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Local order

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I

¹ A sense of in-between shapes contemporary theoretical perspectives on identity through concepts such as fluidity, hybridity and diaspora. These concepts have traction when theorising global social and cultural orders characterised by 'a delocalized *transnation*'. In this formation, Appadurai argues, 'the formula of hyphenation (as in Italian-Americans, Asian-Americans, and African-Americans) is reaching the point of saturation, and the right-hand side of the hyphen can barely contain the unruliness of the left-hand side' (803).

² Yet in the relatively monocultural space of Anglo-Celtic rural Australia, delocalised and hyphenated transnational identities tend to make their presence felt most strongly on television. Rather than fluidity, rigidity appears to be a more appropriate metaphor for reading the divisions in rural settler-Australian identity that function as 'uneven, local attempts to make sense of the world' (Gilroy 98).

³ In Lismore on the north coast of NSW, for example, the relatively fixed notion of being "a local" maintains its power. Since returning to my home-town of Lismore in 1999 I have become particularly fascinated by the constant use of the word "local" in everyday conversation and in the local newspapers. When I share my fascination with students and colleagues, I am struck by the emotive engagement, both positive and negative, that the idea of being "a local" stimulates. That these students and colleagues have local knowledge of what it means to be "a local" is no doubt a factor in this emotion and engagement: being "a local" marks a divide in belonging and in the local social order.

⁴ While there is ample literature regarding "the local" within the context of globalisation, "the local" in place-based and regional research, "local knowledges" in anthropology, or "the local" as metaphor for issues of subjectivity and self in feminism and postcolonial theory, literature on being "a local" is curiously sparse. A strong thread of scholarship comes from Hawai'i (for an example see Ohnuma). Conversely, in the Australian context I am aware of only one publication dealing specifically with the idea of being a local. In *Ronnie's Story*, Richard Woolley analyses the performance of being a local at a pub in the Sydney suburb of Redfern. By telling first-person anecdotes about a long-term Redfern local, Ronnie, more recent arrivals position themselves in a local order of being local.

⁵ Woolley's analysis indicates the power and significance that the idea of being a local has in Australian society, even in places where populations are relatively fluid. Yet while performance may be one strategy for creating a local order, the key to a successful performance in Woolley's analysis is a relation with an "authentic" local who has qualities not of fluidity, but of routine and rootedness. It is this latter sense of being local that has salience in Lismore. It functions as a benchmark for authenticity and acceptance.

⁶ This sense of being "a local" deserves scrutiny because it carries the full weight of traditional settler belonging. In addition, being "a local" deserves careful unpacking because it is a category that excludes. Concealed within the idea is a racial and colonial discourse. An analysis of being local in Lismore reveals that not everyone can be a local and the conditions of acceptance are obscured. One criterion is, however, clear and discussable: if there is a question of one's status as a local, conversation typically and quickly moves to duration of personal and ancestral residence.

II

⁷ "When I first came to Lismore twenty-five years ago, people told me it takes 25 years to become a local [...]. My time's up. I think I can safely say I've made it." (Nora Vidler-Blanksby qtd. in Satherley)

⁸ "All [the people I just mentioned were] born and bred in the area, plus John Chant, who has been here for 40 years, which makes him a local." (Baxter)

⁹ “[...W]hat I’ve come to understand is that you are *never* a local unless you are born here. [...] I mean even after twenty-odd years people say [to me], well, you’re not a local.” (Irwin)

¹⁰ Becoming local takes time: routine every day time spent on the ground. There is a notion here of connection between identity and a “patch of dirt”, of authenticity through autochthony, of a seed planted, of being a child of the soil, of coming from a place as distinct from a womb. Being local weaves identity and place together in this most intimate fashion. A local’s sense of identity emerges through time from a developing everyday personal relationship to place through a meld of history, community and geography (Miller 217). To come from outside Lismore, and move beyond being “just a blow-in” — an unannounced stranger blown off-course — the honorific must be earned through an infusion of soil into one’s blood. The period required for this metamorphosis is clearly open to question: 25 years, 40 years, forever. In a sense, locals were never not there. History begins with their arrival.

III

¹¹ The stability of this reading of the local order rests on the concealment of an anxiety: an anxiety that settler autochthony is a fiction. Diffusion of settlers and dispersal of Aborigines was the reality of locals’ “settling”. Aborigines upset the signifying chain of local settler belonging at its source because a straightforward appeal to duration of residence is quickly undermined by 40,000 years of Indigenous tenure. This challenge to autochthony initiates a pre-emptive strategy of avoidance and concealment. The language of the settler “local”, articulated through history, community and geography of necessity excludes Aborigines. In de Certeau’s words “locals” define themselves within a ‘proper place’ — ‘a place appropriated as one’s own’ — ‘in a world bewitched by the invisible powers of the Other’ (1984: 36).

¹² An analysis of the use of the word “local” reveals how the idea of being “a local” stabilises local settler belonging through concealment. Local, in this usage, is an adjective doing the work of a noun. By becoming a substitute for the noun, the actual noun which “local” modifies is understood, elided, concealed. ‘So you’re “a local”, huh? A local *what?*’ we might ask. Turning to local newspapers reveals what the concealed noun is not.

¹³ Within everyday settler discourse Aborigines cannot be noun-locals. To do so would pollute the proper place of “the local” with the Other. Instead, Aborigines are adjective-locals. In *The Northern Star*, Lismore’s daily paper, Digby Moran is described as a ‘local [...] indigenous artist’ (Redmond). Bill Walker, the co-ordinator of the Bundjalung Nation Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Committee, is a ‘respected local identity’ (“Co-ordinator named”). These instances are illustrative of the repeated use of the term “local” as a regular adjective in reference to Aborigines. Local is a modifier of the nouns “artist” and “identity”, indeed a modifier that refers to an imagined boundary rather than to the land itself. Now and then there is a subversion of this order and someone will refer to an Aborigine as a ‘fair dinkum local’ (Opit). Nevertheless, a qualifier is required. Supporting evidence is needed for the Aboriginal claim to status as “a local” — a *fair-dinkum* local as opposed to a *no-need-to-explain* local. If there was a class of nouns to which “local” belonged, we would be justified in labelling them “dispossessives”.

IV

¹⁴ Being a local is a valued aspect of Australian culture and identity — an embodiment of care for community and place for the long term. In the contemporary moment, characterised in the media by accelerating cultural change and personal and national threat, the local represents tradition through apparently unchanging repetition that tourists, sea-changers and tree-changers seek as a refuge and solace. The locals might be said to offer a community of resistance and trust. The local stands within a clearing in a cluttered and threatening world.

¹⁵ As I have attempted to argue, however, the local that is revealed in the light of the clearing contains concealment. As an adjective masquerading as a noun, “local” silences talk of the clearing of Aborigines and in the Aborigines’ place it silently installs the settler as original and autochthonous. As Heidegger writes, the ‘clearing in which beings stand is in itself at the same time concealment. [...] on concealment [...] occurs within what is lighted. One being places itself in front of another being, the one helps to hide the other, the former obscures the latter, a few obstruct many, one denies all. [...] A being [...] presents itself as other than it is.’ (Heidegger 54)

¹⁶ While there is much to value in being local, as an everyday contemporary practice of colonialism and exclusion it deserves careful attention and transformation. The transformation is clearly more than a task of defining and reinstating the noun that follows the adjective "local," and instead requires an ontological earthquake of sorts for settler locals. How could the local order in Australia be otherwise than colonial? How might settler Australians be able to imagine the clearing they inhabit in a way that does not clear the land of Aborigines? Within these questions lies a possible ethics of location for settler Australians.

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