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Welcome to Bogan-ville: reframing class and place through humour

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Abstract

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Keywords

humour, welcome, class, bogan, place, ville, reframing

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Abstract:

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Keywords: bogan, working-class culture, class discrimination, social media, Albion Park

Introduction

On the 4th of August 2009, Australian online news commentary website *The Punch* announced that the suburb of Albion Park, in the Australian industrial city of Wollongong, was one of the nation's Top 10 most “bogan” places.¹ In Australia, *bogan* is a term of derision with some parallel to *white trash* in the United States and *chav* in the United Kingdom—used mockingly to describe people of working-class origin, people considered “rough” and uncultured. Bogans are stereotypically associated with crime, hard rock music, beer barns, customised old cars and cheap clothing: track suits, flannelette shirts, mullet haircuts and the now iconic Australian sheepskin “ugg” boots.² The story I present here is of how the Wollongong suburb of Albion Park became understood as archetypically bogan through an interactive media event, but also—crucially—how local people reacted. I wish to probe what is revealed by this peculiar case of bogan identification: what it suggests about humour as a form of cultural politics in Australian cities, amidst broader debates in the social sciences and humanities about the co-constitution of place and identity, and the saturation of interactive and social media in everyday life.³

The term *bogan* is a relatively recent addition to Australian lexicon, but it has historical antecedents, tied to the Australian predilection to denigrate those considered uncultured. According to Bruce Moore, the editor of the Australian Oxford Dictionary, its exact origins are unknown, though it was even as recently as the mid-1980s seemingly a mere regionalism, believed to have originated in Melbourne's western suburbs.⁴ Only since the 1990s has it become widely known nationally. According to Moore, the national dominance of the term *bogan* completes the search for a replacement for *larrikin* after the latter garnered largely positive overtones (in no small part thanks to the comedy and commercial success of Paul Hogan). Moore

traces *bogan* back to two uses: first, the 1980s television comedy actor Mary-Anne Fahey and her character Kylie Mole on *The Comedy Company*, for whom it was a synonym for *dag* or *dork* (“a person that you just don’t bother with ... a complete loser”); and second, as a denigration of the undereducated or socially-disadvantaged. In this usage, the earliest recorded example is found in the September 1985 edition of surfing magazine *Tracks*: “So what if I have a mohawk and wear Dr Martens (boots for all you uninformed bogans)?”⁵ This latter sense, as a descriptor infused by class and perceptions of lack of education and taste, is the focus here. When in 2009 Albion Park was decreed as an archetypal “bogan place”, it was infused with denigratory overtones about class and lack of sophistication. The questions arising from this, about how humour frames class politics spatially, is my concern here.

It is important at the outset to appreciate how the use of *bogan* adds to a genealogy of derisive humorous terms through which the Australian working-class has been persistently denigrated. As David Nichols depicts in *The Bogan Delusion*, class discrimination and victim-blaming is rife in Australian history and society.⁶ A slew of antecedent terms precedes the use of *bogan*: “westie, bevan, barry, chigger, scozza, mocca, gullie and booner”.⁷ All of them, Bruce Moore argues, ultimately stem from the *larrikin* figure: in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century a *larrikin* was “a young, urban rough; a hooligan”.⁸ Cultural historian Melissa Bellanta provides further clarification:

When the word *larrikin* first came into common Australian parlance in the late 1860s ... it meant ‘hoodlum’ or ‘street tough’. It was used by journalists and police to refer to young rowdies or street-gang members, or as a defiant way for those young people to refer to themselves.⁹

Unlike *bogan*, which according to Bellanta “taps into anxieties about credit-fuelled consumption” and “attention-seeking antics among newly cashed-up boors”, the term *larrikin* was linked to moral panics about youthful street disorder. Nevertheless:

Even though early usage of the word *larrikin* was initially different to the way that *bogan* is now used, it is interesting to note that a series of caricatures, theatrical skits and written pieces were published in the Australian press at the turn of the century that poked fun of *larrikin* youths’ style in a way not too different from *bogan* jokes today. These caricatures implied that rough *larrikins* were the epitome of vulgar tastes: whether because of what they wore, or how they talked, or the way they chose to amuse themselves.¹⁰

