Cultural reductionism and the media: polarising discourses around schools, violence and masculinity in an age of terror

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This paper provides a media analysis of three interrelated sets of newspaper articles dealing with youth, schooling and violence. Understanding the media as a dominant and powerful cultural text that creates the realities it describes, the paper takes a critical view of the ‘standpoint’ of recent media representations of the Cronulla (Sydney, Australia) riots, gang violence in schools, and issues of education amid broader concerns with security in an ‘age of terror’. The paper draws attention to the polarising media discourses that demonise young Muslim men as the ‘other’—violent and dangerous—and advocate for ‘ethnic’ integration of this ‘other’ over ‘progressive education’ or ‘multiculturalism’. Such reductionist sociology is presented as highly problematic in its homogenising and inferiorising of minority cultures and in its silencing of particular issues imperative in understanding and addressing contemporary expressions of violence. The paper calls for a more nuanced interpretation of issues of culture and violence that, in particular, acknowledges how masculinity politics are implicated in current manifestations of violence.

Introduction

Schooling and violence have had a close association in educational literature, both academic and popular. Schools are sometimes regarded as institutions that do violence, actual and symbolic, to the students (Ayers et al., 2001; Harber, 2004) and sometimes teachers in them. Sometimes they are perceived as sites where violent masculinities are normalised (Mills, 2001; Leach, 2003), although, violence is clearly not solely perpetrated by boys (Lloyd, 2005; Bhana, 2008). Sometimes schools, in particular government-run schools, are constructed as places where violence amongst students is rife (Michie, 2001), and where teachers feel threatened. In the USA,
concerns about violence are often raised in relation to school shootings (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). In more recent times schools have been constructed as places that can foster terrorism. This paper explores issues related to schools and violence as they are played out in the print media with a particular focus on how current concerns with ‘terror’ and ‘security’ are shaping media reports.

The media and education have a complex relationship (see for instance Dennis & LaMay, 1993; Thomson, 2004). There is no doubt that the media have an impact upon shaping national constructions of schools, teachers and the various activities associated within them (Snyder, 2008). Unfortunately, positive news stories are not particularly attractive to mass media outlets (McGill, 1993), unless shaped within a hero narrative (see for example, Blackmore & Thomson, 2004). Within much of the media treatment of education there is a deriding of ‘educational experts’ (Kincheloe, 2004) and an appeal to a common sense grounded in traditional values. There is still a dominant theme with the media which suggests that schools have changed for the worse and that concerns with social justice and the like have intruded upon the ‘real business’ of schooling (Snyder, 2008). The ‘politics of knowledge’ around what is occurring, what is being taught in schools and what students are like today, especially in western nations’ poorest schools and locations, is one that is being shaped by various media outlets. Many people, unless they are responsible for the care of school children, receive very little direct information about schools, and those with children only know about individual schools, apart from what they learn through the media. How the media report educational matters is thus of great significance in public understandings of education.

Issues related to schools and violence are often a media staple, alongside stories of youth out of control (see for example, Thompson & Stolz, 2008). Such stories have been critiqued in the past for their sensationalist constructions of ‘youth today’ (Welch et al., 2002), their implicit, and sometimes not so implicit, racism (Giroux, 1998) and their silence around issues of gender (Mills, 2001). However, whilst there are remnants of the older discourses in current stories, recent newspaper reports on youth, schooling and violence have taken a different turn in the post September 11/July 7 era. In engaging with this turn, we provide a media analysis of three inter-related sets of newspaper articles dealing with youth, schooling and violence. The first set deals with issues arising from what was described as a ‘race riot’ that took place in the Sydney suburb of Cronulla. The second set relates to ‘gang violence’ in schools. The third set relates to the relationship between schools and terrorism, particularly Islamic terrorism. In each of these sets of articles there are common themes. These relate to an ‘othering’ of non-white—and particularly Lebanese Muslim—youth, the failure of multiculturalism and progressive education, and a silence about masculinity issues, and all can be read through lenses shaped by discourses of security and the war on terrorism.

The paper examines these themes within an understanding of the media as a dominant and powerful cultural text that creates the realities it ‘describes’ (see for example, Poynting et al., 2001; Threadgold, 2006). These realities, we argue, are highly problematic in their polarising discourses that distort, conflate and re-signify
assumptions about religion, ethnicity and culture in ways that demonise young Muslim men as the ‘other’—violent and dangerous—and advocate for ‘ethnic’ integration of this ‘other’ over progressive education or ‘multiculturalism’. We contend that such representations in the media (as well as more broadly, in other sociopolitical domains) are deployed within a ‘reductionist sociology of culture’ that reifies culture as the property of an ethnic group or race; as a distinctive and bounded entity; and as internally homogeneous (Turner, 1993). Such reductionism, as is well established (see Benhabib, 2002, pp. 4–5), has ‘grave normative political consequences for how we think injustices among groups should be redressed and how we think human diversity and pluralism should be furthered’.

