

2006 Issue No. 13 — Making Badlands

“I wish I was anywhere but here”: “Structure of address” in the badlands

By Constance Ellwood

Why does some country get called bad? Partly it is because the law needs the outlaw for reassuring citizens that the unruly and the unknown can be named and contained even if they cannot be annihilated. Their function is to acknowledge but also to deny insufficiencies that are part of everyday social and psychic reality (Gibson 179).

This paper began its gestation process after the riots which took place over a period of four nights in early March 2005 in the suburb of Macquarie Fields in the western suburbs of Sydney, NSW, Australia. The riots were sparked after a high-speed police car chase in which two young men in their late teens were killed. Anger of local residents erupted in response to the deaths of the young men and was targeted at local police. This anger took the form of street riots which continued for several days. The driver of the car in which the two young men were killed, who had fled the scene, was taken into custody a week after the riots. In the ensuing days, NSW police arrested 59 people and laid 186 charges for a variety of offences including assaulting police, malicious damage, malicious wounding, possession of an offensive weapon, possession of illegal drugs, and rioting (NSW Police).

Responses in the print media to the Macquarie Fields riots by the government and police, and reinforced by talkback radio commentary, involved a hardline condemnation of the rioters, and, by association, of their families. There was also a call by an Opposition member of the State Government to increase the powers of the police who were seen to have been insufficiently tough. [1] In these responses, the suburb of Macquarie Fields, on the outskirts of the sprawling mass which is Sydney, could be read as a threshold space which, in a symbolic way, marks “not only the boundaries of a society but its values and beliefs as well” (Hetherington 49). The comments by government and police spokespeople which dominated the print media positioned the rioters as criminals acting wilfully against civil society. And the suburb, in a metonymic extension, came to carry, but not for the first time, the marker of this antagonistic choice for criminality and the antisocial. As with other discussions which critique the role of the media in law-and-order debates (see, for example, Goodall), we see here a situation in which the media constructs identity according to familiar discourses, and how representations of the rioters pre-empted responses and concealed realities.

The paper discusses some conditions of this event and the responses which it provoked. While acknowledging that there is an always fragile balance between the possibly good intentions of social policy and its sometimes paradoxical consequences, the paper seeks to show some ways in which the production of space and identity in this site have been obscured in social relations of power. It attempts to delineate some of the social and economic conditions for the riots, in the light of the government’s vigorous denial, at least initially, of the impact of any such conditions. It then seeks to develop an argument in which the riots can be seen as a “structure of address” (Butler), as a form of speech, arising out of and expressing these conditions.

In *Precarious Life*, Butler refers to “the vocalization of agony that is not yet language or no longer language” as the cause of our awakening to the precariousness of the Other’s life (39). In this text, she is referring to the Othering experienced in contemporary political contexts, above all through U.S. military power, by the political prisoners of places like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay. While not wishing to engage in comparisons of suffering, I aim to demonstrate in this paper that a related Othering and dehumanisation is carried out on the Macquarie Fields rioters in the responses to them as criminals. I ask what it would mean to hear their Molotov cocktails as “non-languaged vocalisations of agony”. Given ongoing calls for change arising from reports on both public housing and youth needs (Spiller Gibbins Swan Pty Ltd; Pain) and the continuing failures of governments to participate in effective community consultation in relation to these calls, the riots can be seen as an expression of an anguish, an anguish which has been ignored. In the light of this failure, by governments, to understand this expression and respond appropriately, the paper situates itself within a more general call for an ethics of listening (Corradi Fiumara). As part of this call, the paper draws on the voices of the residents and the youths themselves.

Some conditions of possibility for the riots

The riots took place in Glenquarie Estate, a public housing estate established in the early 1970s within the Macquarie Fields suburb. It is possible to suggest contradictory reasons for the establishment of public housing in such a location. Its distance from the city, and the lack of facilities in the area, encourage the perception of the area as a dumping ground for “the unruly and the unknown [who] can be named and contained even if they cannot be annihilated” (Gibson 179). Indeed, according to recent research, the Estate today contains “a large number of socio-economically disadvantaged individuals and families, many already experiencing acute social and mental health problems before they are housed on the estate, many long-term unemployed and unemployable, all housed together at a site which is geographically isolated and increasingly losing services, and with them, job opportunities” (Lee 39). In the most recent census, unemployment figures for the broader area were more than twice the Australian average, at 11.3%, while average weekly family income was only two thirds of the average for greater Sydney (Australian Bureau of Statistics). In a study by the University of Western Sydney, the unemployment rate amongst youth aged between 15 and 19 years in the larger local government area (Macarthur) averaged between 15% and 17% in the 1999 to 2000 period (Centre for Regional Research and Innovation).