A succession of terms followed *larrikin*, many region-specific: *lair* (“someone of rowdy manners and loud dress sense”¹¹); *bodgies* (in the 1950s, from *bodger*, meaning fake—a reference to the proclivity to wear clothing made of cheap imitation American fabric¹²); *derro* (from *derelict*, implying homelessness, much like the American *tramp*); *westies* in Sydney’s western suburbs (from the 1970s); and then *bevans* in Brisbane (and curiously, also in Tasmania); *booners* in Canberra; and *Chiggas* in Hobart (after the suburb Chigwell, regarded as socially-disadvantaged). *Feral* (synonymic with wild, weed or pest) is often used to describe rough working-class culture (though within radical parts of the Australian environmental movement it also denotes a consciously-chosen “alternative” aesthetic of dreadlocks and hemp clothing).¹³ *Hoon* was reported as early as the 1930s, to describe “a standover man who protected the interests of pimps and prostitutes”; since then it has somehow morphed into a more specific hooligan: “a young male exhibitionist who drives dangerously or at reckless speed, and likes to show off his hotted up car”.¹⁴ All such

terms are, in David Nichols' words, "just a coy mask for demonising the disadvantaged".¹⁵

Bogan: condition or culture?

Relevant to the analysis here are three key tensions within the meanings and use of *bogan* (as with *westies* and other larrikin terms preceding it). The first is the stereotyping of socio-economic poverty as a condition distinct from embodied working-class culture. The use of *bogan* in some circles implies poor upbringing and bleak fortunes, a synonym for lack of wealth. But more deeply, *bogan* means an absence of cultivated aesthetics or tastes.¹⁶

Sometimes the conflation of poverty and lack of cultural sophistication comes unstuck: for example with the rise of the resources industry in Australia and the propensity for members of the working-class to earn high wages as tradespersons in mining, it is possible for bogans to be wealthy—hence the recent moniker *cached-up bogan*. As Barbara Pini, Paula McDonald and Robyn Mayes argue, the wealth of such people threatens Australian middle-class hegemony, providing "a mobility to enter the everyday spaces of the middle-class".¹⁷ The subtext of denigrating the poor is no longer sufficient, and hence "cached-up bogan" has emerged as a linguistic and cultural response—a signifier to mark the newly rich as nevertheless incapable of escaping parochial working-class cultural traits, as "other" to "middle-class deservingness, taste and morality".¹⁸ As David Nichols vividly puts it "talk about 'bogans' is a way for elites to talk about working class (usually but not always white) people as though they were an inferior species, a kind of monkey; it's racist language tweaked to ridicule a class or a culture".¹⁹ One can escape poverty, but the bogan imprint is seemingly permanent.

The bogan joke: denigratory or means to defiance?

The second tension is that inherent in most acts of comedy: between cruel denigration and celebratory affirmation.²⁰ Part of the term's linguistic triumph is because *bogan* denigrates almost exclusively within a humorous oeuvre. Like *larrikin*, *westie*, *chav* and *white trash*, the intent is to poke fun at the working-class—for the middle-class to have a laugh at the Other's expense—but also to render knowable through humour and stereotype that which is alien or feared. Meaghan Morris reminds us that stereotypes “are *forms of apprehension* rather than bad representations, and their force is to mobilize familiar knowledge to explain and absorb unfamiliar experience”.²¹ The media event discussed below was one such attempt, to comprehend “working-classness” with middle-class hubris, but also, through humour, to reinforce the sense of social class as a fundamental cultural difference.

Like all acts of comedy, the joke can be taken the wrong way, and can become a site of antagonism, of politics. The issue is not so much one of political correctness, but of what is at stake, culturally and symbolically, in class-based humour. Humour can work to entrench oppression, or when appropriated by the oppressed, can become a subversion, or even a tactic of political resistance. Comedy's impact can be “widespread and out of proportion to box-office or ratings success ... comedy touches, in one way or another, on a vulnerable social nerve”.²² Indeed, the ambivalence of humour has been an important political asset historically: very early on the emergence of the cartoon in newspaper publishing, as well as satirical periodicals used humour to fire salvos at the powerful.²³ In more recent contexts, gimmicks for television shows such as *The Chaser* “have become an increasingly important part of the repertoire of political contention”²⁴ in an age where formal

protests (and protestors) struggle to gain legitimacy or airspace in mainstream news coverage.

