference to Islam and Muslims in Australia. Indeed, references to the gang rapes and the threat of the young Lebanese/Middle-Eastern/Muslim man to women played a significant part in both the lead up and the subsequent response to the events of 11 December 2005 at the Sydney beachside suburb of Cronulla.

December 2005

On 4 December 2005 it was reported that two lifesavers had been beaten up by a 'gang' of four men following a dispute. The fact that the lifesavers were not in uniform or on duty at the time and that there had been an altercation between three lifesavers and four men of 'Lebanese background' involving insults thrown by both sides,²¹ was not considered an important fact within media reporting of the incident. Over the course of the next week the attack took on mythical proportions. A further attack on lifesavers was reported in the middle of the week and stories of "Lebanese/Middle Eastern/Muslim men" disrupting Sydney's beaches abounded.

The first express link to religion/ethnicity was made by Alan Jones on Monday, during his talkback radio programme on 2GB. In response to a caller's rhetorical question regarding the type of "grubs" responsible for the attack, Jones stated, "What kind of grubs? Well I'll tell you what kind of grubs these lot were. This lot were Middle Eastern grubs"²². This angle was subsequently taken up by the *Daily Telegraph* on Tuesday, which, in an article entitled "Fight for Cronulla: We want our beach back" quoted the Surf lifesaving Sydney rescue services manager, Stephen Leahy as saying that it was common for Middle Eastern men from Western Sydney to taunt Cronulla surf lifesavers²³. The Wednesday and Thursday issues of the *Daily Telegraph* featured a series of articles detailing other incidents involving "Lebanese/Middle-Eastern/Muslim" men at Sydney's beaches and Alan Jones asked his callers for more stories. A demonstration was organized for the following Sunday, in what Steve Price of 2UE called "a community show of force".

It was also Alan Jones who was responsible for first linking the Sydney gang rapes with events at Cronulla. One caller to Alan Jones's radio programme stated that she had

²¹ See Scott Poynting "What caused the Cronulla riot?" *Race & Class* 48(1) 2006: 85-92, p86.

²² Quoted in ABC *Mediawatch* "Front page: Jones and Cronulla" – available at <<http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s1574155.htm>>.

²³ "Fight for Cronulla" *Daily Telegraph*, 6 December 2005.

heard derogatory remarks made to people of Middle Eastern appearance on Cronulla beach, suggesting there were “two sides to the story”. Alan Jones’s response was clear; “Let’s not get too carried away, Berta. We don’t have Anglo-Saxon kids out there raping women in western Sydney”²⁴. Interestingly, in interviews conducted by the ABC programme, *Four Corners* with rioters, Islam’s “lack of respect for women” and the gang rapes were cited as motivating factors for their participation. “Mark”, one rioter, told the journalist:

I don’t know if you remember, but when they [Bilal Skaf and others] were being tried in the court, they were... they wanted him to be tried in an Islamic court – do you remember that? Yeah, ‘cause they wanted him to be tried under Islamic law. Because they were saying that that’s ok to do that [rape] to a woman²⁵.

Responses to the Cronulla Riot

In the aftermath of the riot, responses oscillated between denial and justification. With headlines such as, “Terrorism, gang rapes behind riots: MP”²⁶ appearing in the media in the days following 11 December, the riot became characterized as a valid demonstration “gone wrong”. Indeed, in his book on one of the sets of gang rapes, *Girls Like You*, it is in this manner that Paul Sheehan reconstructs events. Sheehan refers to one of the gang rape victims, Tegan Wagner, attending Cronulla on 11 December and quotes her as dismissing the racist intentions behind the demonstration, inflamed by neo-nazi organizations. Instead he re-casts events:

[Tegan Wagner]... went to Cronulla beach on 11 December to attend a demonstration against the sexual harassment and racist intimidation by Lebanese men at Cronulla²⁷.

He goes on:

What was never reported, despite the thuggish element, was that for most people this was protest *against* racism²⁸. (emphasis in original)

In contrast, his title for the chapter dealing with the riots – “Intifada” – leaves the reader in little doubt that violence was perpetrated by Lebanese/Middle Eastern Muslims and that it was an attack on Australia motivated by ethnicity/religion.