At the time of the riots, the argument that social and economic conditions on the Estate had an impact on residents and may be a contributing factor to the riots was put forward by academics and others. However, this argument was not countenanced by the government. The then Premier of NSW, Bob Carr, was unequivocal, stating that “There are no excuses for this behaviour” (cited in Jopson, Davies and Norrie). Rather than acknowledge the correlation between entrenched social disadvantage and public housing estates (Spiller Gibbins Swan Pty Ltd), the Premier refused the notion of social disadvantage, reiterating: “I am not going to have it said that this behaviour is caused by social disadvantage. A lot of people grew up in circumstances of social disadvantage and they did not go out and attack the police with bricks and light fires in the streets” (Jopson, Davies and Norrie). This view was supported by the Commissioner of Police, Commissioner Moroney. Citing his own life experiences of growing up on a public housing estate, he claimed “It’s about personal choices. It’s about life choices. If you can live on a housing commission estate and aspire to be the Prime Minister of Australia, that’s a life choice” (cited in Porter and Stapleton). Both the Premier and the Commissioner saw the riots in terms of an implicit agency held by the rioters to choose their way of life, as a choice between a rational and reasonable participation in civil society or an unreasonable choice for criminality. Another contributor to the discussion, an ex-detective speaking in an opinion editorial, also supported the idea of *choice, not circumstance* (Priest), a point to which I return below. The position taken by the Premier and others was strongly represented in the media in the days immediately following the riots while the notion of social disadvantage was relatively muted, allowing a dominant view to circulate in the public imaginary of the police as having been mistreated and of the rioters as trash

deserving of water cannons and rubber bullets, as a resident of another Western Sydney suburb told me.

Life on the Estate

The concentration of social disadvantage and associated poverty in the Glenquarie Estate has been seen, by those on the estate, as an error of judgment, as having created a ghetto of disadvantaged and marginalised citizens. As a local community centre coordinator commented, "everyone has admitted that the estate was one of the worst blunders of the last century ... they have created terrible social problems" (cited in Jopson, Davies and Norrie). In the views of one resident, the problems of the area derive in part from the lack of support given to single-parent families who make up a high percentage of those on the Estate. "Single parents suffer dreadfully and some give the area a bad reputation which needs to be organised against. A lot of very young single mothers are given a Housing Commission house and left to get on with it. They are trying to organise a budget and are yet young enough to want to get out and enjoy life and forget the rent. That's why they need some attention" (Lockett 59). This resident saw a link between an overrepresentation in the population of single mothers, and increased levels of juvenile vandalism, commenting "I think this was possibly due to the fact that there didn't seem to be many men about. When an area has an even social mix there is usually harmony. One counterbalances the other" (Lockett 58). This resident's view reflects more recent housing policy which seeks to provide for a mix of income levels in new developments (Toon and Falk).

Another aspect for residents of the area is its social and physical isolation (Lee). The area is relatively poorly serviced by public transport, and facilities are noticeably limited when compared with the not-so-distant yet difficult-to-access possibilities of the inner city. Ongoing problems with public transport and isolation are mentioned in an oral history of the area which covers a period of almost 100 years (Lockett). Residents commented on the distance from parts of the Estate to the railway line, the necessity of having a car and the relocation of basic facilities such as shopping and banking out of the area. One resident cited the five-hours needed to go, on public transport, to buy the Halal meat required by her Muslim family (Lockett). [2] From the point of view of young people especially, facilities are inadequate and have been so since the early days of the Estate. An early report carried out by the National Youth Council of Australia in 1974, for example, which asked local young people their opinion of the area, reported that "60% complained about the general social environment, i.e. lack of facilities for entertainment in the area - no halls for dances etc. 29% complained about the general physical environment, especially mentioning the isolation" (National Youth Council of Australia 11). A concern over inadequate public transport services and the need to travel outside of the area to find work was also an aspect of a 2001 report (Centre for Regional Research and Innovation).