The media is one space where class-based humour proliferates and is negotiated to varying degrees. Belittling the working-classes through humour is an age old media stunt. Ridiculing is a classically tabloid broadcast media tactic, the sort of thing tabloid newspapers and commercial television stations do to rustle up circulation or ratings. In the UK, magazines and tabloid newspapers have run annual surveys on the “Britain’s most crap towns” (coincidentally, the author’s birthplace of Luton won this “prize” in 2004²⁵); while shows such as *A Current Affair* in Australia run “freak show” and “shock and awe” stories on welfare-dependent single mothers, poor families with hoarding problems and grannies with menageries of cats. As Tim Edensor and Steve Millington argue, middle-class commentators long for evidence of poor aesthetic judgement among the working-class—in order to maintain the middle-class’s control over the economy of taste.²⁶

The point, however, is that such control is rarely complete. As I show below, the *bogan* stereotype, like *larrikins*, *westies* and *hoons* before it, is wide open for appropriations and ironic inversions. And again, there are historical precedents in film, television and print media. As Alan McKee has argued,

There is little guarantee that any given text ... will necessarily function in the way described when it is activated by audiences; or taken up and distributed in secondary texts. What is necessary is an attention to the processes of reading involved in comedy.²⁷

Hence *larrikins* were essentially late nineteenth-century louts, but when regularly aggrandised in editions of *The Bulletin*, as well as on vaudeville stages, a script was

created for feminine appropriation by brazen young women who “read” and performed larrikinism in their daily lives.²⁸

A century later, many Australian films and television shows lean on working-class characters to draw out the comic ambivalence of denigration/commemoration. Compare for example two depictions of working-class Melbourne families: in the 1997 box office hit film *The Castle*, and in the ABC television comedy series *Kath and Kim* (2002-2007). *Kath and Kim* lampoons aspirational bogans with newfound wealth, arguably doing little to dispel representations of the working-class as lacking taste, yet the series nevertheless depicts “a little Aussie battler succeeding against the odds” through an extra-diagetic narrative.²⁹ In *The Castle*, the Kerrigan family, archetypal bogans, are depicted in a somewhat condescending light as simple and naïve—yet by the film’s end they become heroic battler-bogans who through love, unity and belief in social values triumph against Big Government and developer greed.³⁰ The battler-bogan as quiet comic hero later re-surfaced as Kenny, in the 2006 comedy film of the same name featuring a loveable uneducated portalo worker who trusted others, and ultimately triumphed over more urbane, cynical vested interests.³¹

Important in the particular local context of Wollongong was another earlier comic precedent: Norman Gunston, a character played by Garry McDonald initially on the cult Australian television comedy *The Aunty Jack Show* (set in Wollongong) and later in his own TV variety show. The Gunston character supposedly came from Dapto (the adjacent suburb to Albion Park), and in *The Aunty Jack Show* humour operated to lampoon both Wollongong and Gunston’s unsophisticated character. But by the time Gunston was hosting his own wildly-popular TV series in 1975, he had arguably become a kind of heroic *proto-bogan*: using an uncouth persona and subversive parody to confront celebrity guests, revealing their ego and conceit.³²

This historical arc of class-based humour in Australian media is now being refracted through new electronic and social networking platforms. Bogan humour has been especially promulgated through such means. This includes classist humour such as the distribution by email of such jokes as “bogan monopoly”, You Tube videos and websites such as <http://www.bogan.com.au/>, a site “dedicated to the Kingswood” (motor car) featuring parodied bogan blogs, polls and a “bogan of the week” competition. There are now countless bogan facebook groups, and #bogan has become a popular Australian hash-tag on Twitter. Such platforms generate multiple overlapping “publics”³³ through which, in this instance, bogan humour disperses and is given breadth. In many ways such new media merely amplify the denigratory potential in classist humour—unleashing without editorial oversight spaces for what can only be described as cruel diatribes. Nevertheless, what such interactive media also bring into play is a more profound ability to appropriate the conversation on the part of those being stereotyped. This kind of online appropriation is at the heart of the story of Albion Park detailed below.

