dismantling of social inequalty. In addition, for people in the gym, as in the broader context of New York City, the 'reading' of the bodies of others into categories of racial belonging remains deeply embedded in habits of seeing, thinking and interacting such that these identifications represent a key trope through which others are situated in relation to oneself, and in terms of which relationships are constructed and negotiated. At the same time, the implicitly objectifying processes of such identifications are resisted through conscious efforts to evaluate others intersubjectively, 'to see people as people'. In Brooklyn Gym, everyday practices are carried out within categories of difference, while also reframing and escaping them as they are calcified in academic discourses of racism and multiculturalism alike. Academic framings of the multicultural must move beyond reductions of society into census categories of difference, toward a different way of seeing how they are practised and produced in the messy interstices of daily life.

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9

Fishing the Georges River: Cultural Diversity and Urban Environments

Heather Goodall, Stephen Wearing, Denis Byrne and Allison Cadzow

Introduction

Fishing is the most popular recreation in Australia but there are many different ways in which Australians have fished. Here are just a few extracts from interviews with people who live near and use the Georges River, a large tidal river in Sydney's suburban south-west.[1] They suggest the diverse skills and knowledge on the river, but also the currents of emotion, fear and politics which swirl around everyday fishing:

Mahmoud lives in Bankstown but his family came from Syria:

> *...we use a traditional Syrian or Lebanese rod where there's no reels. It's about a metre long and it's telescopic...so it comes out to some six metres and then from the end tip, a fishing line is just tied to the top and then you put a sinker, a float and then another line down with the hook.*

Kel, from an Irish background, grew up in the Depression-era squatter settlement at One Tree Point on Salt Pan Creek, which runs into the Georges River (Earnshaw 2001; Barnham 2003). He reminisced about the 1930s:

> *Me and my brothers made prawn nets out of chaff bags strung together and we'd use a hurricane lamp at night time to go down and prawn and take them home and cook them straight out of the river into the pot.*

John, an Aboriginal man, grew up on Salt Pan Creek in the 1950s. Calling himself 'a lazy fisherman', he explained:

> *... if you go when the coast wattle is in flower, you can pop the flower and leaves into the deep inlets and pools around the Salt Pan. The next tide cleans it all out. But when you do it, it takes the oxygen out of the water and you can just scoop the fish out.*

Cuong, who came from Vietnam as a young boy in the 1980s, described how his family's growing financial security was expressed through their fishing gear:

> *So when they got here, they'd just buy a rod, just a stick, back when they poor. And when they got a bit more, they got introduced to the whole fishing technology and that's when they'd first buy themselves a few expensive parts and they'd go fishing. My uncle actually went to Queensland and bought a net for $400 but he only used it once, because it's illegal. [...] he was so excited about it because it was about 20 years that he hasn't been able to find a net. In Vietnam, he didn't do it that often but it was part of his childhood, so when he found the net he just had to buy it, no matter how expensive it was! Coming back from Queensland the next day, he got up at about four o'clock, got all my other uncles up and went to the national park just to try the net. They caught nothing at all ...*

In contrast here is an Anglo-Australian teenager who'd grown up on the Georges River. He told us he's never fished, 'the water is too polluted'. But he's spent all his childhood with family and mates on the banks and out on boats. He says:

> *... anyway, it's the Asian fishermen who take all the little fish. They never throw anything back. I don't know if they're Vietnamese. Hell, they're just Asian. When we were kids we'd walk past their buckets and try and push them over, and we'd throw stones at them when we were out in the boats because they're dragging. We'd see them out there with their throw-nets, dragging the river at night. We were down there. They take all the prawns. It wrecks the river.*

And here is Helen, from the Sudanese community, describing how she learned to fish from the people along the river's banks:

> *There's this old guy I met a couple of times when I first started fishing and he showed me a lot of what I needed to know, he was an old Greek guy, like a retired tiler or builder. He used to have these home-concocted baits. [...] And then, when he was showing me that bait, then some other guys, a group of young Lebanese guys, would come up to me and go, 'Nah, we've been catching all day on steak'.*

These diverse views arise because fishing is tangled up in the rapid cultural, social and environmental changes which have occurred on the Georges River in recent decades. Beyond the headlines and statistics of ethnic conflict in the area, it is everyday activities such as fishing that open up the lived realities of change because they are always social practices, even when people fish alone.