In this early part of the 21st century with its high unemployment rates and uncertainties, this geographic isolation manifests in a sense of social isolation and hopelessness, also experienced by earlier generations who have been subjected to this same isolation. The parallels, in the exchange below, between the adults' beliefs and those of the young man demonstrate these intergenerational cycles of beliefs about life and future prospects (McDowell); both the 16-year-old boy and the adults concur about the hopelessness of the boy's situation.

Female: My boy's home now, I left him in bed, he hasn't been up, there's just nothing to do. I'm not getting up, that's his attitude.

Researcher: How old is he?

Female: 16...[..]

Male: There's no escape at all, not at all for them. (cited in Lee 40)

The social malaise which manifests in young people's apathy and sense of hopelessness about their prospects was strongly expressed by one resident in an interview at the time of the riots: "Life here is putrid. What's here for them? Nothing" (Jopson, Davies and Norrie).

Comments by the young people also published at the time of the riots demonstrate clearly this sense that they feel there is nothing for them to do in the area. Importantly, in terms of causes of the riots, their comments also demonstrate the links between “hanging around” in streets and shopping malls and an increased surveillance of their activities by police, which is associated with a growing criminalisation of hanging around (Pain 154). The resultant high level of antagonism between the young people and police is also clear: “We got nothing to do here. So the cops harass us, they pull up at four o’clock in the morning and play the song Bad Boys really loud and put their sirens on. We want revenge” (15-year-old male quoted in Jopson, Davies and Norrie); “What’s there to do here, man. Whatever you do the cops come after you. You walk down the street, you get harassed by the coppers” (19-year-old male quoted in Totaro and Connolly); “For the past 12 years the cops have been coming here throwing blokes into the back of paddy wagons and taking them on joyrides where they beat the shit out of them. It’s no wonder everyone who lives around here hates the f---ing cops” (Statement by a youth cited by Haines). The statement, “I wish I was anywhere but here”, was cited as being the text of a T-shirt worn by a member of the group known as the Kelly Gang, one of whom was the driver of the car which crashed. Debbie Kelly, the mother of three members of the Gang, stated “The boys just need someone to trust them, someone who doesn’t call them scum. The police treat them like dirt” (quoted in McDonald, Stapleton and Gosch).

Indeed, this complaint, that there is nothing to do and nowhere to go, is a common response from young people when challenged over their behaviour (Pain). But the criminalisation of “hanging around” is a heavy-handed response symptomatic of a failure by authorities to acknowledge that there is a clash between young people’s needs to develop and perform their identities and the fact that public spaces are most often adult spaces. The street, specifically, is one arena in which masculine performance is constructed, and car racing in suburban streets provides a practice and a site for “issuing rhetorical challenges to the law” (McDowell 62). A heavy-handed response to “hanging around” contributes to the deep mistrust of police and the institutional victimisation experienced by many young people (Pain).

A spiralling cycle of behaviours can be seen at work here in which boredom provokes behaviours which are viewed negatively by police, and are often subject to criminalisation. Responses by police are viewed as provocation by the young people who then enact further “bad” behaviour prompting further retaliation by police.

Compounding this sense of surveillance experienced by young people, is a similar sense in the community at large of being under surveillance. At the time of building, the Glenquarie housing project was regarded as innovative due to implementation of Radburn principles of housing layout, in which dwellings have pedestrian access, leading to schools and shops on one side, and roads and vehicle access on the other. The Radburn approach was initially seen as “a way of humanising” public housing estates (Toon and Falk 144). However, the layout was experienced by some residents as compromising of their privacy and of their conception of a respectable family life. The fact that the front door was the backdoor, and the backdoor was the front door meant that visitors could arrive and leave at any point. “People were always coming into the back door because the road was there. I didn’t like it much when the kids were small. You always had washing in the laundry and that was the main entrance to your home....The street was your backyard” (Luckett 67). Because of this lack of differentiation, there was effectively no private area to the houses. The Radburn layout can be seen to work in a way similar to the panopticon discussed by Foucault in that family life was constantly on display and families were effectively subjected to a kind of “axial visibility” (Foucault 200). Another resident commented that the houses “weren’t designed for privacy” (Luckett 79). This sense of undergoing surveillance was aggravated by the fact that “everybody could see in because the fence palings were spaced out. Everybody knew your business and though I was a private sort of person I had to adapt because we had no choice” (Luckett 79).