Bogan places: spatialising class

The third and final tension I wish to draw out of the use of *bogan* is between the denigrated, classed body and the denigrated, working-class place. Through humour, working-class bodies are denigrated and marked as “rough”³⁴, but so too are objects and landscapes classed. Used as both a noun and adjective—one can be judged “a bogan”, and something can “be bogan” (a shirt, a name, a haircut “is *so* bogan”)—it becomes a word increasingly used to describe *place*, and to denigrate with humorous intent places and spaces judged to be culturally working-class.³⁵ The following is

typical—from an online discussion about bogans triggered by *The Punch*'s poll on Australia's most bogan places—in that it pathologises both people and their “habitat”:

The bogan—a fascinating beast. The majority of the species are hideously repugnant and unintelligent, and yet they manage to breed in ever-increasing numbers and populate an area known as the outer west [of Sydney] ... Their habitat consists of a weatherboard or brick-veneer dwelling and is characterised by an early-model Holden or Ford in the driveway surrounded by a group of males ... the females spend most of their time in supermarkets and shopping malls, using a shrill high-pitched call to discipline their children and contact other females. Males and females rarely interact socially except during breeding season, which is otherwise known as Friday night.³⁶

Here, in David Attenborough style, Australian outer suburbs in particular are ridiculed as “bogan”, as “other” to the cultivated, progressive, intellectual inner-city.³⁷ Sue Turnbull traced such *anti-suburbanism* through Australian comedy from the nineteenth century, through to more recent humorous figures such as Dame Edna Everage and Kath and Kim.³⁸ Bogan places are where students, hippies, greens, gays and lesbians aren't supposedly present (or welcome?): outer working-class suburbs where men travel from to work in factories and offices, and women were meant to look after children; or social spaces such as “the pub” with entrenched sexist gender roles. More than just a denigration of individual physical appearance or popular cultural predilections, both traditional media and online traffic about bogan places reconstitute social class boundaries as *spatialisations*.³⁹ Othered boundaries are drawn around the physical spaces of the working-class, positioned against the “normal” spaces of the middle-class: densely-populated urbanity versus uncontrolled sprawl; gentrified terraces and apartment culture versus new estates and first home buyers;

heritage streetscapes versus shopping malls; zones of inner-city creativity contrasting with arid suburbia—the territory of bogan cultures. Such binaries have for at least two decades been subject to criticism by urban scholars and cultural geographers,⁴⁰ who have traced representations of suburbia and demonstrated how they inform a distinctly Australian politics of class and identity. Yet the comic vilification of the suburbs continues through the spatialisation of bogan. At the heart of this is a curious paradox where Australians—in the most suburbanised nation on earth—lampoon the suburbs and construct them as “other” to an imagined, de-Australianised, cosmopolitan urbanity that does not really exist.

Albion Park – a landscape of shame and pride

In the Albion Park example we see these three tensions—bogan as poverty versus cultural lack; bogan as denigratory versus celebratory humour; bogan as body versus landscape—play out in one contemporary media event. When voted as one of Australia’s “most bogan” places by *The Punch* in 2009, Albion Park quickly received notoriety as an iconic bogan landscape. Email and online traffic exploded and news stories ran nationally.⁴¹ According to *The Punch*’s article, Albion Park was

a dormitory suburb with big blocks ... a nice hard pub and top-notch takeaway. Brutal killings. A bikie gang. The rugby league team is called the Outlaws and the dress code is based on stinking hot summers and bitterly cold winds blowing straight off the Snowies [Mountains] in winter. The van Krevel atrocities. Pins in the eyes of paedophile former Mayor Frank Arkell. Shopkeeper David O’Hearn decapitated and his blood used to write Satanic messages on the walls. The Fourth Reich bikie gang HQ just up the road. An

EPA station constantly monitoring for toxic fallout from the Port Kembla steelworks. Albion Park is bogan heaven on a stick.⁴²

Context was thus vital to this spatialisation of bogan. Albion Park is in Wollongong, a regional industrial city an hour south of Sydney, at the heart of the Australian coal and steel industries, a “carbon central” location,⁴³ where heavy industries remain integral to both the economy and imaginary of a community and region—despite it now also hosting a nationally-significant university and an increasingly diversified service-based labour market. More so than other Australian cities, Wollongong was suffering from the global financial crisis at precisely the time of the Albion Park “bogan” announcement. The GFC froze global demand for steel as Chinese manufacturing stalled from vanishing US consumer demand. Flow-on effects were felt at Wollongong’s main steel plant in thousands of job losses; and in quick succession Australian textile and clothing manufacturer Bonds also laid off hundreds of staff locally. Albion Park and neighbouring suburbs supplied the bulk of Wollongong’s manufacturing labour—and were especially hard hit by the GFC-related job cuts. Dark clouds also boiled over the city’s traditional manufacturing industries as a result of proposed carbon taxes to be introduced nationally in Australia. It was against this backdrop that the designation of Albion Park as “most bogan” place emerged, and was subject to debate within the region. The implication was that Albion Park bogans were “failed citizens” who populated a landscape of “failed industry”.