Our analytical lens draws on Benhabib’s work (2002, p. ix) in understanding cultures as ‘complex human practices of signification and representation, or organisation and attribution which are internally riven by conflicting narratives … and formed through complex dialogues with other cultures’. In our examination of media representations of violence, gangs and schooling, we seek to critically interrogate the ‘standpoint’ of such representations in terms of how the culture of the ‘observed’ is imposed, unified and cohered. These lenses bring to light important silences around, for example, Anglo violence towards Muslims; and the masculinity politics of gang violence. We contend that such interrogations remain central within a broader sociopolitical context that tends to respond to, and make sense of, increasing diversity, complexity and social disharmony through a premature normativism—an all-too-quick reification of given group identities—that fails to examine critically the meaning of cultural identity (Benhabib, 2002). Such interrogations are imperative given the broader shifts in political imagery that have propelled cultural identity issues to the forefront of political discourse (Benhabib, 2002, see also Fraser, 1997) and illuminated, for example, the tensions between the discourses of multicultural tolerance or inclusiveness and the social justice claims of oppressed groups (see Okin, 1999). Conditions wherein ‘the most salient social movements … are cultural defined “groups” … who are struggling to defend their “identities”, end “cultural domination” and win “recognition”’ demand a critical view of the dominant and powerful cultural texts (i.e., the media) that distort and re-signify the ‘realities’ of minority groups (Fraser, 1997, p. 2).

Cronulla

The Cronulla riots in Australia received major media attention. Whilst Australia was not new to ‘ethnic’ tensions (Collins et al., 2000), the scale of this violence, that new technologies were involved in its organisation and planning and that it was perceived as a clash between white society and Lebanese Muslims made it very newsworthy, spawning numerous political analyses of the causes and effects. Typically such reports drew on blame discourses towards Lebanese Muslim youth ‘culture’ or ‘ethnicity’. For example, Keith Windschuttle (2005), a conservative Australian historian, writing about the Cronulla riots in The Australian (‘It’s not a race war, it’s a clash of cultures’), argued that the riots were not a product of race, but of culture, and he
clearly attributed blame for long-standing tensions between Lebanese-Australians and Anglo-Australians to Australia’s multicultural policies. He claimed, for instance, that ‘The tensions that exploded this week were defined into existence by multiculturalist policies and ideas’. He argued that prior to the advent of multiculturalism in 1975, people from Lebanese backgrounds in Australia were not defined by their ethnicities, and were assimilated into the Australian community: ‘They prospered here, married into the local community and, within two generations, became indistinguishable from the Australian mainstream’. Attributing blame for the riots to Lebanese ‘ethnicity’, Windschuttle links the events associated with the Cronulla riots to violence in schools:

The Lebanese assaults on the Cronulla lifesavers that led to this week’s mass retaliation were nothing new.

This behaviour has been with us more than a decade. When the former principal of Punchbowl Boys High, a school dominated by Lebanese Muslim youth, suffered a breakdown and sued the NSW government, he gave an insight into the local culture.

Between 1995–1999, students armed with knives threatened classmates, teachers were assaulted and gangs invaded classrooms. On one occasion, the principal had a gun held to his head by a Lebanese gang member who threatened to shoot him. One of his students was convicted of murdering a Korean schoolboy and three other students were jailed for their roles in some of Sydney’s most notorious gang rapes. (Windschuttle, 2005)

Paul Kelly (2005), also writing in the *Australian*, suggests that the Cronulla riots present a new challenge to multiculturalism. He states:

This arises from multiple factors, global yet local. They include the suspicion engendered by Islamist terrorism, the tribal mentality and violent behaviour of Lebanese gangs in Sydney, the crisis of family authority within sections of the Middle East community, the social and education problems facing boys, a sentiment of white racism and the failure at a political, community and police level to address these social issues years earlier. (Kelly, 2005 p. 12)

He also suggests that the Cronulla riots represent a new antagonism towards multiculturalism in Australia.

This tribal violence is a new feature of multicultural Australia. It is not driven by poverty or bad economic times. Its exponents are not Hansonites, the over-55-year-old males, largely unemployed or affected by structural change in regional Australia. This is a different cultural and social phenomenon based around young people and the failure of ethnic integration in Sydney’s south. (Kelly, 2005, p. 12)