The Georges River runs through the heart of Sydney's most culturally diverse population, including long-established Aboriginal and Anglo-Celtic communities as well as the many more recent immigrant communities that have developed since the 1980s. Most people in all these communities are in working-class employment (if they have jobs at all), are living in densely packed suburbs and, despite some gentrification on the margins, still have significant disadvantages in educational and social infrastructure. As well as being a large river with scenic parklands threading along its lower estuarine reaches, the Georges River is also the focus of intensifying ethnic conflicts which often spill over into the media. The names of the river's suburbs – Cabramatta, Liverpool, Bankstown, Macquarie Fields and Lakemba – are well known around Australia for their tensions. Yet, recent surveys of Australian attitudes to cultural diversity have demonstrated a widespread endorsement of the desire to reach across cultural differences despite the effect of international events and the media in increasing the hostile polarisation between ethnic groups (Ang et al. 2002, 2006).

This paper will ask whether considering the area's complex relationships and tensions through the lens of 'everyday' activities might allow us to understand those conflicts more clearly. Fishing is one of those everyday sites, offering the chance to reflect on how the day-to-day relationships across and between communities actually work. Our project, *Parklands, Culture and Communities*, has conducted around 120 in-depth interviews drawn, in roughly equal numbers, from four of the many cultural groups in the area: the Aboriginal, Anglo, Vietnamese and Arabic-speaking people who live near and use the Georges River parklands. The Aboriginal population is a small but culturally significant minority of between 1 per cent and 2 per cent along the river. The

Vietnamese community is focused in the Fairfield area, where it forms 16 per cent of the local government area, but Vietnamese people comprise between 4 per cent and 7 per cent of the LGA populations along the northern length of the Georges River and along the Cooks River which also runs into Botany Bay. Arabic-speaking communities form expanding minorities in many areas on the northern riverside, their numbers rising from 9 per cent to 16 per cent of the population in the Bankstown LGA between 1986 and 2001, and from 12 per cent to 15 per cent in the Canterbury LGA, with substantial although small rises in all areas from Rockdale in the east right out to Parramatta (ABS results to 2001), As the river is the historic and geographic centre of the only substantial bodies of 'nature' in these densely developed suburbs, the topic of fishing arose constantly.

The project team members have each worked on fishing in different contexts (Goodall 2001, 2006a, 2006b; Byrne and Nugent 2004; Wearing et al. 2008) and so to consider this question we have turned to the substantial literature on fishing as a recreational activity (Kuehn et al. 2006; Hunt et al. 2002; Hunt 2005) This has been helpful in identifying the social nature of anglers' decisions about when and with whom to fish, but only a small amount of it, notably that of Myron Floyd, considers the impact of ethnic diversity (Floyd et al. 2006; Henry and Lyle 2003; Hawkins 2004; Behrendt and Thompson 2004; Toth and Brown 1997). Development studies offers complementary work on the geography and biology of the rapidly transforming fishing industries in countries and regions from which many Australians come, such as Vietnam, India and the Middle East, demonstrating that 'traditional' fishing has long since disappeared under the impact of global commercial economies (Dey et al. 2005; Can and Quy 1994). A valuable approach has been the human-centred sociology of the 'everyday', notably that based on Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus', which investigates taken-for-granted and very physical activities to learn more about how they contribute to social relations and the power expressed through them. Much of this work has aimed at explaining how power is entrenched and preserved. However, analysts such as Judith Butler and, in Australia, Noble and Watkins, have argued that the embodied practices of habitus need not be seen as deterministic. Rather, they investigate situations in which consciousness and the exercise of agency could challenge social dominance and political control (Butler 1999; Noble and Watkins 2003).

