# Surf's Up: Riding the Waves of Modernity & Postmodernism at Cronulla Beach

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Cronulla Beach, located on the coast of the Sutherland Shire in South Sydney, has been defined over time in conjunction with its Indigenous heritage, its connection to colonial settlement in the 18th Century, as the home of a generational marker in the form of film and as the site of a violent cultural explosion. Defined in conjunction with the 'Aussie lifestyle', this site has been transfixed with this stereotype to appeal to our sense of identity as Australian citizens. Using the paradigm of Modernity and the appropriation to Postmodernism as a progression from Tradition, the fundamental basis of this chapter is the historical, social evolution and cultural influence upon an individual's identity and citizenship. Through the lens of scholarly research, published texts, and with some help from Icehouse, the modernist ideals of progress and the subjective constructs of postmodernism and traditional history are explored through the waves of Cronulla Beach.

*Keywords*: Cronulla Beach; Puberty Blues; Cronulla Riots; Tradition; Modernity; Culture; Conflict; Ethnicity; Citizenship; Lifeworld

*Standing at the limit of an endless ocean*
   *stranded like a runaway,*
*lost at sea*
     *city on a rainy day down in the harbour*
      *watching as the grey clouds shadow the bay*
       *looking everywhere*
*'cause I had to find you*
        *this is not the way that I remember it here*
      *anyone will tell you it's a prisoner island*
       *hidden in the summer for a million*
*years*

  *Great Southern Land,*
*burned you black*

*so you look into the land*
  *and it will tell you a story*
*story 'bout a journey ended long ago*
  *if you listen to the motion of the wind in the mountains*
   *maybe you can hear them talking*
*like I do*

The historical narrative of Cronulla Beach begins and ends with the famous lines from Icehouse's iconic song, Great Southern Land – *'standing at the limit of an endless ocean'*. Located at the edge of the geographical landscape in Sydney's Sutherland Shire, Cronulla Beach epitomises Australian experiences of citizenship. Using the paradigm of postmodernity

and the appropriation of modernity, the historical and social evolution of identity as a concept can be explored through an inextricable link between culture and location.

Scholar, Baudrillard, asks, "If you are someone, can you 'find' your personality?" (Baudrillard 1998, p. 87). In this question, the issue of what it means to be an individual is raised, in coherence with processes engaged in to create an identity. In a culture of citizenship and nationalism, identity is undertaken through the formation of relations and connections with other individuals and spaces made significant as a product of experiences (Best & Kellner 1991). Cronulla Beach provides an example of the way in which the 'lifeworld' – "the frame against which a multitude of...knowledge which everyone shares...[is] located and answered" (Gross 1992, p. 39) – has evolved to inhabit the "struggle to be someone" (Anderson 1990, p. 132). This in turn exhibits how ideas regarding the nature of identity and citizenship have shifted through time. These changes in understanding the self are demonstrative of the wider shift from traditional to modernist and subsequently, postmodernist ways of thinking that occurred in society.

The terms 'tradition' and 'modernity' are concepts that encompass a variety of ideas, movements and practices in an array of fields. While tradition is widely accepted as "defined values, established continuities and codified patterns of behaviour (Gross 1992), Western perspectives of this concept emphasise the "static" (Nash 2001, p. 11) nature of tradition as a theory. Epitomising progress (Morley 1996), modernism is defined as a series of ideas emerging from the Age of Enlightenment (Best & Kellner 1991, p. 2), a category of "historical periodization" noted as modernity (Weber, cited in Morley 1996). As modernity developed out of, or in reaction to tradition, it is imperative to examine these two concepts comparatively, as they are defined by their differences. Significant oppositions defining tradition and modernity include their approach to culture and the concept of progress and rationalisation – a by-product to the emergence of capitalism and scientific discovery (Weber, cited in Morley 1996). Cronulla Beach provides an example of the effect these contrasting notions have on social practice, particularly in terms of citizenship.