For many of the demonstrators this was a battle to reclaim Australia from new immigrants, and in particular, from those of Lebanese backgrounds. Placards and banners with slogans such as ‘We grew here, you flew here’ were prominently displayed, T-shirts were worn displaying comments such as ‘Ethnic cleansing unit’, and the Australian flag was in widespread evidence. In response to the latter, the organisers of the 2006 Big Day Out musical festival, held a month or so after the riots and which covered the Australia Day weekend, proposed banning the display of the Australian flag from the event in an attempt to minimise nationalist violence against minority groups.
This attracted significant critique from a variety of sources, including the then Prime Minister John Howard. An editorial in the *Herald Sun* reflecting on the importance of the flag and Australia Day (‘Let’s fly the flag’) (*Herald Sun* Editorial, 2007, p. 18), stated in relation to the Big Day Out in 2005 that: ‘The organisers’ ill-considered move was another blow to the credibility of multiculturalism. This buzz word was not supposed to be about hiding the nation’s flag for fear of it upsetting ethnic extremists.’ Ironically, it was the use by the Cronulla rioters of the Australian flag as a symbol of white racism and a rallying cry for those intent on committing violence against people of ‘Middle Eastern appearance’ that promoted the organisers not to support the display of the flag at the event, not that it would upset ‘ethnic extremists’.

**Gangs**

Gang violence associated with schools is a media staple (Cornford, 2002; AAP, 2008; Woolcock, 2008). For instance, an Australian news wire service detailed the various violent attacks that had occurred at a school in Canberra, the nation’s capital, over a short space of time. In amongst a long list of specific violent incidents, it also stated that: ‘There have also been reports of young men circling the school in cars threatening the students with baseball bats and teachers being forced to lock the school gates to protect students’. Often underpinning such reports is that governments and/or educational authorities have not taken the issue seriously. For instance, a *Sydney Morning Herald* article stated that: ‘A year after it was warned about gang warfare among ethnic youths, the NSW Government will “tackle allegations” of high school violence in Sydney’s south-west’ (Cornford, 2002).

A recent attack at Merrylands High School was widely reported in Australia. Underpinning much of this reporting was an association between this event and US gang violence. For instance, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that: ‘Glorification of American gang violence may be behind a horrific schoolyard attack involving five boys as young as 14 armed with machetes and baseball bats’ (Barrett, 2008). Underpinning many of these stories is an implicit assumption that such American gangs, which these young people are supposedly modelling themselves on, are non-white, and usually Afro-American. Paul Sheehan (2008) writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* was far less circumspect about race in his depiction of the events at Merrylands High. He stated for instance: ‘last Monday a group of violent racists acted out their YouTube fantasies and stormed into Merrylands High School at 8.50am.’ Throughout the article, he made significant mileage out of their race, suggesting that public officials had failed to acknowledge the ethnic or racial background of these young offenders. For instance, he stated that:

A week after this rampage, any member of the public interested in this crime could have deduced the alleged perpetrators were Tongan morons. Or perhaps morons who are, regrettably, Australian citizens but portray themselves as ‘nigga gangstas’.

Sheehan then goes on to suggest that Tongans are, much like other groups often associated in Australia with violence, the racists in the community:
Just as Goulbourn jail, home to the most violent offenders, is dominated by Aborigines, Pacific Islanders and Lebanese Muslims, so is racial hate-mongering in our society disproportionately represented by these same groups, even as the ideologically tainted human rights industry obsesses about white racism.

Whilst the article was purportedly about the events at Merrylands High School, he uses this as an opportunity to attack young men of Lebanese background. Homogenising non-white culture along deficit lines and in opposition to white culture, he does this through linking the violence at Merrylands High School with that at Cronulla, although diminishing the violence perpetrated by young white men as nothing more than a ‘fracas’, whilst suggesting that the ‘ethnic melting pot of western Sydney’ is not working.

Every so often, this simmering melting pot boils over, as it did last Monday. The most notorious example took place on December 12, 2005, when hundreds of violent, racist Lebanese Muslim men, many of whom had been sexually harassing young women at Sydney beaches for years, swept in convoys to the eastern beach suburbs for revenge raids in response to the anti-Lebanese demonstration and fracas at Cronulla the day before. (Sheehan, 2008)

An article in the UK’s Sunday Times is similarly pointed about the failure of multiculturalism and in suggesting that white people can experience racism from minority groups (Rogers, 2008). This article reports on the sentiments expressed by a mother whose son was severely injured after being attacked by a gang of young people at a school. The article states:

The mother of a 15-year-old boy left with brain damage by an Asian gang is blaming multiculturalism for the way ethnic minorities get away with violent bullying in schools. [The mother] whose son Henry nearly died in the attack, believes a ‘culture of timidity’ among teachers is stopping them clamping down on ethnic minority bullies because they fear accusations of racism. She also accuses teachers of failing to recognise that ethnic minorities can exhibit racism against whites.