²⁴ Quoted by David Marr “Alan Jones: I’m the person that’s led this charge” *The Age*, 13 December 2005.

²⁵ ABC *Four Corners*, 13 March 2006 - transcript available at <<http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2006/s1590953.htm>>. Accessed 31/10/06.

²⁶ Sydney Morning Herald, 12 December 2005.

²⁷ Sheehan (2006: 56).

²⁸ Ibid: 362.

Similarly, a vocal commentator on the phenomenon of “Lebanese/Middle-Eastern/Muslim gangs”, Tim Priest, a former Sydney police detective turned opinion writer for *The Australian* was quoted in an article which appeared in the paper on 13 December 2005 as stating:

It’s been a long time coming... and it can’t stop now... Of course the usual clique of agenda-driven ethnic community leaders were quick to condemn the Cronulla incidents as un-Australian and racist. Nevermind the multitude of racist attacks on young Australian men and women during the past decade, which have now manifested into full-blown racial retaliation²⁹.

Within political responses, the New South Wales Police Minister was reported as stating, “I am concerned a small number of Middle-Eastern males have a problem with respecting women and I think that was an underlying current...”³⁰. In his response, the Prime Minister John Howard stated that he refused to use the “racist tag” which he believed was “flung around sometimes carelessly” and instead preferred to characterize the riots as fuelled by the large numbers of people and the over-consumption of alcohol³¹. While he condemned the violence, Howard was quick to add, “I think that it’s important that we do not rush to judgement about these events. I do not accept that there is underlying racism in this country”³². He went on to discourage any attempt to “wallow in generalized self-criticism”. He did not refer to the issue of the inflammatory media reporting in the week leading up to the riots nor the success of the neo-nazi organizations in mobilizing people through the use of racist text messages.

Cronulla revisited/revised – A Year On

In the twelve months following the Cronulla riot, the discourses explaining the events developed further. In an article on the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 31 October 2006, the treasurer Peter Costello was reported to have accused the Muslim community, through its continued support for the controversial Mufti Sheik Taj el-din al Hilaly, of having led to the gang rapes and Cronulla riot:

²⁹ “Blame race riots on police force neglect” *The Australian*, 13 December 2005.

³⁰ Comments made on the *Sunday* television programme, Channel 9, cited in Christina Ho “Cronulla, conflict & culture: how can Muslim women be heard in Australia?” *UTSpeaks* Public Lecture, 5 September 2006 – http://www.uts.edu.au/new/releases/2006/September/images/utsspeaks_dr_ho.pdf. Accessed 3/11/06.

³¹ “PM refuses to use racist tag”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 December 2005.

³² Press conference, Phillip Street, Sydney 13 December 2005 – available at <http://www.pm.gov.au/News/interviews/Interview1723.html> Accessed 3/11/06>.

These kinds of attitudes have actually influenced people...So you wonder whether a kid like Bilal Skaf had grown up hearing these kinds of attitudes and you wonder whether kids rioting at Cronulla have heard these sorts of attitudes³³.

Aside from the re-affirmation of the connection between Islam and the gang rapes, what is stark in this comment is the “kids” Costello chose to represent as rioting down at Cronulla. Similarly, in a radio interview with Alan Jones regarding Sheik el Hilaly’s comments in late 2006 likening scantily clad women to raw meat left out for cats, Costello did not contradict Alan Jones when he linked the Sheik’s comments, the gang rapes and “kids rioting down at Cronulla”³⁴. Adding to this, in writing about a proposed rally by Muslims to be held the first weekend in November 2006 the *Daily Telegraph* alluded to possible similarities between the use of text messages in this context and in the events at Cronulla, implying the same people to be involved³⁵. Whilst the article went on to quote a number of the messages sent, most of which called for a peaceful protest, the title and the association with Cronulla appeared to suggest a possible recurrence of the 2005 violence. In this way, the Cronulla riot was further disassociated from white racism and recast as another attack on ‘Australia’ by the Muslim community through the young Lebanese/Middle-Eastern/Muslim man. Islam, the Sydney gang rapes and the Cronulla riots all become inextricably linked.