The popular theory that tradition "fortified community ties [giving] people a sense of belonging" (Gross 1992) is challenged by the modernist notion of 'progress' – "a revolutionary break with tradition" (Morley 1996). A belief in the importance of progress is characteristic of modernity:

> Enlightenment philosophy is imbued with a sense of life being in transit
> from a primitive origin to a utopian end. Applied to society, it was the
> belief in the necessity of social progress... History is not an aimless
> chronicle but a developing process of constantly shifting struggles...
> (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p. 33)

This ideal of progress, mirrored by Kant who approaches this notion from a Eurocentric perspective with colonial undertones – an influential connection to the historical events situated in the area of Cronulla Beach – shatters notions that history is objective and rational. Rather, tradition and history are subjectively constructed and it is this construction of knowledge by society that is central to the concept of citizenship within the contextual history of Cronulla Beach as behaviours and attitudes between cultural groups evolved. In contrast to both previous spheres of thought, lies the theory of postmodernism which grew from the concepts embedded in modernity. Using Morley's parameters of definition, postmodernity represents "a period of social life, with postmodernism [being] a form of cultural sensibility

and aesthetic style expressive of this period" (Morley 1996, p. 49). In this mode of thought, postmodernist scholars favour "language games... [giving] rise to institutions in patches – local determinism" (ibid, p. 37) in opposition to the modernist belief in a universal truth. In Lyotard's opinion, the self-legitimisation through grand narratives is a key feature of modernity, whereas the idea that truth can be localised is one that has been promulgated by 20th Century postmodernists. The conflicting understandings of reality are the result of historical change:

> At the beginning of the twentieth century, modernity took on multiple
> perspectivism and relativism as its epistemology for revealing what it still
> took to be the true nature of a unified underlying reality (Sarup 1996, p.
> 95).

Postmodernism challenges this concept of an 'underlying reality' by drawing upon "a growing suspicion that all ideas about human reality are social constructions" (Anderson 1990, p. 3). In this school of thought, the construction of a reality is *created* through a process of representation, and consequently signification (Hall 1997, pp. 1-2) – as opposed to merely *depicted*. Drawing upon other scholars, Sarup states, "Baudrillard claims that in the contemporary world, the boundary between representation and reality implodes" (Sarup 1996, p. 111). This claim raises the question of the effects of this implosion of reality on identity. How can we create a 'self' within this new social order which is lacking in a grounded reality?

This article aims to chronologically follow the trajectory of Cronulla Beach as a site for modernist and postmodernist thinking as a progression from tradition. By examining the site through a historical lens, changes in attitudes and behaviours can best be determined in the creation of individual and community identity and cultural citizenship. Notoriously ambiguous to define, the concept of culture – sociologically speaking – encapsulates the beliefs, behaviours and objects characteristic to the members of a particular society (Tylor 1881):

> It is through culture, that people and groups define themselves and create
> institutions, customs and norms. Culture creates a reaction...of human
> activity [and] is a product...of human habits (Tylor 1881).

Within this article, there is an emphasis on the importance of meaning and processes that are associated with culture – "the production and exchange of meanings" (Hall 1997). The context of Cronulla Beach holds within its waves the quintessential Australian beach culture and is a site where meanings of citizenship have been created and are ingrained within its very sands – however, it is a social culture that has not been exempt from change and transformation. Rather, it epitomises societal evolution characteristic of tradition, modernity and postmodernism.

*cro·nul·la noun /ˈcru.Nul.La /*
*1. Deriving from the Aboriginal word 'Kurrunulla' meaning Land of the Pink Shells*
*2. Part of the Southern Coastline on the Eastern border of Australia in the state of New South Wales, city of Sydney*