Poynting et al. (2001) argue that this kind of reporting regularly presents the problem of gang violence as new news. However, they suggest that fear of young gangs is almost ‘timeless’ (see also Collins et al., 2000). Whilst this is clearly the case, it does need to be recognised that the current reporting on gangs is being undertaken in a new global context concerned about security and terror. This is apparent in some of the language within the Sunday Times article where, for instance, one of the 18-year-olds convicted of grievous bodily harm was described as a ‘wannabe militant’ and reported as having a video of the collapse of New York’s Twin Towers as a screensaver on his mobile phone. In a speech in 2006, Tom Calma, the Australian Race Discrimination Commissioner, Responding to Cronulla: Rethinking Multiculturalism, makes this point:

[W]e must recognise that while these types of conflicts have been around for many years—taking the form of surfies against rockers, or surfies against westies etc., there is something new in the nature, intensity and scale of these conflicts as they are manifesting today. That these old fights (one might say primordial fights) between young men around territory and sex, have now taken the form of large scale racial conflict, between Middle Eastern people
and non Middle Eastern people ... It requires that we broaden our investigation over the causes of the Cronulla riots beyond just the local factors. (Calma, 2006, p. 2)

Such a broadening would take into account the overriding concern that many western countries now have in regards to security and terror. It is also a concern that manifests itself in discourses around the purposes of education. Following the Cronulla riots, the then conservative Federal government, under Prime Minister John Howard, instigated a nationalist values education approach that included the mandatory flying of the Australian flag outside all schools that wanted to receive Federal government funding.

Schools, security and terror

Concerns with security and terror through the schooling process have been closely linked to ensuring that the education of students from Muslim backgrounds is controlled in ways that expose them to the views of the dominant culture whilst prevent them from coming into contact with ‘extremist’ viewpoints. There has thus been a scepticism about Islamic schools that are not under the control of the state. This scepticism has been heightened by the fear generated about young Muslim men. Whilst, as indicated earlier, this fear is not new, there is an added dimension to it in the light of security and terror concerns. The association of Islamic schools with terrorism has been particularly evident in the UK, but the media concern with ‘home grown’ terrorism since the July 7 bombings in London has also been evident in Australia.

When a proposed Islamic school in Sydney was denied planning permission in 2008, reports on the events were enveloped by various discourse articulating fears about terrorism—interestingly, from both sides. For instance, the lead in to a story about the local council decision to reject planning permission for the school quotes the President of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils as suggesting that this might play into the hands of extreme Islamic groups (Emerson, 2008). He apparently suggested that it was better for Islamic schools to be, as with the proposed school, overseen by the state government, or, as he is quoted: ‘Muslim children will be given their religious education in backyards and garages by ... teachers whose credentials no one could vet ... You may have some very extreme imams or religious teachers getting through to the children.’ Concerns over the relationship between Islamic schools and terrorism have also been articulated in the UK (ABC Newsonline, 2006). Fears have been raised in the British media that Islamic schools outside the state sector will become breeding grounds for terrorism (The Economist, 2005; Kite, 2005). An article in the Melbourne Age ‘Push for Muslim state schools in the UK’ (Kite, 2005) noted that ‘Up to 150 new Muslim state schools could be created in a move to bring Islamic education of British children under government control after last month’s London bombings’. In constructing a fear around the development of Islamic schools, multiculturalism is again in the firing line. An Economist article begins with the following statement:
Since the London bombings on July 7th, fears have been growing that Britain is not only allowing, but actually facilitating the creation of a radicalised Muslim community in its midst. Politicians, including some Labour ones, have attacked multicultural policies and demanded that Muslims integrate more fully. Among the targets of criticism are Muslim schools. (The Economist, 2005, p. 26)

However, there is little recognition that perhaps as a result of media commentary on Islamic youth, and links between Islam and terrorism, many young Muslim people do not feel safe in mainstream schools. For instance, a report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2004) Isma—Listen: National consultations on eliminating prejudice against Arab and Muslim Australian, gathered evidence which suggests that many parents have turned to Islamic schools fearing for the safety of their children. This evidence includes:

I know of parents sending their kids from my area pulling them out of public schools and sending them a far distance to Islamic schools. Most of the women wear a hijab and they go to pick up their kids from school and remarks have been passed … and the kids have been bullied.

The parents are saying they are moving the kids to Islamic schools not for the better education and that’s the tragedy. The kids have to be moved from one school to an Islamic school which may not be that good a quality. It’s about safety.

There is a security issue—lots of parents don’t feel comfortable exposing their children to the stress of being teased so it’s more likely they’ll go to Islamic schools. A school shouldn’t be like a boxing arena where the kids have to learn to fight back. We need to focus on education without having to justify our religion. (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2004, p. 76)

However, it is not only within Islamic schools that young people are supposedly being exposed to ‘extremist’ ideas. They are perceived to be getting their ideas from a number of other sources, for example Internet chat rooms, and then taking them into schools. The Chief Constable from the West Yorkshire police force, responsible for developing a national approach to addressing issues of Islamic extremism, is reported to have said that his force has identified at least 10 young people, two of whom are 13 years old, who are in danger of being radicalised by extreme Islamic views (Leppard, 2008). This officer, Sir Norman Bettison, is also reported to have said that: ‘It’s the bright kids who are the ones that might be the most vulnerable’. This same fear for young people is again repeated a few days after this report. The same Chief Constable is again quoted. This time, a boy aged 12 is ‘identified as being at severe risk of being lured into violent Islamist extremism’ (The Times, 2008). However, this boy was white—perhaps why he was described as an ‘angelic looking boy’.

