

## Sydney and the Appearance of the Middle Eastern

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**ABSTRACT:** This work addresses the phrase *of Middle Eastern appearance*, and the related concept of ‘the Middle East’ as it has played out in Sydney over the last ten years. It focuses on the key event of the notorious Cronulla Riots of 2005, and on the healing responses to that event. Forms addressed range from inter-personal jokes to anonymous ‘viral’ internet communications, to short films, and then to recently published, and highly influential, children’s literature. Cautiously re-negotiating the language and its concepts can be shown to have occurred with sensitivity, humour and use of new media.

Recently a second-generation Australian, Joe, made his first visit to Lebanon, travelling with his father, through Beirut and then into the mountains to the family’s ancestral village. On his return to Sydney, the following exchange was overheard:

*Dave [Anglo<sup>1</sup>]:* So, what was it all like? Was it what you expected?

*Joe:* Oh the security everywhere was enormous; they all looked really edgy as if something was always about to happen.

*Dave [Anglo]:* Suppose it was because of all those ‘of Middle Eastern appearance’.

*Joe:* Oh, funny bugger, you are.

The joking here is based upon the post-9/11 and widely-acknowledged (Western) profiling of persons who were potential threats/suspects—this based upon their ethnic appearance as ‘Middle Eastern’. Such profiling judgements can be seen as offensive by the individual or by the group affected, and are particularly destabilizing in that the individual or minority is singled out for attention and marked as ‘not part of the major group’. Of course, in Beirut and across the Middle East and North Africa, such an ‘appearance’ would be the norm. Even in Sydney, such

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<sup>1</sup> In Sydney the terms *anglo* and *skip* indicate an Australian of British descent, these terms widely used by those of other descent. *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*, as early as 1987 (its 7th ed.) cites the latter as ‘colloquial and derogatory’, and from ‘*Skippy*, kangaroo in children’s television series’. In effect, the terms *anglo* and *skip* are counterparts to the ‘slang and derogatory’ term *wog* and related usages.

an ‘appearance’ is the norm in many suburbs, e.g. from the Western Suburbs to the Airport in Mascot.

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Australia, long a multi-national country, has a sizable proportion of its population which has been born in the Middle East,<sup>2</sup> and as an indication of the cultural inheritance, to this proportion can be added the multiples of descendants who have been born in Australia—often now for several generations. For example, at the end of the nineteenth century the numbers from Lebanon were large enough to require the construction of their own large church buildings in Sydney and in Melbourne.<sup>3</sup> Such is the longer-term nature of large-scale migration from the Middle East, first appearing much further back than the comparatively recent (and, in its turn, even larger again) migration from Asia.<sup>4</sup>

In Australia, the post-9/11 uncertainty, led to what seemed to be the ‘sudden’ appearance of those of Islamic religion. Now, while usually of Lebanese origin, centred in the lower socio-economic Sydney suburbs of Lakemba and Auburn, there were associated problems in the public identification/discussion of related issues. In fact, for those who had little contact with any of these suburbs or groups, by a process of over-extension all whose backgrounds were in the Middle East or North Africa were mistakenly considered to be Islamic. At its simplest over-extension, the word *Lebanese* came to mean *Islamic*, as also did its frequent contraction, *Leb*. This ignores the situation that the great majority of Australians of Lebanese origin are also Christians (approximately 80%), as is the situation in Lebanon. Indeed, this mistake ignores the major fracture line between those two religion-identifying groups, arising from its long bitter history in that country. This frequent over-extension of definition was accompanied by an over-simplification in discussion, where doubts could be readily expressed as to the commitment of the ‘other’ to ‘our’ shared national values. Possibly these fears were increased by the two recent wars—those in Afghanistan and in Iraq. In the latter, the language of identifying, simplifying and objectifying the ‘enemy’, had much potential to carry over into within-Australia opinions and encounters.