How, then, did local residents of Albion Park feel when in 2009 their place was announced as one of Australia’s most bogan?

There were over 390 online comments to *The Punch*’s original article, ten times the average on that website (as well as 493 Facebook likes); followed by

lengthy online discussions on the website of Wollongong's main city newspaper, *The Mercury*, and radio talkback sessions (in which I was enrolled grudgingly as an "expert" commentator). Whole new Facebook groups were created.

Reactions to Albion Park's bogan status were split, in ways that demonstrate how place and class identities are contradictorily imagined. Some were embarrassed, angry, offended:

come on, the top ten bogan in oz?!!! I have lived here for 2 years and have never experienced anything bogan/anti-social/lower class ... it is the quietest area I have ever lived. In my experience there are other places of oz which are far, far worse ... didn't they go to Liverpool? And as for the pub, yes, it is hard, I went in once, it wasn't my scene, end of story.⁴⁴

For another,

Albion Park is a beautiful and family oriented suburb. I have lived here for the past 8 years and I find it to be a very nice place, clean and a safe place to live ... People in albion park, in the new estates at least, dress quite nicely. I have decent clothes, a nice car AND AN HONOURS DEGREE from Wollongong University. The people conducting this survey have got it WRONG. I wish they'd stop slandering my suburb without first checking the facts.⁴⁵

Designation as bogan clearly offended some, for the implication that they too would be associated with poverty or absence of taste—and instead claimed an "insider" speaking position to defend their patch. Casting those responsible for developing online lists as ill-informed outsiders, locals renegotiated a position of privilege to speak for the place in question. But in so doing, many reproduced class hierarchies that placed them above other people and suburbs elsewhere in the region:

I'm horrified that my town is the first on the list!!! I would like to clarify that there are different areas of Albion Park and yes some are a bit feral but some are also beautiful - as is where I live. Whenever I'm asked where I live I make a point of say the 'nice part of Albion Park' every time!!! I've been thinking about petitioning the local council to rename our area. I think I'll get onto that now!!⁴⁶

Some bought into the designation of Albion Park as bogan—adding fuel to the fire: “Definitely 100% bogan. The ‘national dress’ of the ppl I work with that are from A Park is an old unwashed tracksuit (wrinkled / unironed) , holey brown woolen jumper and ugg boots”.⁴⁷ Others accepted the idea of typecasting places as bogan, but displaced their understanding of what bogan meant onto other, neighbouring suburbs:

What, Did these people drive through Warilla blind-folded? What about Warrawong and Port Kembla ... we all know what goes on at Wentworth Street when the sun goes down :^) I bet the punch people know it too.⁴⁸

So too for Bellambi – “I think that Albion Park certainly is ‘bogan’ however [previous commentator] quite rightfully put that Bellambi would be up there in my opinion. Now, where did I misplace my latte?”⁴⁹—and for nearby Dapto, a place with older working class associations (famous for Norman Gunston, and its “Dapto dogs” racecourse):

I am astounded by the complete lack of knowledge you all have in this area. Having lived in many of the wannabe bogan places mentioned here, and personally having both a winter and summer flannellette wardrobe, I can tell you all that without doubt - without any contradiction - Dapto, NSW is THE bogan capital of the world.⁵⁰

Some went to great lengths to chart a precise local map of class:

The people mentioning Dapto need to remember that Dapto is divided in two by the rail line. Anything west of the rail line in the new areas of Horsley, Avondale, Mt Brown, Cleveland is upper middle class, the bogans live in Kanahooka and Koonawarra. Middle of town is the neutral territory where both go shopping. Don't confuse it with feral Berkeley either. In Dapto the tatts are spelled correctly, the minimum age for pregnancy is 16 and the kids don't start smoking until at least age 10.⁵¹

Another derided formal place-branding of new estates for the manner which they eschewed old place names (and class associations):

Well, I would happily nominate Dapto the traditional 'bogan ville' but I notice that no one lives in Dapto anymore, they all live in Horsley (the re-named new housing estate) ... lol same postcode different bogan.⁵²