This raises another concern found in the media. How is it possible to identify those at school who might be potential terrorists? A report in the Guardian (Laville & Cobain, 2005) headlined ‘From cricket-lover who enjoyed a laugh to terror suspect’ on one of the July 7 bombers, published just under a week after the attack, paints a picture of a very ordinary young man who liked playing football and cricket in the streets. The next day, the Guardian (Cobain, 2005) ran another story on one of the other bombers, headlined ‘The boy who didn’t stand out’. Four days later a BBC
News report on the young men that took part on the attack worked with a similar theme, ‘Suicide bombers’ ordinary lives’.

The politics of fear generated from these stories works with the notion that it is difficult to ‘spot’ a potential young terrorist and perhaps the alarm and confusion generated by these stories indicates the success of media reductionism in its association of terrorism with Islam. The reality that they can be ‘bright’, ‘ordinary’, ‘cricket lovers’, ‘enjoy a laugh’, not ‘stand out’, and even be ‘white’ and ‘angelic looking’ disrupts the normalised media representation of ‘terrorist’. The only marker which may suggest that they represent a threat is that they are ‘Muslim’ but this is not necessarily visually identifiable. This works to generate a fear about all young Muslim men, and encourages a community to be ‘vigilant’—which can often lead to the kind of vigilantism that occurred on the beaches of Cronulla.

Common themes

The ‘reductionist sociology of culture’ deployed in the media constructions presented here is highly problematic in terms of restricting the ways in which we think about human diversity and equity. Referring to Benhabib (2002, p. 68), these constructions can be seen as:

… drawing rigid boundaries around cultural identities; accepting the need to ‘police’ these boundaries to regulate internal membership and ‘authentic’ life-forms; privileging the continuity and preservation of cultures over time as opposed to their reinvention, reappropriation, and even subversion; and legitimising culture-controlling elites through a lack of open confrontation with their cultures’ inegalitarian and exclusionary practices.

Critically interrogating the overwhelmingly Anglo-centric standpoint informing these media representations reveals the polarising discourses that distort, conflate and re-signify assumptions about religion, ethnicity and culture. Such discourses suggest an imposed and unified view of culture that is highly problematic in terms of what is privileged and reinscribed as well as what is ignored or dismissed. Non-white, but particularly Muslim, youth are constructed as ‘folk devils’ (Poynting & Noble, 2004)—their culture homogenised and inferiorised in opposition to Anglo-Australian culture in all three story sets as dangerous, violent, tribal, racist, sexist, religiously extreme, radical and potentially terrorist. Such representations are presented, in this respect, as the property of this minority group (Turner, 1993). Anglo-Australian culture is positioned, on the other hand, as either justifiably retaliating against this ‘other’ or taken-for-granted as normal—the invisible, unmarked term against which ‘other’ ways of being are judged (Weedon, 1999). A critical view of this unmarked term—the ‘cultural controlling elite’—reveals how Anglo-Australian culture is complicit in such violence in, for example, its nationalistic rallying at Cronulla and its instilling of fear in terms of school bullying perpetuated against Muslim children. As Benhabib (2002) argues, cultures are formed through complex dialogues with other cultures. In terms of how such constructions are efforts to contain, police and control, they are particularly problematic in their conflation of ‘culture’ with other identity markers, for example, religion, ethnicity and race to mobilise blame discourses.
towards the non-white Muslim ‘other’. This is especially so given that, as Benhabib (2002) argues, we tend not to share a common understanding of particular group identity practices (either within or without a particular group), whether they be religious, cultural or ‘ethnic’. Moreover, as such practices are dynamic and interpretive social constructs that constantly shift and change across time and space; they are neither clearly delineable nor congruent with population groups (Benhabib, 2002). This is most apparent in the three story sets, for example, in how the media’s reductionist sociology constantly associates Lebanese Muslims with violence and sexism. Certainly, as many Muslim feminists have consistently argued, while violence and sexism may be construed as patriarchal or cultural interpretations of Islam, they have no basis within the Islamic religion (see al-Hibri, 1999; Barazangi, 2004).