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<sup>2</sup> The Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, in its overview snapshot, cites the Australian Census which found that the numbers from North Africa and the Middle East combined came to a total of 251,000 people. See <<http://www.dfat.gov.au/aib/society.html>> [accessed 31 October 2010].

<sup>3</sup> See Batrouney, Andrew and Trevor Batrouney, *The Lebanese in Australia*, Australian Ethnic Heritage Series (Melbourne: Australasian Educa Press, 1984), pp. 48-49.

<sup>4</sup> Here DFAT cites South-East Asia 553,000, and North-East Asia 389,000 <<http://www.dfat.gov.au/aib/society.html>> [accessed 31 October 2010].

In the Australia of 2001, the expression, *of Middle Eastern appearance*, was largely new.<sup>5</sup> Its background form was in the infrequently used expression, *of Mediterranean appearance*, and this followed on from the more frequently used phrase, *of Aboriginal appearance*. Indeed the latter had long been used by law enforcement agencies and the media, in particular, from the 1990s—its purpose being in order to avoid the too-ready identification of race with crime.<sup>6</sup> The blanket term *Aboriginal* was thus avoided. So the phrase *of Middle Eastern appearance* was ready for use in the new fracture lines which emerged in the new century.

### *Cronulla Riots, 2005, Cronulla Language*

December 11, 2005, saw the appearance of racially-inspired mob violence on an Australian suburban concourse-type beach. The images were horrifying, showing group attacks upon individuals who were innocent of any involvement. Some of this targeting of the defenceless was captured in video which, when replayed by the media, can still shock today.<sup>7</sup> The response over the following nights was for carloads of youths, armed with baseball bats, to drive towards the beachside suburbs, and to attack individuals or to proceed to smash windscreens of cars parked in streets. Much of the organization for all this activity was orchestrated online and by mobile phone.

The sequence of events, which led to these attacks, the events themselves and the aftermath, are all well-documented on-line, supported by contemporary quotations and eye-witness accounts.<sup>8</sup> The account of the initial disturbance shows anger escalating over the concepts of behaviour and of entitlement to use the beach—‘I’m allowed to, now fuck off and leave our beach’, said one of the initial protagonists.

In addition to such obviously inflammatory language, the seemingly objective/descriptive language can also be seen to divide. The phrase *of Middle Eastern appearance* was used eight times within the Wikipedia

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase has not yet appeared in either the *Macquarie Dictionary* or the *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

<sup>6</sup> In the early 1990s, an ABC ‘Four Corners’ program presented a Redfern police officer responding to a question on identifying crime by saying that—an Aboriginal person driving a red Laser would be a car theft. Ignoring the intended humour of her comment, the community response was to interpret her words (and/or possible policing decisions) as racism—but within ten years, and the ‘War on Terror’, profiling was seen as an effective and crucial tool.

<sup>7</sup> However, over time, its shock value has come to be shared by security camera footage of more recent random/opportunistic attacks, typically alcohol-fuelled, late-night, and with a small group attacking an individual. Race is seldom noted as a factor in these more recent attacks.

<sup>8</sup> 2005 Cronulla Riots, Wikipedia <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2005\\_Cronulla\\_riots](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2005_Cronulla_riots)> [accessed 13 October 2010].



account in direct or indirect quotation. *Middle Eastern* and *Middle East* appear several more times. Together these phrases indicate the major rift which one group wished to make/exploit. In the same account, the words *Lebanese* and *Leb* appear fourteen times—a usage which is both more specific than ‘Middle Eastern’, but certainly broader than the Islamic Lebanese group.<sup>9</sup> The sweeping over-generalization in all this can be readily linked to the sociologist Stanley Cohen’s influential concept of ‘moral panics’,<sup>10</sup> a concept initially devised as an analysis of Britain’s Mods and Rockers phenomenon in the 1960s, but



[Above and left] ‘Viral’ images distributed online in the days following the Cronulla Riots, 12 December 2005.