It therefore seems from a review of the media and political commentary on the Sydney gang rapes and Cronulla riots, that two major discourses can be identified. The first being the “race not racism” discourse detailed above, through which the actions of certain individuals from a minority cultural background were considered sufficient to call into question the cultural legitimacy of the community to which they were identified as belonging. The second is the emergence of a so-called ‘feminist’ discourse which has been used to justify the wide-scale attention given to the Sydney gang rapes as well as providing an excuse for the riots at Cronulla. The gendered nature of the discourses therefore requires further consideration.

³³ Peter Hartcher, Philip Coorey, Philip & David Braithwaite “Sheik falls on his sword” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 October 2006.

³⁴ Interview with Alan Jones, 2 GB, 31 October 2006 – transcript available at <<http://www.treasurer.gov.au/tsr/content/transcripts/2006/159.asp>>. Accessed 3/11/06.

³⁵ “Muslim rallying call”, *Daily Telegraph*, 1 November 2006.

The Appropriation of the Language of Feminism

While feminist discourses are not generally treated favourably within mainstream public discourse in Australia, the language of 'women's rights' has often been used in relation to Islam and Muslims in Australia and by unlikely people. Commentators who are more often associated with conservative positions on the issue of women's rights were extremely vocal in their condemnation of the Sydney gang rapes as acts of sexual violence and their demands for stronger legal responses. Paul Sheehan, in his book on one of the sets of gang rapes draws attention to the low conviction rates for rape in Australia and sympathetically sets out the difficulties faced by victims of sexual violence during the course of the legal trials as they are subjected to long and embarrassing cross-examination³⁶. There was also such a public outcry at the initial sentences given to the rapists in the first set of trials that an appeal was instituted, resulting in the most severe penalties ever imposed for a crime other than murder.

In September 2006, in relation to Muslim integration in Australia, John Howard was quoted in *The Australian* as stating:

Fully integrating means accepting Australian values, it means learning as rapidly as you can the English language if you don't already speak it. And it means understanding that in certain areas, such as the equality of men and women... people who come from societies where women are treated in an inferior fashion have got to learn very quickly that that is not the case in Australia³⁷.

This is not the first time the Prime Minister has stood up "in defence of women's rights" against Islam. Christina Ho, as well as referring to the above quotation, documented comments made by the Prime Minister back in February this year, regarding the "extreme attitudes" towards women held by some with the Islamic community³⁸. More recently, responses to Sheik el Hilaly's comments in Australia regarding the connection between scanty clothing and provocative behaviour and sexual assault have unleashed fierce reprobation and their suggestions that sexual assault may be 'provoked' dismissed unreservedly. John Howard was quoted as stating: "They are appalling and reprehensible comments... They are quite out of touch with contemporary values in Australia...The idea that women are to blame for rapes is preposterous"³⁹. Treasurer

³⁶ Sheehan (2006) *supra* note 20.

³⁷ Richard Kerbaj "Howard stands by Muslim integration" *The Australian*, 1 September 2006.

³⁸ *Supra* note 30.

³⁹ "Cleric's comments condemned" *Sun Herald*, 26 October 2006

Peter Costello went further, stating in an interview on the popular *Sunrise* morning television programme on Channel 9, in response to a comment by one of the presenters, David Koch that “if George Pell [Cardinal of the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney] or Peter Jensen [Anglican Archbishop of Sydney] said this [referring to Sheik el Hilaly’s comments] they would be railroaded out of town, quite rightly”, the Treasurer stated, “well they wouldn’t say it, that’s the point, because they don’t have that view of women...”⁴⁰. In this way, Costello suggests an ethnic/religious root to misogyny.

Sporting heroes or gang rapists?