Most useful, however, have been those approaches which engage a recognition of embodied knowledge, like fishing, with a consideration of how it is related to the external environment. Bruno Latour's work

identifies the agency of networks which include the biological, living world but also non-living technologies such as fishing rods and nets with which and through which humans interact (Latour 1999, 2004). Central to our understanding of how fishing works on the Georges River have been the approaches in anthropology that investigate the way humans are continually creating and recreating their relationships with their environments. Tim Ingold and Arjun Appadurai argue in their quite different works that culture does not predetermine a fixed pattern of relationships with any environment. Rather it offers a repertoire with which to continuously generate a sense of belonging to a place. Ingold's definition of a 'dwelling perspective' is important in the attention it pays to the way culture is not a given but is learnt each day in an active process of interaction with one's physical as well as social environment (Campbell 2005; Ingold 2000, 2005). Appadurai points to the cultural labour involved in continuously investing sites and landscapes with social meaning, labour which is intense but largely invisible to its practitioners. This results, Appadurai argues, in the production of *localities*, or the lived, socialised and 'everyday' generation of bonds between humans and places (Appadurai 1996, 1995).

In considering the everyday embodied activities, like fishing, of our interviewees on the Georges River, we argue that they are making performative claims on this external, material and natural world. By doing so they are making interventions in the relationships of power in the human societies around them. Ingold has identified the intentionality in everyday embodied practice when he writes:

> The concept of nature, like that of society, is inherently and intensely political. It is invariably bound up in a politics of claim and counter-claim, whose outcome depends on the prevailing balance of power (Ingold 2005: 503).

This paper discusses three examples of fishing in which it has been characterised as a 'problem' or has been a site of conflict.

1. ***Fishing out of place***: embodied knowledges which seem to be dislocated from the external natural world through migrancy or time. Such activities tend to be regarded as an inappropriate repetition of the past or as practices deployed in ignorance or disregard of new conditions.

2. ***Fishing as claim***: a process involved in performative deployments of embodied knowledges.

3. ***Fishing to 'produce locality'***: fishing as an exploratory and future-oriented intervention which, as Appadurai might suggest, generates an engagement for individuals or communities with the new 'locality'.

The first of our examples concentrates on the fishing practices of Vietnamese people in the Georges River area, while the second and the third examples widen the scope of inquiry to all four of our chosen study communities, including Aboriginal, Anglo-Irish and Arabic-speaking communities. Migrancy, and particularly the problem of how to undertake the ongoing creation of a relationship with a new place, is relevant for all four communities. Our research has been framed overall within Massey's understanding of place as a node in both time and space formed by the interconnections of the people who move through a place at any one time and of Chambers' understanding of migrancy as the presence of earlier and more distant homes in constant interaction with current places (Massey 1994; Chambers 1994). In our research on the Georges River, many of the local Aboriginal population have either moved from rural areas into the city themselves or have parents who did so. The group who least recognise themselves as migrants are in fact the Anglo-Irish, but the possibility that their fishing practices are a continuing expression of discomfort and insecurity in relation to place is an element which recurs frequently in our data. Migrancy has often been understood as leading to the preservation of links to the past by consolidating identities and repeating practices. We argue to the contrary that embodied practices like fishing, following the suggestions of Judith Butler, can be seen as future-oriented activity for change, mobilising known skills in a grassroots strategy for learning and making a new 'place'.

1. Fishing 'out of place'

Fishing is so engaged with the non-human material world that it is hard to imagine how it could be 'out of place'. Yet Australian regulators argue that migrants, and in particular Vietnamese migrants, are practising fishing behaviours which were developed for different environments and in different economic, legal and social contexts. We suggest that this is too simple a reading and will argue below that much Vietnamese fishing is related to the local environment. Yet there are also fishing behaviours on the Georges River which are indeed 'out of place'. They were not only learnt in another environment but are practised to evoke not just the memory but, beyond that, the physical feel and experience

of that other place. Ghassan Hage has argued from his research that for Lebanese immigrants missing their home, the complex of embodied experiences involved in feeling the weight of holding a Lebanese fishing rod in one's hands, the familiar physicality of baiting, casting and hauling in and the surrounding presence of a riverine environment were ways to conjure up the sensations of regaining a lost homeland, to experience both places simultaneously.[2]

The group whose fishing is consistently identified as 'out of place' both by the group itself and as a 'problem' by regulation agencies are Vietnamese Australians. Their rod fishing, use of nets and shellfish gathering is criticised because regulators and the general public assume that Vietnamese people tend to catch and keep under-sized fish, to gather too much and in general to fail to abide by the regulations about the types and size of fish to be caught. The main issue for the Georges River is net fishing. While regulators have quite complicated rules about where you can or cannot net fish in the lower Georges River and what sort of nets you can use, it is generally understood in the wider population that all net fishing today is illegal everywhere and in any form.