Some brushed-off the designation of Albion Park as bogan landscape: "I can't believe the reaction to this story. I think it is hilarious. I live in Bellambi and have been called a bogan, redneck and much worse. Who cares, as my mumma always said, sticks and stones".⁵³ Others sought to invert the term of derision and celebrate bogan notoriety. Local resident Tula began a facebook group "I am a proud Albion Park bogan" (which over a thousand members would join; see Figure 1). The idea of one's "inner bogan" was regularly invoked as a source of class and national pride:

I reckon that to be Australian means to be part bogan, especially in the Illawarra where financial disadvantage has shaped our historical development. I come from the dizzying heights of Mount Warrigal (alas, the non lake side). I lay claim to equal parts class and equal parts bogan and there's nothing wrong with me. So what, I say! Let's embrace the inner bogan in us all and celebrate it with pride.⁵⁴

Figure 1. Selected online postings to the Facebook group, “I’m a proud Albion Park bogan”

Sarah Hafez: “Im a Park Rat and Proud!!!!”

Kylie Summers: “loud and proud park bogan!!!!!!! woop woop!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Cara Rowles: “PARK PRIDE BABY.... PROUD AS TO BE FROM PARK.... WOULDNT WANT TO BE FROM NE WHERE ELSE.....2527 BABY!!!!!!!!!!”

Melissa Richardson: “Look out for the sign posted horse float (of course) on the highway Albion Park Rail announcing “Boganville has plenty of hunnys”. ”

Irene Burgess: “Call us Bogan if you want. With this sort of advertising we may stop getting people from everywhere else moving in ... Albion Park is my home and I love every little piece of it ... Where else can you say Hello and be answered by name at Woolworths, the Post Office, The Chemist and Newsagent. The Postman knows us all by name and keeps an eye on all. My Home, My Albion Park!!! Heaven, cradled by the Escarpment, The Lake and The Ocean.”

Jesina Evans: “I am proud! So what if i go to woolies in my pjs sometimes.”

Katie Riboldi: “ 2527 Proud of it, Just cause we know how to live it up with no shame, Lived in 2527 my whole and would not wont to live any were else, 2527 BOGANS YEWWWW”

Jane Horcicka: “better a bogan than a silver spooner”

Neil Boland: “I used to think that the word bogan was offensive, especially when applied to my home town. I now realise that we’re just normal and anyone who calls us a bogan is a just a stuck-up prick (we’re looking at you, Figtree, Mangerton, Keiraville, etc).”

In specific response to the Punch’s description of Albion Park:

hey you forgot the two rock quarries and the gun club! But the piece de resistance de boganesque is the block of land in the main street, opposite the hard bikers pub, which has a cyclone fence on it which is the modern equivalent of a town crier. ‘Happy 18th Shazza luv Daz & da Kids’, ‘Welcome Home For Parole Johnno!’ and others spraypainted on bedsheets

hung on this fence are a true reminder of how far ahead Albion Park is in the bogan stakes. Go AP 2527 [postal code] all the way!!!⁵⁵

Two days later a spray-painted sign ‘Welcome to Bogan-ville’ (Figure 2) was hung on the cyclone fence-noticeboard.

Figure 2. ‘Welcome to Bogan-ville’⁵⁶



Shortly thereafter, former Miss World Australia Katie Richardson, who grew up in Albion Park, made a jokey comment in the press about Albion Park’s bogans, which she said were common, evidenced in the fact that locals went to the supermarket in their pyjamas. Proprietors of the local newsagent reacted to this comment and in turn announced the inaugural Bogan Day to be held in the following week, where residents were encouraged to wear pyjamas all day in public. Bogan identity could be thus subversively performed, by bogan bodies whose dressing up in public spatialised this place as working-class, but proud. Casey Eastham, another prominent local who became a member of the national hockey team the Hockeyroos, was quoted as saying “I attended a great school, Albion Park High School, with

fantastic staff. So if being from Albion Park you are considered to be a bogan then I can safely say I am a proud bogan from Albion Park”.⁵⁷ Appropriation of bogan humour had become a local celebrity issue.

The Albion Park Hotel (pub) hosted a Bogan Night with fancy dress, and talk grew of transforming the traditional annual Albion Park agricultural show into a national bogan festival. Serious proposals were even floated to fund the construction of a giant ugg boot monument. (In a local newspaper poll on whether this should be erected, the results were split 50.5 percent in favour, 49.5 percent against⁵⁸). Yet, within a week, the media event had passed, and the “Welcome 2 Bogan-ville” sign had been ripped down. In January 2010 after debate in local council, proposals to erect a Big Ugg Boot statue in Albion Park were officially curbed, though not without dissent. A laugh in the face of derision was one thing, but it was too much, it seemed, for civic leaders to etch the bogan identity permanently in the landscape.