<sup>9</sup> In the days following the initial riot, defence and resistance centred around the Lakemba Mosque. Ibid.  
<sup>10</sup> Cohen, Stanley, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1980).

published later and its recurring applicability is still often noted somewhat later. He notes that

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media (p. 9) ... [and that much is to be learnt from] how society labels rule-breakers as belonging to certain deviant groups, and how, once the person is thus type cast, his acts are interpreted in terms of the status to which he has been assigned. (p. 12)

His focus is upon society's expectation, rumours and their magnification, all of which helps to consolidate the deviant group, to validate its identity, and intentions, and to focus its action. The media's reaction is then shown to lead to exaggerated publicity-seeking behaviour, to provide a 'contagion effect' whereby others at a distance could also feel prompted to participate, and finally transmitted stereotypical descriptions of how one can behave in the deviant role.<sup>11</sup> All this is wrapped in the language of identification. It may also be noted that, traditionally such groups have been young and male. Similarly, their locations are often beaches, that liminal egalitarian space, which in Australia is often the site for major life's identifications/ choices; as a leading writer, Robert Drewe, puts it

Australians make or break romances at the beach, they marry and take honeymoons at the beach; they go on holidays with their children to the beach, and in vast numbers retire by the sea.<sup>12</sup>

The timing of such large-scale panics/ clashes is around holidays—when opportunity meets one's sense of seasonal time and our proper/ justified place within it.<sup>13</sup>

#### *A Folk Response Using New Media*

At the same time as the above events were inflaming many, some others responded with what may be termed a folk humour—aware of the issues, the 'calls-to-arms' and the methods, but eschewing both violence

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<sup>11</sup> For a useful summary of Cohen's approach, see *Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>12</sup> 'Tidal Pull', *Good Weekend, Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 October 1993, pp. 39, 41 (p. 41). In Huntsman, Leonie, *Sand in Our Souls: The Beach in Australian History* (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 2001). More generally, see Drewe, Robert (ed.), *The Picador Book of the Beach* (Chippendale, NSW: Pan Macmillan, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Santino, Jack, *All Around the Year* (Urbano and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), pp. 1-2.

and withdrawal. Their preferred response was satire, which was appreciated and so then widely transmitted in the online method termed 'viral'—as with the rapid distribution of topical jokes online. Developments in technology meant that by 2005 images could be constructed to take their place alongside the textual/ verbal, and with encouraging effect. One image so distributed shows the familiar beach lifesavers' flags as replaced by the national flag of Lebanon. The image is polysemic, extending from suggestions of an overly inflated concept of ownership of the beach, to the suggestion that the only safe place for Lebanese on the beach is the narrow space between these flags.

Another widely distributed image presents a mock 'sale flyer' from the widely-recognised commercial franchise, Rebel Sport. Here the focus is on the Islamic Middle Eastern community, in that the store's branch is identified as in the suburb of Lakemba—this being a centre of the Islamic community in Sydney. The approach is of excessive exaggeration—as if the commercial operator would want to quickly arm large numbers with their defensive/ offensive weapon of choice.

The offer 'Buy 3 Bats Get 2 Free' is sufficient to arm a carload of five youths intending violence. Furthermore, seemingly taking advantage of the particular time, there is a special offer: 'Purchase before the weekend and receive a free car-pool pass to the beach on Sunday.' The violence which had spilled into the week-nights, was widely expected to build into an even larger confrontation at the beach the following Sunday. With such exaggeration, the belligerent intentions of some could be defused into humour. The absurdity of the escalating violence and the mindlessness of its participants, it was suggested, could be exploited by commercial opportunism.