Australian regulation authorities talk about Vietnamese fishing practices in the same deterministic way that Bourdieu writes about habitus. The 1997 Australia-wide report, *We Fish for the Future*, commissioned by the Department of Environment, remains the major report conducted to date (Recfish, ECC 1997). It broke important new ground in initiating consultation with the Vietnamese community and exposing the official failure to convey information effectively to this or other non-English-speaking communities. Yet at the same time, it identified Vietnamese practices as a major problem, which threatened the existence of species in estuarine and coastal environments. The authors explained such activities with phrases like 'all activities are naturally geared to the catching of food' or these activities are 'culturally entrenched' and 'continue to persist'. In effect, the Recfish report argued that Vietnamese people were trapped within a culturally determined understanding of fishing as aimed at essential food provision, which led them to have what Recfish termed a 'conceptual difficulty' in comprehending regulations restricting those practices in Australia. As a consequence Recfish generated a number of recommendations about policies which would socialise or in extreme cases punish the groups involved, in order to dissuade them from such inappropriate behaviour.

The Recfish argument is contradicted by the accounts of participants in our study, and in earlier research (Thomas 2002), which have all suggested that most migrants from Vietnam since 1980 have come from

urban areas, not from subsistence agriculture. Although they might have lived close to rivers or to coastlines, as do most people in Vietnam, they were only very seldom practising fishing, either commercially or as subsistence. Most of our interviewees explained that they had not fished for a long time before migrating. For many of them, fishing was something that they remembered with nostalgia as a childhood pastime at their grandparents' village, in what several called 'fishing for fun'. Fishing had a variety of meanings for the Vietnamese we interviewed but what it doesn't mean is the expectation that their life in Australia will rely on subsistence fishing.

More people in our interviews explained that on arrival in Australia they felt a sense of unfamiliarity with the recreational behaviours around them, like lawn bowls. Furthermore, they had not felt welcomed into such sports clubs and venues. Having looked in vain for recreational pastimes with which they had been familiar in Vietnam, they chose to practise what they *did* know, which was how to fish. In this sense their practice of fishing reflected, at least initially, a sense of exclusion as well as an inability to participate in the dominant local recreational activity. There were, however, outcomes to this almost enforced fishing which were seen by both older and younger Vietnamese interviewees as beneficial. The older interviewees reflected that it had allowed them to talk about their lives in Vietnam to younger members of their family who were growing up without that experience.

Strikingly, a number of the people with whom we spoke explained that they or their older relations fished *more* in Australia than they had in Vietnam. They pointed out that fishing had taken on not only a different but a more central and defining role in Vietnamese people's experience of *being Vietnamese* in Australia, so that over time the practice became much more commonly assumed to be an expected part of family outings and larger extended family and community gatherings. It came to be almost a ritual which would demonstrate a link with the past. While it did not reflect their actual previous practice in Vietnam, it had come to express a sense of what they shared with other Vietnamese people in Australia. Fishing *became* that which defined them as a cultural group with a sense of identity to non-Vietnamese people in Australia. This also helped to explain why activities that involved significant numbers of people, such as harvesting shellfish on coastal rock shelves or prawning, or illegal netting, might be carried on long after there might be any economic or nutritional need, if there ever was one. It was the 'collectiveness', one interviewee explained, 'the fact that it was doing things together! so they could

come home with what they had gathered, have a get-together, eat this food they had collected together!' In a situation of migrancy, in which pressures have been high and identities challenged, the emergence of a collective activity that was even marginally related to a home-country tradition, and which could offer ongoing opportunities for socialisation and community building, was to be welcomed and sustained.