In the 1990s, a change of policy led to a de-Radburnisation move in which the process of

renovating houses to relocate front and back doors of dwellings was begun. A dual justification is evident for this process. On the one hand, the Radburn layout was attributed (Spiller Gibbins Swan Pty Ltd 26), albeit without hard evidence, with being one of the causes of the Estate's social problems. At the same time, new housing policy which favoured a mix of public housing rental and private ownership required the sale to private owners of some housing stock. For this to occur, increased saleability was important. However, housing lots in a Radburn layout, which require public maintenance of public spaces, are less saleable than more conventional lots (Toon and Falk). In both cases, political and economic imperatives are strongly evident, while the life world experiences of residents are occluded from consideration.

Contrasting dominant media representations of the rioters and police

In the light of these conditions, I now turn to consider the way the rioters were represented in two major Sydney newspapers, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian*, at the time of the riots. I focus on statements, referred to earlier, by the Premier and the Commissioner of Police, and on their association of the rioters with criminality and with "choosing" to enact this criminality. This representation of the rioters could also be found in an opinion piece written by a former detective. In this piece, the rioters were positioned as active, in a binary opposition with the police who were aligned with a kind of passivity. Thus, while the rioters were addressed as criminals, as "rock throwing hoodlums", "disaffected local youths", "urban hoodlums", who had carried out "wanton behaviour" (Priest), the police were described as the passive victims, the "stationary targets" (Op cit), of unprovoked violence. In these representations, the young rioters are aligned with activity and choice; as having wilfully chosen to take up these antagonistic positions in which they actively create trouble. The police on the other hand are positioned as without choice; the passivity of their *stationary target* position implies a kind of abnegation of choice which by implication is imposed from above. Described as "unable or unwilling to quell the disturbance" (Priest), they have apparently not been given the powers to act more forcefully by their superiors. As I have attempted to argue, the positioning of the young rioters as having choice is belied by the conditions of their existence and the fact that these cycles of poverty and crime are intergenerational.

In this positioning, the binarisation *active criminal* versus *passive target/victim* becomes fixed. The possibility that the rioters themselves may also be victims, while the police may also be criminals becomes impossible to consider. In fact, a number of statements were made which implicated the police in the death of the two boys – it was implied that the car chase was an unnecessary and malign attempt to kill the boys and there were also some questions around the actual circumstances of the accident and the police involvement in it – but also, as we saw above, the police, over a period of time, have continually harassed the youth of the area. A reverse alignment, with the possibility of police as criminal and youth as victims cannot be taken seriously if the overriding representation of the youth is that of *criminal and hoodlum*, while that of police is *stationary target*.

A second effect of the binary is that no complexity is allowed into the picture. The Premier's comment that there is only one source to blame is patently simplistic. His statement, "There is one blame here and that is the people who went out and threw bricks and caused riots. There is only one thing to say to them: the police will get them, because they are engaged in illegal behaviour" (Jopson, Davies and Norrie), is unable to accommodate the complexity of human life and human behaviour. The idea that the youth may be both carrying out criminal acts – and throwing a Molotov cocktail can undeniably be seen in this way – while also expressing their very real frustrations at not only harassment by police, but also the frustrations of being victim to particular social and economic conditions with limited outcomes for employment and quality of life, cannot be countenanced within such a framing of the problem.

A week after the riots, the Premier did acknowledge what he called the "so-called disadvantage of Macquarie Fields" but he claimed to have chosen not to talk about this "in the middle of a law

enforcement challenge” because it would have sent “a confusing message to police, a message of weakness to the wrongdoers, and it would have undercut decent, battling families in the area” (quoted in Davies). The binary is still evident here with the “wrongdoers” placed in opposition to “decent, battling families” and the confused police caught somewhere in the middle.