On being bogan—and humour as cultural and spatial politics

Classism still reverberates strongly across Australia. While on the surface of things *bogan* and all its related jokes, pranks and subversions might seem superficial, underneath the skin are deeper emotional and moral wounds. Local responses to the designation of Albion Park as Australia’s most bogan place attest to this: a mix of defensiveness, rejection, subversion, irony, pride. Middle-class cringe is alive and well, in the inner-city and in suburban Wollongong; but so too in the Albion Park case, were there harsh views of those nearby, even less fortunate, amidst extant poverty. Bogan humour magnifies social injustice from within.

Ambivalence and contradiction infused this interactive media event. Yet, the absence of a unitary position or reaction among Albion Park locals should not be

construed as an absence of working-class solidarity; rather as evidence of how ordinary people can respond in unexpected, unpredictable and creative ways to the designation of them and their neighbourhoods as “poor”. The difficulty is to say conclusively whether the creative appropriation and subversion of bogan humour within typecast places negates underlying classism or merely provides a means to soften the blow. New electronic media intensify old modes of media dialogue about class, but they also provide avenues to debate what it means to be working-class, to be “bogan” —and to be Australian, too. All the same, in the process an industry of class derision—constituted in this case as heavy traffic on websites, blogs and facebook groups—becomes further vitalised. Bogan humour promulgates in this way, becoming topical as a source of online engagement, rather than fading into the background as irrelevant or inappropriate.

This example invites reflection on the ways in which humour operates as a form of spatial politics, especially around class and neighbourhood, and how classed people and places are “fixed” spatially in the “moment” of the media event. In television and film, battler-bogans and bogan-heroes tread a fine line between condescension and celebration but nevertheless tap into entrenched nationalist sentiments and values—appealing to Australianness.⁵⁹ In tabloid journalism, “current affairs” television stories, online newspapers and blogs, the zoom is more closely focused—on bogan bodies, homes, social spaces, sports, suburbs. In blogs, on Facebook, on Tongarra Road and Terry Street, Albion Park, the landscapes and bodies inhabiting classed terminology are specifically georeferenced. As Robyn Dowling argues, places “‘bind’ classes together ... spatially congruent and spatially extensive social networks and imaginaries are implicated in processes producing and reproducing classes”.⁶⁰ This goes some way to explaining the humorous appeal, the

social imperative towards mapping the microgeographies of class in lists of bogan places, or in the case of Albion Park, locals' baton-passing of the derisive bogan joke onto other nearby neighbourhoods and suburbs. We should not pretend for a moment that this is somehow a peculiarly Australian trait: even in Poland, "parts of the working class are labeled as 'dresiarze' (those who wear tracksuits) and 'blokersi' (those who live in tower blocks) to reductively frame the working class as tasteless and anonymous, yet somehow threatening".⁶¹ Terms of derision everywhere have their desired social and geographical effect: putting people in their place.

In many ways, then, *bogan* is merely the latest linguistic/cultural device to maintain middle-class hegemony, keeping the working-classes at bay as apprehensive other, in fixed spatial coordinates. But in the expanding social media landscape, it is also a convenient means to profit on prejudice and the cheap laughs that come from putting down others. Judging by the number of online comments to *The Punch's* original article on bogans, the strategy here was predictable—articles on bogans successfully create online traffic.

The story of Albion Park as "bogan" confirms and confounds conventional readings of class politics in urban Australia. As well as binding the abject working-class body, the failed industrial worker, to a failed industrial landscape and stagnant cultural backwater, the naming of Albion Park as Australia's most bogan place also became—albeit unintentionally—a means to *enchantment*, an avenue for this otherwise nondescript place to declare itself *bogan-ville*. Working-class appropriations of bogan jokes rendered that which is utterly familiar—"ordinarily" suburban, Australian places—as newly alien. Sure—a bogan joke gets a laugh at someone else's expense. But what happens afterwards is far more complex, as evidenced here by the contradictory array of discussions online in comments, blogs

and facebook pages—far more evocative, perhaps, of the texture of everyday life than media stereotypes could ever capture.

Notes

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