2. Fishing as a claim

In a very different use for fishing, the performance of a claim in the sense to which Ingold refers, there is a clear relationship to the surrounding environment. Fishing can be seen as a claim because to be comfortable and skilful requires long practice and participation in the sport, which could be anywhere, but also a familiarity with the specific place, the way the banks slope, the currents in the river as they flow over the unseen bed, the tidal influences and the species which may swim there. This performance of comfortable and knowledgeable fishing therefore positions the fisher as one who is 'at home', who belongs in that place and may be said to exercise an assertion of ownership. Each of the four groups we have interviewed have used fishing to make such claims about their relationship to the river. Their claims are in tension – and even in competition – with each other.

The most assertive group to use fishing in this way are the Anglo-Celtic residents of the area, increasingly the minority in the parks on weekends or holidays, but during the quieter weekdays, it is Anglo-Celtic locals who are most often seen fishing. They are eager to talk about their sense of their fishing as a demonstration of belonging. We interviewed a group of elderly Anglo-Celtic Australian men fishing at Burrawang Reach at Picnic Point, a section of the Georges River National Park. They told us they lived on Heroes Hill, their nickname for the returned servicemen's retirement village close by. Their affectionate reference to 'Heroes' evoked the legends about national identity born in warfare but it embedded those distant battles into their familiar local landscape within and around what is now designated 'national'. Today this title indicates a focus on conservation management, but the first people to demand that the riverland park be called a 'national park' were the local working-class Anglo-Celtic populations of the 1940s, who argued that it needed to be 'national' to save the green space from factory expansion, not only to protect the environment but to offer space for the local working people to enjoy the real 'bush'. For them, these local people were 'the nation'

and their imagined construction of a group identity was closely tied into the native landscape.

The elderly fishermen told us first how much they enjoyed their time in their regular spot on the river bank. Before long, however, they began telling us how angry they were that newcomers were taking over some of their spaces. Overall, they complained particularly about Arabic-speaking people, whom they assumed were all Muslims – they joked bitterly that their home would soon be called Iraqi Hill. In relation to the river, however, their main complaint was about Asian fishermen. Their accusations mirrored those of the young teenager we had talked to who didn't fish but still claimed to care about anyone who 'wrecked the river'. These older men positioned themselves as the ones who not only knew the regulations about fishing and catch sizes, but who cared enough about the river to abide by the restrictions. Asian fishermen, they complained, would 'take everything out of the water', catching and keeping fish smaller than the regulation size by using nets as well as lines. Such representations are reinforced by press articles about violent clashes along the Georges River between Vietnamese fishers, fishing authorities and European-identifying fishermen. Greek and Italian fishermen accused Vietnamese fishermen of 'overfishing' and using aggressive tactics to secure the best fishing spots (*Sun Herald*, 22 October 1996, p. 40; *Torch*, 30 January 1991, p. 1) Yet violence – or the accusations of it – do not all flow one way. A number of Vietnamese recreational fishers have been assaulted while fishing and many reported that they had been targeted for abuse (Recfish, ECC 1997).

Deeper investigation shows that these assertions of responsible fishing mask a more ambiguous past and present. Anglo-Celtic fishermen interviewed in our study talked frequently about how they used nets in the past, from the hessian bags used for prawning to the hand-made nets of local anglers and the commercial nets of the professional fishermen who trawled in the Georges River up until the 1960s, when it was closed due to heavy industrial pollution. Today, with the river again open for fishing, the old fishermen have been happy to tell us humorous but 'off-the-record' stories about how they trick the fishing inspectors by keeping a 'second bucket' in the car boot to hide undersize catches and escape a fine. Yet the public claims that Anglo-Celtic and, more broadly, European fishermen are defending environmental responsibility keep being repeated as a way to marginalise Asian fishermen. In effect, this is consistent with the 1940s vision of the local residents who wanted their park to be 'national'. Their desire, as demonstrated in their campaigns and public statements, was to use the parks to foster an imagined nation

which would be mono-cultural and quite strictly bounded in racial and ethnic terms. The river and fishing continue to be mobilised to make the same claim that the 'nation' belongs to those who claim they know how to look after it.

This is certainly not the view of Aboriginal people who live on the Georges River. There has been a sustained history of Aboriginal presence in this area, including both traditional owners and the people who migrated into the area from rural areas. The emerging Aboriginal communities have drawn on affiliations to land both distant and local to develop an understanding of cultural responsibility as Aboriginal adults towards this city river, taking an active role in the custodianship of the land on which they are living now. Fishing has played a major role in the way many people have done this.