As is often the case in such rapidly-spread online communications, the identity of the composer/s is not known. 'File Info', which is electronically coded within the images, suggests that the beach image was photographed in 2003, and that it was modified (i.e. the flags added) on 12 December—the day after the initial riot. The baseball bats image was composed in the early hours of 13 December—at the end of the second night of 'baseball bat' violence on the streets. The speed of this composition/ distribution is important in that its very speed adds to the humour (as with topical jokes), but also because it here becomes an intervention in the uncertainties of events while they are in the process of unfolding. Just as their names are missing, it is also important that the racial/ religious background of the composer/s is not known—and so their stance cannot be identified/ imputed and thus too-readily dismissed as partisanship. In sum, the folk-message in these two images becomes one of humour which transcends the gulf between the two main groups. If circumstances, or the situation permitted one to talk to the other then it would be shared humour.



*Still from 'Between the Flags', Tropfest Short Film Festival, 2007. The clothing of the two characters reflects their intended identities: the Australian flag on the shorts of one; the other in the [Lakemba area's] Canterbury Bulldogs rugby league jersey, with its message a mix of loyalties—for sport, team, suburb, community and indirectly for [Islamic] religion.*

#### *Inter-personal Response Probed in a Short Film Form*

Billed as 'The World's Largest Short Film Festival', *Tropfest*—held in Sydney—features a free mass-public screening of the finalist entries, and this takes place early in each year. A dvd collection of the finalists typically appears several weeks after the festival, and this dvd is distributed freely to the public with their purchase of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The short format is undemanding on time, the content is broadly accessible and widely enjoyed.

In early 2007, one of the finalists, 'Between the Flags' (written, directed by Jayce White), presented a situation where two intending rioters, of opposing sides, encounter each other at a beachside carpark.<sup>14</sup> Clarifying that each is there for 'the riot', they decide that they are the first there, and that it would be better to wait for others—as even ten or twelve would be described as merely 'a brawl, not a riot'. They enquire about weapons—one has a cricket bat, the other a knuckle-duster (not

<sup>14</sup> See the opening exchange of the two characters in the online video available at <<http://www.imdb.com/video/wab/vi2429551129/>> [accessed 31 October 2010].

shown). As their solitude continues, each soon makes comment on their other shared interests (mobile phones, audio, music etc.), asking for advice, correcting the other, sharing their enthusiasm. Having a ball to accompany the bat, they ultimately engage in a game of beach cricket—with the skills and humorous posturing which one can see on Australian beaches any weekend. This continues for quite some time, until the climax comes when a mobile phone message tells one of them that the intended riot has gone ahead, but that it was at a different beach.

While the identity clash prompting the event seems to require ‘a riot’, this feeling is shown as not affecting the shared interests and connectedness of individual Australians. After a menacing opening, with titles identifying the date and event, the whole is a most humorous presentation, and one which had a strong impact upon the massed open-air audience in the Sydney Domain. Within the few minutes of this short film (one blogger reported) that there was ‘a lot of laughing and clapping and it was a great idea’. In online comment immediately after, there were numerous expressions of surprise that this film did not win the competition. Perhaps judged as too predictable or artless, the short film’s message was nevertheless one of great value to the community—as another blogger claimed ‘it’s just so relevant to Sydney in recent times’.<sup>15</sup>

#### *More Recent Imaginative Response*

The passage of several more years means that the issues can be addressed in a more general fashion. Over time the already loose, but powerful, concept of ‘Middle-Eastern appearance’ can be explored in broader contexts and of new ways of shared understanding.