The name of this beautiful stretch of landscape is sourced from the Aboriginal dialect, providing an immediate connection to the indigenous heritage of this site. The naming of this

beach in lieu with traditional customary practices creates a contrasting dichotomy to the modernist establishment of colonial capitalism which occurred in the 18th Century. Expansionist thinking, an aspect of modernity (Morley 1996), espoused the spread of Western imperialism which saw this stretch of the Southern coastline mapped by Matthew Flinders and George Bass in 1796 and subsequently, was a point of landing for Thomas Cook in 1788 (About NSW 2012). The European settlement of Australia encompassed a variety of motives ranging from "wealth, pride in imperial glory, escape from poverty" (Gillen & Ghosh 2007, p. 19). The residential development of 'holiday homes' that were established at this site (About NSW 2012) are a testament to this, as the 19th Century saw Cronulla Beach rise as a popular holiday destination for settlers. A change in the political outlook of Australian society post-World War II shifted the physical landscape of Cronulla Beach dramatically – the construction of "high rise apartment blocks and higher density housing...became increasingly desirable for people looking to set up a home for their families" (About NSW 2012). In this manner, Cronulla Beach symbolises the expansionist logic and belief in progress that is expressive of modernity. Intrinsically tied to this logic is the proliferation of capitalism as a way of life. Marxism claims that "capitalism creates a collectively exploited working class, in a unique position to transform itself and the world...with the aim of improving the future" (Marx, cited in Dunn 2009, p. 1). This belief in an economic break from tradition created a specific set of community citizenship ideals in the area of Cronulla Beach – ideals based on the desired 'Aussie lifestyle'. Moreover, capitalism, ever the entrepreneur and relying on the ability to "create desires and aspirations...cravings that can only be satisfied in the symbolic universe" (Anderson 1990, p. 132) influenced the formation of a particular type of identity and personality associated with the 'Aussie beach life' – primarily Anglo-Saxon citizens and families varying in economic status from aspiring to affluent (About NSW 2012).

*Cronulla: God's Country*

By examining the functioning of historical movements such as imperialism, colonialism and Marxism, it is possible to ascertain and stabilise, to an extent, conceptions of our immediate society or 'lifeworld'. Stanford claims that history is not stagnant; it changes according to context (Stanford 2005) – this idea of representation and interpretation being a key feature within the postmodernist ideology. Promulgated by Gross as the "primary reality of daily existence, including the common fund of knowledge which everyone shares" (Gross 1992, p. 39), the 'lifeworld' concept gives rise to additional postmodernist ways of thinking. The release of the controversial film, *Puberty Blues (1981),* became both an influence on, and reflection of, young Australians in the 1980's through its depictions of teenage sex and drug use, high school experiences and family life. Located and filmed at Cronulla Beach, this film espouses Baudrillard's questioning of the formation of an identity as connected to a place or experience. This notion of a 'performative' or 'constructed' identity is a key concept in postmodernism, opposing modernist principles on the "rational, self-contained subject" (Coleman 2011):

> It is the ability for self-determination, characterised by free decision making, rationality and autonomy that not only defines the humanist subject in general, but also produces individual identity. (Anderson 2008, p. 4)

Rejecting the idea of an autonomous self, postmodernism sees "identification as a construction, a process never completed" (Hall 1996, p. 2). Cronulla Beach provided the location for a transition from modernity to postmodernity through the medium of film as

citizens of the Cronulla community began to unknowingly imbue themselves with the idea of relativity. This film's influence, not exclusive to the younger generation, saw a need to reaffirm belonging and to create – or recreate for older generations – an identity that both mirrored and rejected what was portrayed in the film. Ideas on feminism and multiculturalism which emerged as a consequence of the film's influence saw Cronulla Beach serve as a backdrop for societal evolution and transformation up to the 21st Century as identity and community formation altered to suit changing contexts.

*"It was going to be a hot summer that year.*

*You could see the ripples of heat move above the ground.*

*Walking across the sand,*

*the soles of your feet burned"*

4th December 2005. On a sunny Sunday morning, at the beginning of the Sydney summer season, two volunteer lifesavers were bashed on Cronulla Beach following an altercation with citizens of Lebanese background. Gaining immediate media attention, the incident was branded as a 'racial conflict' and was surrounded by condemnation as an "attack of an 'Aussie icon' (AHRC 2005). The subsequent week saw a series of mobile phone text messages calling all "Aussies" to gather at Cronulla Beach to move against the attack on the "Australian way of life" made by "wogs and lebs".