Lew Solberg's life-story exemplifies this process. Lew came to Sydney as a child with his mother, an Aboriginal woman from around Yass, and his Anglo-Norwegian father. They lived in Redfern, where Lew spent some of his time, but most of his weekends were spent with his father's mother in her home at East Hills on the Georges River. From this childhood on the river, he has remained in the area all his life, fishing regularly from his small 'tinny' motor boat, building on his knowledge at the same time as learning more about the conservation needs of the river he had previously fished only for food and pleasure. He is now an elderly man who continues to fish, although now only on a 'catch and return' basis. He has taken up his responsibilities to the Aboriginal community and to the river by participating actively in the Aboriginal Land Council as their representative on the emerging Catchment Management Committees for the area, where he is able to speak on behalf of the Land Council, reflecting its concerns about the health of the river as a whole. Lew's knowledge of fish habitat, of changing bank and bed structures, the condition of the waters and the changing life along the water's margins on the river banks have all contributed to a deep understanding of change in the quality of the water over time. These factors have allowed Lew to strengthen his own sense of his role as a custodian of the river which in turn he sees as embodying his responsibilities as an Aboriginal man.

The assumptions of white Australians that they are the owners of the area is in conflict with the claim being developed by Aboriginal members of the community such as Lew Solberg that they are the people with the custodial responsibility to care for the river. There is yet another and quite different type of claim being made by a number of the Arabic-speaking groups in relation to their use of the river, including fishing.

Access to the open air, nature and to the river is understood among Muslims to be one of the ways encouraged by the Koran to communicate with God. According to Manzoor: 'all is holy ground. As the Prophet so beautifully puts it: the whole of the earth is a mosque.' Nature is seen as a gift and a divine revelation (Wersal 1995). In Islam, the material use of water continues to have a very direct link to the expression of religious affiliation, so that the ability to access parks freely, to sit and meditate by the waters, to fish in river water as well as to participate actively in coastal beaches and swimming, are all expressions of relationships to God. Some academics have argued that Islamic teaching considers water as God's gift to people, and that the whole Muslim community must have access to it (Abderrahman 2000). Others have stated that the Koran and associated hadiths recommend water conservation and valuing of resources (Amery 2001).

Our respondents have described how Muslim families seek out parklands and access to the water on occasions like family celebrations and birthdays, for family and community events like Eid at the end of Ramadan as well as for personal meditation and reflection. This Muslim use of the river echoes that of some Vietnamese Buddhist interviewees who use local rivers for meditation. For all of these events the assumptions are that being close to nature and rivers means being close to God in a very material sense. This takes parklands out of the 'national' frame in which they are positioned by white Australians generally. Instead of offering a platform on which to perform the nation and national identity, the parklands and the river instead offer a site with which to express one's relationship to God and one's common humanity rather than one's national identity.

The significance of water is even more evident in the case of the Arabic-speaking Mandaeans, an Iraqi group whose religion is neither Christian nor Muslim, but whose teachings, like Islam, retain a strong link between the symbolic meanings of water in a religious sense and the material uses of water both for religious practices and for everyday life (de Chatel 2005). Mandaeans baptise regularly in full-immersion ceremonies in what they regard as *Yardna*, the living water. This again allows a direct relationship between the individual and God and between individuals within the community, with each other collectively and through that collective process with God again. Both of these quite different religious groups from Arabic-speaking cultures bring with them a way of positioning themselves and of claiming their rights of access to water both for picnics and for fishing as being expressions of a far broader global humanity and affiliation with human beings generally in their

relationship with the spiritual. These points of reference are far outside the concept of either local and underlying owners or the concept of a nation state as owner of a common and public 'nature'. Indeed, any such concept of a singular 'nature' is illusory.

These are all different ways in which the physical practice of fishing and the use of waters in the Georges River area can be understood to be an expression of making a claim for positioning oneself as having a particular relationship to the land and to the social and political structures of the nation state and then again to the broader religious community.