By way of contrast, this apparent concern for women and their protection against sexual harassment and violence was less strongly voiced in reference to the alleged gang rapes committed by members of a number of Australian sporting teams, most notably the Canterbury Bulldogs. While within the media there was some consideration of the misogyny associated with male sporting culture in Australia, the Prime Minister was quick to dismiss as “quite unfair” on players who had not been accused of anything to be subjected to “generalizations”. He stated, “I know a lot of people associated with rugby league and they are decent, upright citizens”⁴¹. He is also reported to have said, “At a time like this I stick up for the game, not put the boot in”⁴². As Joseph Wakim pointed out in an editorial piece published in Melbourne paper, *The Age*, the Prime Minister’s fear of generalizations did not seem to extend to his classifications of Muslims and Islam; “Where was the ‘I know a lot of people from the Lebanese community and they are decent, upright citizens’”, he asked⁴³.

Indeed, aside from John Howard’s response, there was widespread debate about the sporting culture’s fostering of masculinist and misogynist values. However complete condemnation of the sport was considered excessive. Furthermore, no link with ethnicity or a particular community was made.

⁴⁰ Transcript available at

<<http://www.treasurer.gov.au/tsr/content/transcripts/2006/157.asp>>. Accessed 1/11/06.

⁴¹ Quoted by Joseph Wakim “Gang rape, sport, power – and prejudice” *The Age*, 9 March 2004.

⁴² Kathy Marks “And they call it a British disease” *The Independent on Sunday*, 7 March 2004 – available at

<http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4159/is_20040307/ai_n12751183>. Accessed 1/11/06.

⁴³ Wakim (2004).

“Veiled victims” – violence against Muslim women

So how has Australia suddenly become so ‘feminist’? An opinion piece in *The Australian* shortly after John Howard’s comments in September by long-time critic of feminism, Janet Albrechtsen provides a clue⁴⁴. In her article Albrechtsen praises the Prime Minister whilst expressing her disgust at the “moral blindness” of feminists, which she sees as caused by multiculturalism. For Albrechtsen, feminists have chosen to concentrate on “banalities” such as unequal pay, glass ceilings, unequal distribution of domestic and childcare workloads while ignoring the significant problem of “oppression meted out to Muslim women at the hands of Muslim men in Australia”⁴⁵.

However in her detailed accounts of violence against Muslim women committed by Muslim men in various European contexts, Albrechtsen does not explain why her concerns are limited to the oppression “at the hands of Muslim men”. While Muslim women are often held up as ‘proof’ of an inherent misogyny in Islam through representations of them as ‘veiled victims’ of their men, their culture and their religion, there has been little attention given to racist violence committed against Muslim women in Australia. Even prior to the recent rise of Islamophobia post 9/11, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission documented instances of Muslim women being attacked, verbally assaulted and their *hijabs* being ripped off their heads in response to the First Gulf War⁴⁶. In a discussion paper by an anti-racism research group based on work with a number of key community agencies, it was found that people perceived as Muslim or Arab had been subjected to significant verbal and, on occasion, physical abuse and that the majority of attacks were against women⁴⁷. Similarly, the Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales reported that attacks on Arabic, Middle-Eastern and Muslim communities in Australia have tended to target Muslim women⁴⁸.

⁴⁴ Janet Albrechtsen “Heed the PM’s call for women’s rights” *The Australian*, 6 September 2006.

⁴⁵ See also Janet Albrechtsen “Human rights can no longer be sacrosanct” *The Australian*, 13 September 2006.

⁴⁶ HREOC (2004: para. 1.5.1).

⁴⁷ Julie Browning & Andrew Jakubowicz “Respect and Racism in Australia: Discussion Paper No. 2” *Racism Monitor*, University of Technology, Sydney, 2004: 7 – <<http://www.fairgo.net>>, see also HREOC (2004).

⁴⁸ Anti-Discrimination Board of New South Wales (2003: 75-76).