A highly troubling way in which these polarising discourses play out in these stories relates to how multiculturalism and assimilation issues are presented. Here multiculturalism is presented in simple opposition to a more favourable integrationist or assimilationist model. Multiculturalism is blamed as producing ethnic divisions and violence, as failing in terms of ‘ethnic integration’, as excusing abhorrent behaviours, and as producing white racism. On the other side of the binary are demands for Muslims to ‘integrate’ or ‘assimilate’ into the ‘Australian mainstream’ (so that they become indistinguishable from this mainstream, as one commentator put it). We acknowledge the highly contentious terrain around notions of ‘multiculturalism’ that provide legitimacy for these blame discourses. Certainly, for example, efforts to preserve the culture of minority groups through a granting of special ‘group rights’ within liberal states have compromised gender equality principles for minority girls and women (see Okin, 1999). Such circumstances have led to a rejection of multicultural policies and practice that presume a particular minority group’s culture is clearly delineable or identifiable and should be preserved regardless of its potential compromising of human dignity and wellbeing (see Okin, 1999; Benhabib, 2002). To these ends, it is clear that we need to ‘re-think multiculturalism’, as Calma (2006) suggests; however, the alternative integrationist/assimilationist framework proposed in the media stories, that privileges white Anglo ‘culture’ and an exclusive nationalism, is highly regressive.

Also highly regressive are the number of very telling silences produced by these polarising discourses. These relate to a failure to address the ways in which particular masculinity politics are fuelling the tensions. Susan Faludi (2007) has provided a compelling account of the ways in which traditional forms of masculinity have been revalorised through the popular media in the USA in response to September 11 terrorist attacks in that country. Similar trends can be noted in Australia in the aftermath of Cronulla where, in many sources, Lebanese men were constructed as the sexual harassers of white women on the beaches, thus enabling the construction of the white nationalist demonstrators as protectors of ‘their’ women (Sheehan, 2008). Interestingly, a number of conservative commentators have linked the wars on Afghanistan, Iraq and on ‘terror’ as wars to protect women from the oppression of Islam (Hymowitz, 2003), and have used the opportunity to attack feminism and feminists ‘at home’. Little has been made of the increased violence and harassment of
Muslim and Arab women by men of Anglo origins which have occurred in the post September 11 era (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2004; Poynting & Noble, 2004).

Whilst men are clearly the focus of concern in much of the reporting on events associated with Cronulla, Merrylands High and terrorism, rarely is the theme of masculinity taken up. An exception to this is Peter West (2005), a well know Australian commentator on boys’ education, who in an on-line opinion piece on the Cronulla riots (‘Sydney’s burning: but why did it happen?’) states:

It used to be true that Australian boys grew up with pillars of authority which kept them in check … Significantly, all those pillars I mentioned have weakened. Fathers don’t have the same authority they once did. Churchmen are suspect. Most men today would not dare reprimand or even threaten to discipline a badly-behaved child.

Here, there is a tapping into a masculinity politics that suggests there is a crisis in masculinity. This supposed crisis has spawned many populist books, and articles, about how men are the new disadvantaged and that that disadvantage is being demonstrated in a number of arenas (see Mills, 2003). One such arena is schools, where the popular refrain of ‘what about the boys?’ is still widely recognised as a legitimate educational concern. In trying to understand Cronulla, West links this supposed crisis of masculinity with the current boys’ debates. He asks:

What about schools? Schools teach toleration and respect for others. But boys are not getting many ideas of masculinity from school. One report after another shows boys around the world are largely alienated from school; are suspended from classrooms in large numbers; get expelled in disproportionate numbers; and often just go to school so they can play sport and be with their mates. (West, 2005)

His argument is that as boys have disengaged from schooling they get their ideas of masculinity from elsewhere. He suggests that it is primarily from the US media depictions of Black male youth through music and videos. This suggestion is one that again taps into polarising discourses about non-white young men.

Whilst the recent articles about gang violence in Australia are not specifically about young Lebanese Muslim men, the racist discourses which are used to create understandings of this violence are similar to those used in the demonisation of Muslim youth in Australia. For example, the Merrylands High School attacks were perpetrated by young Tongan men, but the Sheehan article uses this as an opportunity to link the violence at the school with the kinds of violence that have been perpetrated by some young Lebanese men. Again, there is a silence about the violence perpetrated by young white men. For instance, within discourses about youth gangs, there is often an implication that they are ‘ethnic’ (meaning non-white) youth gangs. This is sometimes highlighted by an association with American Black youth gangs, as in Thompson & Stolz (2008), Sheehan (2008), West (2005) and Barrett (2008) (see Poynting et al., 2001, p. 78). This association also works to heighten the danger of such gangs, such that a community can be constructed as being under siege from marauding dangerous young people. Readers of Brisbane’s Courier Mail, for instance, are informed that: ‘Drive by beatings and random “swarming” attacks by teens armed
with knives and poles are leaving a bloody trail across southeast Queensland’ (Thompson & Stolz, 2008, p. 10). It is a shame that West did not use the opportunity in discussing why Sydney was ‘burning’ to provide a more nuanced account of the masculinity politics involved, in not only Cronulla, but also ‘gang violence’.