Vietnamese net fishing can also be regarded as a kind of place-claiming, even though authorities and other communities see it as a demonstration of Vietnamese people's failure to understand Australian fishing conditions or regulations. Nets, commonly used right across Vietnam, as they are in most countries of Southeast Asia, involve high degrees of knowledge, co-ordination and skill on the part of individuals and groups of people. Fishing with nets is not only a technologically complex but a socially complex process, a point stressed by many of our Vietnamese interviewees. They also expressed a firm belief in the importance of the productive utilisation of valuable resources rather than leaving them unused. This is regarded not as inappropriate exploitation or greed but as a responsible attitude in relation to the environment. This is much more like a claim to belong or a claim to be able rightfully to utilise the resources of the natural world than it is an inappropriate and ignorant action. This is clearly not appropriate in the fragile circumstances in which much of Australia's environment exists nor in the more stressed urban environment. Yet as long as Vietnamese people are thought to be fishing in a way that reflects ignorance and an absence of respect or understanding for environmental concerns, there will be a fundamental mismatch between what regulatory bodies are trying to tell Vietnamese people and what they understand themselves about their own behaviour.

Vietnamese fishing could be seen overall, even in forms like netting which are most strongly condemned as being out of place, as being a demand for recognition of the knowledge and skills that Vietnamese bring with them and the environmental responsibility that they seek to exercise. Such a recognition could contribute to fostering Vietnamese participation in the building of knowledge that will allow a genuine conservation of the resources that are here in their new home. This only becomes a possibility, however, if we see the embodied knowledge and practice of fishing as being one that is open to change rather than one

that is constrained by the inertia of a deterministic view of culture. This takes us to the final theme of fishing as exploration.

3. Fishing as exploration

We can take a further step, beyond either the assertiveness or the reactivity of the fishing described so far. The *We Fish for the Future* report of 1997 assumes that the practice of fishing is extremely difficult to change. Nevertheless even within the pages of the report we find that many of the Vietnamese respondents talked about actively seeking knowledge in the form of written material or radio broadcasts or other sources that would guide them about Australian fishing regulations and laws. If we consider fishing to be an embodied knowledge, one that is expressed as much in the physical practices of fishing as it is in conscious knowledge, we have a good example of identifying the conditions by which change might occur in Noble and Watkins (2003), who followed a tennis player trained both physically and intellectually by a coach. But fishing is not a case in which the conditions for changing a physical practice would come from manuals and trainers in controlled conditions. Instead, change in fishing takes place as an active exploration by ordinary people, undertaken not with formal training but in the everyday and taken-for-granted trialling and testing of fishing.

Not only did the Vietnamese people we interviewed describe seeking information from official sources but many talked about either themselves or their close relations taking active steps to observe and communicate with non-Vietnamese fisherman, of whatever cultural background. They set out to learn from watching them and imitating the ways in which they made decisions on locations, for example, or how they cast lines. As one young Vietnamese woman described her observations of her community for our study:

> *People take part in fishing here even if they haven't done it in Vietnam, like if they came from urban Saigon. They'll watch each other, watch 'Aussie' fishermen and learn from them, and take part! [...] It has been a really obvious thing since 'Asians' came to Australia. They have loved to fish. It might be about food or finances but also enjoying it. But they haven't usually been professional fishermen. They've had to learn to fish since they've got here, for example by looking at how the Australians fish.*

Our interviewees described Vietnamese people deliberately undertaking fishing as they know it in order to test out the environment, opening

themselves up to communicate, be observed and perhaps even to be criticised by neighbouring fishermen. What they were doing was exploring the environment directly by seeing what worked and what didn't from the repertoire of fishing knowledge they already had. This allowed them to have a direct feedback mechanism from the non-human social world, the environment, where they had to make decisions and judgements about water conditions, about baits and about tackle. They also received feedback directly from the social world around them, which is outside the Vietnamese community, so that they placed themselves in a position of vulnerability in order to be able to learn more effectively.

This type of exploratory behaviour means taking social risks. Yet it was demonstrated not only by Vietnamese interviewees but also by Arabic speakers, including Lebanese Muslims, Syrians and Sudanese. Each of them described the complex and satisfying social processes within their own community of sharing fishing time with either members of their own generation or cross-generational groups where there was talk about practices in a home country as well as about the conditions and the results from fishing in this new environment. There were also descriptions of interactions with neighbouring fishers on the bank who were outside their cultural or language group. These were often deliberately initiated conversations in which information was exchanged about baits and about biting, the sort of low-key and everyday exchanges that nevertheless allowed more open observation of each other's practices and more thoughtful learning about what others were doing.