Following the media coverage of the Sydney gang rapes the ABC news programme *Lateline* reported that there had been threats of retaliatory rapes against women of Middle Eastern origin⁴⁹. Equally, during the Cronulla riots an attack on a 14 year old Muslim girl provides an interesting contrast to the justification that the riots were a result of anger regarding the lack of respect for women and sexually threatening behaviour of Lebanese Muslim men at the beach. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on 12 December 2005; "A bare-chested youth in Quiksilver boardshorts tore the headscarf off the girl's head as she slithered down the Cronulla dune seeking safety on the beach from a thousand-strong baying mob"⁵⁰. The symbolism of 'deveiling' the Muslim woman invokes imagery used by Frantz Fanon in reference to French colonial violence in Algeria; "the rape of the Algerian woman in the dream of the European is always preceded by the rending of the veil. We here witness a double deflowering"⁵¹. In an essay dedicated to the issue of the veil and its significance to the anti-colonial struggle, Fanon equates the unveiling of Algerian women with the rape of Algeria. This analysis leads to an interesting line of inquiry when considering why the discourses on the Sydney gang rapes and the Cronulla riots were framed as they were.

Once again, Janet Albrechtsen provides an interesting theory in attempting to explain the justification behind distinguishing between the 'Muslim' gang rapes and the 'sporting gang rapes':

There is a frightening misogyny behind the alleged gang rapes by footballers. But beneath the gang rapes by the Lebanese Muslim boys, their family members who say they have done nothing wrong and the perpetrators still at large, is not merely misogyny but racism. Spot the difference⁵².

Thus *mere* misogyny is to be contrasted with racism. This comment appears to suggest that the protection of 'our women' has less to do with a generalised abhorrence for violence against women than the significance of this violence as a form of racial or communal attack.

⁴⁹ *Lateline*, *supra* note 7.

⁵⁰ Damien Murphy "Thugs ruled the streets, and the mob sang Waltzing Matilda", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 December 2005.

⁵¹ Frantz Fanon "Algeria Unveiled" in *A Dying Colonialism*, New York: Grove Press, 1965: 45.

⁵² "Let us not overlook the race factor" *The Australian*, 17 March 2004.

The use of women as the embodiment of the Nation has been identified within feminist academic literature. In her book *Gender and Nation*, Nira Yuval-Davis argues that the Woman has often been characterised as the body of the Nation within nationalist discourses. She does not need to act. She simply becomes the physical site onto which a national or communal identity is projected. Through this she remains a passive object that must be protected⁵³. So too, Zillah Eisenstein, referring to Anderson's 'imagined community' argues:

This 'imagined community' is a fantasy world with women present, but silenced. They are absented from the fraternity which is masculine. They are given no citizen voice, although they often take it. Instead they create the borders for the fraternal order⁵⁴.

Thus, Eisenstein argues, the very construction of the nation is gendered. Men act as citizens while women provide the bodies on which national boundaries can be marked and guarded. This idea is further elaborated by Linda Racioppi and Katherine O'Sullivan See who also identify gender as a key dimension in many nationalist discourses and conflicts⁵⁵:

Even a cursory examination of the conflict in Bosnia (where rape was used as an instrument of ethnic cleansing) or of the nationalist rhetoric of Zhirinovskiy (which appeals to traditional Russian notions of masculinity and femininity) makes the centrality of gender to nationalism seem obvious⁵⁶.

As discussed above, through the use of terms such as "systematic ethnic cleansing"⁵⁷ and "signs of Islamic hate against a community..."⁵⁸, the Sydney gang rapes are also characterised as having a significance beyond horrific acts of violence against individual women. Instead the gang rape victims take on a symbolic role as representatives of the Australian community. This is further reinforced through their

⁵³ Nira Yuval-Davis *Gender and Nation*, London: Sage, 1997: 45.

⁵⁴ Zillah Eisenstein "Writing bodies on the nation for the globe" in Sita Ranchod-Nilsson, & Mary-Ann Tétreault (eds) *Women, States and Nationalism: At home in the nation?* London & New York: Routledge, 2000: 42.

⁵⁵ Racioppi, Linda & O'Sullivan See, Katherine "Engendering nation and national identity" in Ranchod-Nilsson, Sita and Tétreault, Mary-Ann (eds) *Women, States and Nationalism: At home in the nation?* London & New York: Routledge, 2000: 20.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*: 20-21.

⁵⁷ Devine, Miranda (2001).

⁵⁸ Alan Jones quoted by Fickling, David, *supra* note 14.

identification as 'white'/'Australian' girls, despite (as noted above) the diversity of their backgrounds.