Importantly, the binary which operates here positions the rioters as invalid speakers. In aligning them unequivocally with the criminal and the bad, this binary thinking precluded the possibility of listening to the content of the rioters’ statements as an attempt to communicate something; it precluded the possibility of considering the communicative intent of their actions and comments. Being positioned as criminals, wrongdoers and hoodlums ensures the rioters are not given the right to address the government and be heard.

Structure of address

In opposition to a positioning of the rioters as criminals, I want to suggest that it is possible to recognise that underlying the riots is an address on the part of the rioters, in terms of the social and economic conditions of their lives and their lack of hope for their futures. I draw here on Butler’s notion of “structure of address” and her suggestion that the terms of this structure of address must be met for the functioning of moral authority. I argue that the responses to the Macquarie Fields riots demonstrate clearly that the terms of a basic structure of address have not been met.

Structure of address refers not merely to a top-down address or to statements by one in a more powerful position to one in a less powerful position, but to a complex process of identities and ethics. At the simplest level the term refers to the idea that when we speak, we address others and expect that we will be listened to and understood. However, in this case, there is a unidirectional hegemony in which, as I will show, the government and police assume only the right to be listened to, but not the responsibility to listen to others. When the Premier states that there is “only one blame here” and this is “illegal behaviour”, the pleas of the rioters are effectively erased, and are made invalid.

The actual statements by the rioters are thus not taken as “an address” because of the prior effacement of them as valid speakers. In other words, what they have said or may say is not seen as a valid contribution to the discussion. While the government and police can be readily accepted as speakers with the right to be heard – they even have “spokespeople” to do that job – the rioters are not given the right to “take the floor” and be listened to. In the description and labelling of the rioters by the government and the police, their actions are condemned absolutely. The rioters’ own descriptions of police, their complaints about being harassed, and the violence which erupts out of the complex interplay between this harassment and the socioeconomic conditions of their existence, although expressed and even sometimes printed in the media, are not heard by the government. In this sense the structure of address which the rioters direct at the government fails; it falls on deaf ears.

At a more complex level, there is a moral imperative implicit in the notion of *structure of address*. It recognises that any address brings with it particular understandings of those to whom it is addressed. We speak, in other words, in ways which presume certain identities of our listeners. Thus, our identities are made, and we come into being, at the moment we are addressed. This understanding, that we come to exist in the moment of being addressed, refers to and draws on an approach which recognises the constitutive effects of discourse on the identity of the subject. It is this constitutive effect of the terms used to describe the police and the rioters which has been discussed above. In naming the rioters unequivocally as criminals, the address fixes and “contains” (Gibson) the identities of the players and precludes not only further apposite discussion but also apposite solutions. And, as Butler shows, “something about our existence proves precarious when [...] address fails” (130).

Conclusion

The Othering and dehumanisation which is carried out on the Macquarie Fields rioters provides governments with a way of denying “the insufficiencies that are part of everyday social and psychic reality” (Gibson 179). To acknowledge the insufficiencies of public housing policy and the needs of young people, and to hear their “bricks and fires in the street” as non-languaged vocalisations of agony, would require a different response, one that did not unequivocally position the rioters as criminals.

The events assist us to consider what it means to acknowledge the humanity of those who, in the first instance, do not appear to conform to notions of “civilized behaviour”. While it may be true to say that if you treat people like criminals they will act like them, and that the portrayal of the rioters as criminal is therefore a socially unskilful way of dealing with the riots, we have to go beyond such an analysis. It is also no longer enough to criticise socially unskilful planning decisions which contribute to the social conditions of satellite suburbs like Macquarie Fields and thus, ultimately, to the riots. Rather, it is time to consider the ethics of the situation, to question structures of address, and, in doing so, find other roles in which to act.

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Endnotes

[1] Three levels of government in Australia are the federal, state and local. State governments are responsible for law and order.

[2] The ethnic demographics of the suburb in the 2002 census showed that about two-thirds to three-quarters of the population identified as being of English-speaking background or descent. The remaining third represented some 25 countries (Australian Bureau of Statistics).

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I would like to thank Dr Murray Lee for his support with this paper, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