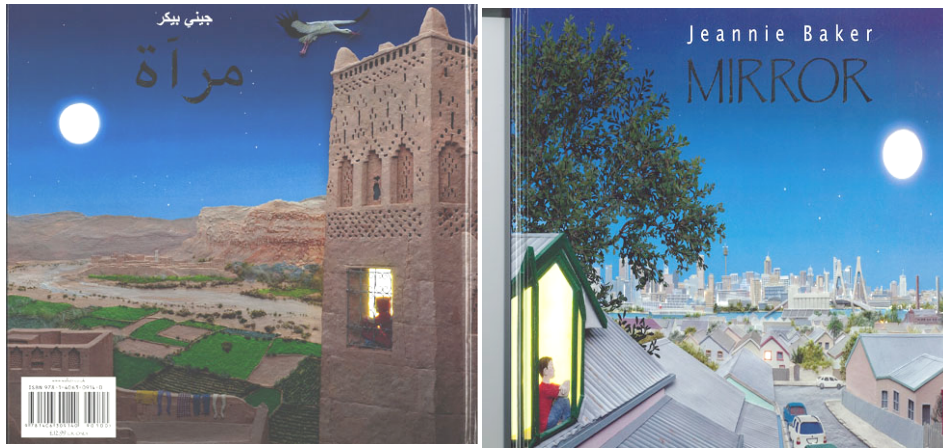
Jeannie Baker is an award-winning and influential Australian children’s author, tackling environmental themes through her picture books.<sup>16</sup> Just as environmental themes were newly challenging in the 1980s, so her most recent picture book—*Mirror* (2010)<sup>17</sup>—addresses a key newly challenging issue of the last decade. The work is set in both Sydney and in Morocco. The overseas setting is drawn from her own journeys there (in 2003 and 2005) and the people, writing, culture and geography, as she presents it, would be read by Australian children as being of *Middle Eastern appearance*.

<sup>15</sup> Did the Tropfest Judges Get It Right? Entertainment Blog, *Sydney Morning Herald* <[http://blogs.smh.com.au/entertainment/archives/box\\_office/009881.html](http://blogs.smh.com.au/entertainment/archives/box_office/009881.html)> [accessed 31 October 2010].

<sup>16</sup> Her *Where the Forest Meets the Sea* (1985) and *Window* (1991) would be read at some point by all Primary School students, and for two decades these texts have frequently been used by teachers as the basis of units of classwork addressing the theme of the environment.

<sup>17</sup> Baker, Jeannie, *Mirror* (London: Walker Books, 2010).





*The 'two front covers' of Mirror (2010), opened out to be seen as one image. Only the location of the ISBN/ barcode (for commercial necessity) indicates a privileging of English-reading format.*

The work takes a most creative approach within the genre of children's literature. In its attempt to mirror the lives of the two children (and by extension all people), the work takes advantage of the different directionality of reading texts in Arabic script—where an unopened book would be bound on the right-hand side rather than the left. In this way, Baker's book has two front covers—one in the English form, one in the Arabic. Next, from whichever direction one opens the book, a reader is then effectively presented with two children's books bound into one, with a double-page opening (stitched in the normal fashion) appearing on each side. There is one page of introductory text (the only text within the picture book, until an appendix page of author's comments) and this is fully 'mirrored' in English and Arabic script. The straight right-hand margin of the Arabic text shows that such readers/writers progress from right to left. Even the page of publication details is 'mirrored' in both languages, as is the usual title page, and also the page demonstrating the planned reading process. To progress through the pages, one must open both versions at the same time in order to see the 'mirroring' of experiences—in effect, one must read as would the 'other'.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The parallel structure of this book is demonstrated in a YouTube video <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUeDDzc7oA>> and also on VodPod <<http://vodpod.com/watch/4653356-window-by-jeannie-baker>> [accessed 19 November 2010].

There are many parallels, and some (cultural) crossovers (such as the Sydney family acquiring an Arabic carpet); there is humour, and nuanced detail which repays many readings. Guiding all this creative reading process and detail is the larger message. As the author says in her final notes:

The idea for the book was right there: that outward appearances may be very different but the inner person of a 'stranger' may not be a stranger at all. Like each other, we live to be loved by family and friends, and be part of a larger family, a community. Inwardly we are so alike, it could be each other we see when we look in a mirror. (p. [18])

Appearances can always be deceptive—especially when there are essential similarities which may be overlooked. In applying this principle to the concept of *Middle Eastern appearance*, one might extend upon Baker's comment and richly-developed metaphor: as with a mirror, the appearance might be somewhat different and awkwardly unfamiliar, but what we are seeing is essentially ourselves.