It is also interesting to note that, in reference to a series of shootings in the South West of Sydney that were also identified as the actions of "Lebanese criminal gangs", the New South Wales Police Commissioner described the attacks as a form of "mental rape"⁵⁹. As with Fanon's use of the metaphor of rape for colonialism, the language of rape appears to offer a useful expression of perceived threats to the borders of a community.

Indeed, rape, both actual and threatened, has frequently been utilised within mobilising nationalist propaganda⁶⁰. In the context of the conflicts in the Former Yugoslavia a UN investigation revealed that a campaign of rape was in fact used as a weapon of war to demoralise and destroy the enemy⁶¹. As Joanne Nagel identifies, sexual conquest and protection often form important aspects of nationalist discourses⁶². In the context of Australia, the historic fear of the 'Other' man who threatens White Australia through the sexual threat to White Australian women has been well documented. As Catriona Elder details, in the past cartoons in *Boomerang* and *Bulletin* have depicted the threat of Chinese men, "who desire white Australia and white women and who plan to take over both"⁶³. She explains this by referring back to Federation as a process designed to protect white society with the preservation of white motherhood. In contrast, Trevor Batrouney's study of Lebanese immigration since Federation found that at turn of century, the Lebanese were considered suitable immigrants and settlers to the new Australia (in comparison with Asians) with one of the reasons given by the Secretary for

⁵⁹ "Spate of shootings 'are a form of mental rape'" *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 October 2003.

⁶⁰ For example, see MacDougall, Gay, UN Special Rapporteur on Systematic Rape, Sexual Slavery and Slavery Like Practices, *Final Report*, 1998: para. 15, Kannabiran, Kalpana "Rape and the Construction of Communal Identity" in Jayawardena, Kumari & De Alwis, Malathi (eds) *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia*, Zed Books: London & New Jersey, 1996.

⁶¹ Askin, Kelly Dawn *War Crimes Against Women: Prosecution in International War Crimes Tribunals*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1997.

⁶² Nagel, Joane *Race, Ethnicity and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers*, New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003: 142-145. See also Kesic, Obrad "Women and Gender Imagery in Bosnia: Amazons, Sluts, Victims, Witches and Wombs" in Ramet, Sabrina P. (ed) *Gender and Politics in the Western Balkans: Women and Society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Successor States*, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999 in the context of Bosnian/Serbian nationalist discourses.

⁶³ Elder, Catriona "Invaders, Illegals and Aliens: Imagining Exclusion in 'White Australia'" *Law Text Culture* Vol. 7: 2003: 221-250, p225.

the Department of External Affairs, Attlee Hunt being, "the high number of female immigrants, with only 62 per cent of the total in 1901 being male, meant that they could not be considered a threat to the safety of Australian women or racial purity"⁶⁴.

When viewed in this light the discourses on the Sydney gang rapes and characterisation of the Cronulla riots take on a different significance. These incidents cease to be individual acts of violence but instead become powerful symbols of inter-ethnic conflict. Through the threat to its women the Australian nation is redefined as "under threat" justifying both racist retaliation in the name of protecting the nation and a repositioning of gendered and sexual violence as outside of, and a threat to, Australian national identity.

Conclusion

The Sydney gang rapes and the Cronulla riots provide an interesting opportunity to interrogate discourses on gender, ethnicity and the nation in Australia. This article can only provide a starting point for analysing the implications of these discourses. However, what this article has attempted to show is how anti-racist and feminist discourses have been pitted against each other. The selective use of the language of "women's rights" and gendered nationalist imagery, far from demonstrating a newfound popular feminism in Australia, reflects the highly gendered, sexualised and ethnicised construction of Australian national identity. In turn, it is argued that this construction holds little positive value to either the greater protection or promotion of women's rights or those of ethnic minority communities within Australia. Instead it legitimates a discourse in which certain ethnicities (Lebanese/Arabic/Middle Eastern people) and religions (notably Islam) become open to attack, in the name of 'talking race not racism' while ignoring the wider issue of violence against women.

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