11th December 2005. Over 5 000 Australians, primarily of Anglo-Australian background gathered at Cronulla Beach to protest against people of Lebanese and Arabic descent, accusing them of harassing locals, sexually intimidating women at the beach and engaging in anti-social behavior (AHRC 2005). The aim was to "reclaim their beach". Protest turned into alcohol-fuelled violence as people of 'ethnic origin' were brutally attacked. Fuelled by anger, reprisal and revenge ensued from young men within the Muslim community. The violence and hatred emanating from this one site spread through the country as riots across Australia followed between the two groups.

*Connected by the Georges River,*

*It is a common joke in the area*

*That to get across the River from the western suburbs of*

*Sydney to The Shire,*

*You need a passport.*

In examining the area of Cronulla Beach and its surrounds, what is evident is the investment by community members in 'bonding capital' – "mechanisms that bring the community together" (AHRC 2005). The implementation of bonding capital in this site has resulted in Cronulla becoming a close-knit community – homogeneity in the Anglo-Saxon ethnicity of most members of the community has contributed to the overriding social cohesion of the area. A subsequent result of this cohesion is the reinforcement of existing intimacy and ties between citizens. These investments made parallel Lyotard's summary – "... no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before" (Lyotard 1984, p. 15). The postmodernist belief in identity formed through connections and relationships within the immediate are most clear in the local institutions

constructed at Cronulla Beach. In the present moment, as products of postmodern ways of thinking, we, as individuals and citizens of a society are in a continuous "process of self-creation which involves defining ourselves through similarities and differences" (ibid, p. 3). The political and societal public debates which occurred following the riots between citizens of the Anglo-Australian and Muslim communities reiterate Lyon's thesis that history is a constructed phenomenon, based on individual's interpretation (Lyon 1999). A lack of investment in 'bridging capital' – "mechanisms to bridge a community to other groups outside their own community" (AHRC 2005) – by the inhabitants of Cronulla led to a certain representation of the riots by citizen members, shaping specific racial and violent meanings. These meanings were based on the symbolic value placed upon common identities as opposed to common interests (Baudrillard 1998) by the Cronulla community. By geographically localizing personal values, individuals categorise themselves "within a system of differences and affiliations" (Coleman 2011, p. 7), engaging in a process of identification involving the "binding and marking of symbolic boundaries" (Hall 1996, p. 3).

The long-lasting tension between modernity and postmodernity when the issue of identity and citizenship is raised laps the sands of Cronulla Beach to this day. In the postmodern sense, identity is "the process of becoming rather than being" as "opposed to something that can be possessed, a stable core of the self" (ibid, p. 3-4). As such, identities are "increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed" (ibid, p. 4). However, the resolve of ethnic exclusivity that emerged from Cronulla's bonding mechanism reflects the Enlightenment notion of the 'true self'. Cronulla Beach, with its emphasis on common identities, became a site where this value is re-affirmed – represented through a myriad of practices and attitudes. Herein lies the adverse question; is it the postmodern fragmentation of identity which fuels a need for a universal truth?

It was a long summer that year in Cronulla. The days of the 'fixed self' colliding with shifting identities and meanings as reality became representation and representation, inversely, became reality. In the present moment, Cronulla Beach has transformed into a narrative of Australian nationalism, identity and citizenship.

Modernity and postmodernism have collided in a tsunami wave of reinvention. To look to the future – as uncovering the dynamics of this site is unquestionably incomplete – there lies potential for both positivity and certainty within the community as espoused by the 'Harmony on the Beach' campaign of 2005.

As time moves on, it is possible that modernism will reassess itself, looking into its ocean-blue eyes and critically examine its meta-narratives and categorized rational issues.

In turn, postmodernism must take a long look at its shaggy, sun-bleached head in the mirror and question its socially constructed realities and the differences it has established itself upon.

*And fervent to re-affirm a sense of authenticity,*

 *Fearing a constructed identity,*

  *Burning to move for and against the representations made about them,*

   *They will both, go for a surf, in the waves of Cronulla Beach.*

**Notes on Contributor**

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