Jeannie Baker says that after her visits to Morocco, the preparation of the book then took another five years,<sup>19</sup> thus leading to its publication in 2010. This leaves 2006 as the conceptual first year of the writing, while she was reflecting upon the inspiring humanity of those whom she had met on her journeys, and at the same time was confronted by her own community's pain and anger—at the very time that Sydney was dealing with the immediate aftermath of the Cronulla Riot. There was a dire need to re-envision the way the 'Middle East' appeared to us, and her commitment to this can be seen through quality/creativity of the work, as well as its quantity (at 36 pages this work is twice the length of a usual children's picture book). That the project took five years reflects a similar concern to 'get it right'. Such a service to the community could only be undertaken by those few people who have the skills, experience, time and commitment. However it can have a broad impact upon the developing understanding of many young people, and (as with her previous works), do so over many years ahead.

There is a benefit in such a broader imaginative (largely word-less) work, in that its relevance may not be so readily ignored or dismissed. However, when still close to the painful event, such a work with its broad message may be dismissed by those whose overwhelming commitment is partisan. By 2010 it may be said that the time for this work had come.

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<sup>19</sup> Baker, Jeannie, 'Interview on 'Life Matters'', ABC Radio National, 16 September 2010. Mp3 downloadable <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/lifematters/stories/2010/3012698.htm>> [accessed 19 November 2010]

*But Residual Simplicities*

Those of the firmest of preconceptions/ beliefs do not have these moderated by any of the examples above. If anything, their beliefs may become even stronger as they encounter challenges, and the beliefs become more privately held. However the community's use of particular language can change, and with it the spectrum of attitudes refracted through use of that language. Time may be seen to have drained the phrase, *of Middle Eastern appearance* (and also *Lebanese*), of much of its likely panic. However, (colloquial) language is shaped 'in use', and just as the moral panic was shaped by the public, the participants, the media and the authorities,<sup>20</sup> so some members of ordinary folk therein began its healing, with more reflective communication of the issues, containing sensitivity, humour, creativity and use of new media.

The inter-personal joking which was recounted in the beginning of this piece shows an acknowledgement of different experiences and appearances in this country, but it also shows the interest, acceptance and commitment that can go with/ arise from situation-specific humour. So long as Australians find ways to cross the inevitable fracture-lines by use of their humour and other attempts to connect, then they will have less need to rely upon mere 'appearances'.

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<sup>20</sup> Cohen also includes the 'agents of control', the authorities, but they have not been in focus in this piece—not least because the authorities' flaws which he notes were not prominent in the responses to the riotous events in Australia forty years later.

Did the Tropfest Judges Get It Right? Entertainment Blog, *Sydney Morning Herald*

<[http://blogs.smh.com.au/entertainment/archives/box\\_office/009881.html](http://blogs.smh.com.au/entertainment/archives/box_office/009881.html)> [accessed 31 October 2010].

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Tony Mason, and Eliza Riedi, *Sport and the Military: The British Armed Forces 1880–1960* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Paperback, ISBN-13: 9780521700740. AUD\$39.95 (inclusive of GST. Export price AUD\$36.32).

On battleships, behind the trenches in World War I on the Western Front, in the Desert, or stranded in rearguard camps, servicemen and women have always tried to play sport, despite the difficulties, tiredness, and even risk. While this volume is largely about British servicemen and women, the same is true of Australian.

When 400 soldiers in Burma in 1946 were asked what they liked about the Army, 108 put down sport as the top attraction—well ahead of comradeship and regular paid leave. This study focuses on this aspect of the lives of officers and men in the three services from c. 1880-1960.

Drawing on a wide range of sources, this book examines how organised sport developed in the Victorian army and navy, became the focus of criticism for Edwardian army reformers, and was officially adopted during the Great War to boost morale and esprit de corps. It shows how service sport adapted to the influx of professional sportsmen, especially footballers, during the Second World War and the National Service years.