Poynting et al.’s interviews with Lebanese young men, for instance, indicate that for many such men being together in groups, in what was often constructed as ‘a gang’, was a defensive mechanism that afforded them some protection from racist attacks. They also note how the groups were somewhat flexible in terms of ethnic membership, but not in terms of gender. For these young men, Poynting et al. (1998) note, ethnicity was less important than masculinity. Many of their behaviours were about proving that they were men with a legitimate status, not a subordinate one (Mills, 2001). Thus, in some cases violence by men subordinated by class and race can be read as a protest against such subordination. For instance, some of these boys in the Poynting et al. (1998) study commented that in relation to white boys, there are not as many words to ‘offend’ them as there are to offend the Lebanese, and other non-Anglo boys, and hence they had to offend the white Australian boys with violence. Poynting et al. (1998, p. 86) as a consequence argue that:

> Violence compensates for the words that are not available; it ameliorates the humiliation of racism. The meaning that the youths attach to this violence, ‘resolves’, in ideology, really unresolved contradictions occurring at the intersection of masculinity and ethnicity, as well as class relations.

Many of these young men’s violent responses can thus be read as responses to a ‘disrespect’ to their manhood. However, much of the reporting of marginalised men’s violence associates violence with non-white ethnicity or culture rather than employing analyses which interrogate the ways in which oppressive practices, shaped through subordinating discourses, contribute to the development of protest forms of masculinity that valorises violence. This lack of analysis is evident in much of the discussion around young men’s attraction to terrorism. The concerns with Islamic schools, for instance, are grounded in the fear that constructs young Muslim men as potential terrorists. Much of this current fear has been generated in the post September 11/July 7 era in relation to ‘home grown’ terrorists. The construction of Muslim youth as dangerous is of course not new in the UK or Australia. In the UK for instance, Louise Archer (2003) notes how the Salman Rushdie controversy over the publication of The Satanic Verses represented a pivotal moment in the construction of young Asian masculinities in that country. She states for instance, that in the 1990s, after very little focus had been given to educational issues facing Asian boys, ‘... this group became regarded as particularly educationally and socially problematic, as stereotypes of “good”, passive, hardworking “Asian” pupils were superseded by increasing moral panics and popular fears about “dangerous” Muslim masculinity’ (2003, p. 33). Australian media stories about dangerous ethnic, and especially stories about Lebanese background, youth gangs are also not restricted to the post September 11 era (see Poynting et al., 1998; Collins et al., 2000). However, as Calma (2006) indicated earlier in relation to the violence at Cronulla, contemporary concerns about Muslim
youth are located in the politics of the global. These global events, such as September
11 and July 7, and in Australia, bombings in Bali that were directed at western
tourists, many of whom were Australian, whilst generating fear about Muslims, have,
due to the responses by some non-Muslims, also worked to create a fear amongst the
Muslim community. This was apparent in a Human Rights and Equal Opportunities
Commission NSW (2004) consultation with Years 5 and 6 students in Sydney
government schools about issues to do with racism and discrimination. Most students
who took part were either from Muslim or Arab-speaking backgrounds. They
indicated that after the bombings in New York and Bali their parents had been partic-
ularly affected, and that the reporting of the events had caused them to be fearful for
their own safety, and that of their parents, and that they had been subjected to verbal
abuse whilst out on family outings. There were also issues in maintaining friendships
with non-Muslim children. Some students indicated that they were no longer
welcome at their non-Muslim friends’ houses for ‘sleepovers’ and the like.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2004) found that the
media were particularly responsible for causing this fear to exist amongst many
members of the Australian Muslim community. It stated that ‘Almost 80 percent of
survey respondents reported that, since September 11, they are more worried or
afraid of something bad happening to them personally because of their race, culture
or religion’ (2004, p. 77). In consultations with NSW teachers, the Commission
was told:

I can see the students coming nearly every day to school and what they want is to let out
their feelings to me in the classroom about what was news or on the front page … ‘Look,
they are blaming the Muslims again’ or ‘They are doing this’ so they are all angry. I try to
change the subject and say ‘Look what happens outside, let’s change it, don’t get upset,
it’s the media’ … I can see the children being so angry. And it’s really wrong because anger
breeds anger and then violence.

In consultations with various Muslim groups they were told:

All of our kids watch TV all of the time. Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Jews, whatever—they watch TV. There is a news update and straight away they mention ‘Muslim terrorists’. So straight away it is stuck in the minds that Muslims are terrorists. So when they go back to school they will be discriminated against because they are ‘Bloody Muslims’… I think the media is the main cause because kids are picking on Muslims at school and these kids get it from their parents and their parents get it from the media.

I came as a refugee from Bosnia … I feel inside that at any moment someone will abuse me or say something to me because every day, every time on TV, it’s’ Muslim fundamentalist’, or ‘Muslim terrorists’. Why are they looking at us as fundamentalists and terrorists?

Other reports in the post-September 11 and Bali bombings era provide similar
graphic accounts of the violence and harassment experienced by Muslims, and people
presumed to be Muslims (see for example, Poynting & Noble, 2004), and in
particular Muslim women (Poynting, 2002).

This fear of the Muslim ‘other’ has also been used to generate an attack on
multiculturalism (see also Parkinson, 2005; Button, 2006; Rogers, 2008). Whilst we
acknowledge the need to rethink multiculturalism, as noted earlier, it has served to
generate and legitimate a range of inclusive education policies in various locations that have sought to encourage school systems to work towards a politics that works with and values difference. However, the events at Cronulla and Merrylands High, explained as a failure of multiculturalism, have also constructed various social justice agendas in schooling as failing (see West, 2005). bell hooks has raised a number of concerns about the ways in which the post September 11 political agenda in the USA has worked in regressive ways regarding social justice concerns in education. For instance, she states:

When the tragic events of 9/11 occurred it was as though, in just a few moments in time, all our work to end domination in all its forms, all our pedagogies of hope, were rendered meaningless as much of the American public, reacting to the news coverage of the tragedy, responded with an outpouring of imperialist white-supremacist nationalist capitalist patriarchal rage against terrorists defined as dark-skinned others even when there were no images, no concrete proof. That rage spilled over into everyday hatred of people of color from all races in this nation, as Muslims from all walks of life found themselves rebuked and scorned—the objects of a random and reckless violence. (hooks, 2003, p. 9)

To some extent the events of Cronulla and Merrylands High, when combined with the events in New York, London and Bali, have in the Australian context opened up spaces for those who have sought to roll back progressive agendas in education. However, in an era where proposed Islamic schools evoke such emotions and hatred as epitomised in the displaying of pigs’ heads at the site and vocal demonstrations, such progressive agendas are more than ever needed.

**Conclusion**

This paper has not sought to argue that the media is all of one kind. The media is a complex industry which also provides space for some alternative views to be presented (see for example, Kyong, 2005; Bell, 2006). However, the media is not a harmless commentator on public events. It works to construct the realities of which it writes. The ‘realities’ with which this paper has been concerned are: the highly gendered notion that Muslim men are dangerous; that white-Anglo women are at risk from such men; that ‘ethnic gangs’ are out of control; that schools are sites where such gangs perform their violence; that multiculturalism is a failed project; that schools have failed to provide the kinds of discipline necessary to teach boys how to behave appropriately; that all Muslim young men are potential terrorists; and that particular schools can be a breeding ground for ‘home grown’ terrorists.

We have argued in this paper that the reductionist sociology that constructs such realities must be de-centred and deconstructed. This involves moving beyond a homogenising of the culture of minority groups within polarising discourses that inferiorise non-white, particularly Muslim groups, in opposition to a normalised white Anglo culture to an understanding of human cultures as ‘constant creations, recreations, and negotiations of imaginary boundaries between ‘we’ and the ‘other’’ (Benhabib, 2002, p. 8). Acknowledging, for example, ‘Lebanese youth culture’ as complex, dynamic and internally riven and formed through broader and equally
complex dialogues with Anglo culture (Benhabib, 2002) begins to make transparent the absences imperative in understanding issues such as race violence and gang violence. In particular, this acknowledgement, as we have argued, brings to light the silences around how masculinity politics are implicated in such violence—how, for example, patriarchal forms of masculinity as dominance, power and control—revaloured in the current post September 11 moment and escalated in the collective gang context—are central to both Anglo and non-Anglo initiated violence. Here young Lebanese males’ violence and their perpetuation of sexual harassment, for instance, can be understood more broadly as an issue of masculine legitimation in response to their racial subordination and powerlessness as a minority group. Along these lines, as Poynting et al. (1998) argue, violence needs to be considered in light of the social, political and economic contexts within which it occurs in ways that recognise the complex intersections of class, gender and ethnicity.

A critical interrogation of the Anglo standpoint of the media representations presented in this paper importantly allows recognition of the violence and terror that is directed towards Muslim communities, and in particular Muslim women, by white Anglo people; and the forms of discrimination experienced by Muslims, or people perceived to be of ‘Middle Eastern appearance’. Such interrogation more broadly also allows an acknowledgement of the positive ways in which multicultural education has, in many ways, enhanced cultural inclusivity in schools. Continued interrogation of the media as a powerful social text that reinscribes and speaks into existence particular non-innocent realities (Lather, 1992) is imperative in understanding and addressing issues of violence and in moving beyond the polarising and blame discourses that are compounding broader contemporary social divisions.

Notes
1. See Collins et al. (2000) for detailed analysis of these events.
2. Pauline Hanson was an elected member of the Australian federal parliament between 1996 and 1998 who founded the One Nation Party based on anti-immigration and racist policies.

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