Mahmoud described his enjoyment in learning from members of his own community but also his keen interest and pleasure in the diverse cultures who all end up fishing the Georges River together:

> *My brother and I, we'd just grab the rod and we go by ourselves and we'd see all the people from the same community or same cultural background there. There's a few characters in particular that I admire for their skill and for their knowledge and experience. Because it's amazing you know? They put like not even a dollar's worth of prawns or dough, and they just keep on catching...you get to meet new people and learn new things and you find that a lot of people like to help each other. If you're out of bait, or you need equipment, hooks, or sinkers whatever, I'm sure your neighbour will fix you up.*
>
> *Lots of different people fish there, like heaps. It's not really any particular cultural background that fishes there, it's unlimited. And young and old, some people even just park their car and watch the other people fishing, they just have a look at what the people are doing, sometimes they have a*

look in the bucket. It's a nice place, just even if you just want to relax, have some time out, private time. Nice place to go . . .

This pleasure in exchange is extraordinary in a climate in the area, and in the country generally, where communication between Arabic-speaking and other Australians is becoming more tense and difficult, reflecting wider national and global conflicts (Ang et al. 2006). And yet such informal, personal and everyday interchange over the very ordinary activity of fishing was reported widely among all our respondents. The deliberate extension and expansion of such embodied knowledge as a form of cultural exploration is an important example of agency and confidence in the processes of migrancy. Perhaps even more importantly, the communication we are tracing in the everyday pastime of fishing on the Georges River offers some hope in the intercultural future for an area high in social polarisation and ethnic and religious conflict. Our interviewee Helen, the young woman from the Sudanese community who has enjoyed the camaraderie among many different people which fishing has brought her, is an example of just such low-key and important optimism:

. . . There's a lot of older men from non-English-speaking backgrounds I've met. Different cultures have different ways of fishing, which I find really interesting, like different methods. [. . .] I think people just talk to each other when they're fishing. You stroll along and say 'hey, how's the catch? What you getting? What bait are you using? I was here last week, I got this . . .' There's conversation you can have with people without asking them any details about them or being intimate. So you can actually get to know someone fishing quite easily, so I've got people who I've met doing that, but I don't know them to talk to them again or anything . . . Fishing's like that, I've found . . .

Conclusions

Reflections on the relationship of everyday activities to locality and environment have often been aimed at understanding the persistence of stratification and control. Yet in this study of Sydney's suburban Georges River, the exploration of the everyday has been useful in considering an unstable and disrupted situation, where political and environmental power have been challenged by rapid cultural and environmental change.

The recreational fishing considered here has ranged across these possibilities. Firstly, fishing 'out of place' can be seen not to be the thoughtless and inescapable repetition of homeland behaviours, as critics have alleged. Rather, for Vietnamese and Lebanese immigrants, and no doubt for many others, it has evoked a lost homeland and allowed knowledge to pass to younger generations. Beyond this, however, for Vietnamese Australians it has taken on a role it never had in Vietnam itself – it has become a focal point for internal collective identification, for building solidarity and for forging a sense of group confidence after what were often traumatic migration experiences.

The intensely political dimension of the everyday can be seen playing out in the claims made through fishing on the Georges River. The competing claims advanced through and about fishing by each of the cultural groups with whom we worked are expressions of the shifting power balance in the area. Incoming communities and emerging cultures have challenged the previous power of the 'settler' Anglo-Celtic 'white' population of the area to define its control of fishing as legitimately 'national'. Each in different ways has used the criterion of environmental custodianship to support demands for greater recognition as collectively belonging to that place, even if for very different reasons, from challenging the legitimacy of a settler 'nation' to calling into question the 'national' altogether. Everyday activities like fishing are physical expressions of such demands, forming the substance of the practices that Appadurai describes as 'producing locality' by generating relationships between people and places. Such roles for the everyday have served not only to strengthen collective identities within cultural groups but to draw the boundaries between such ethnically identified groups so as to defend or argue positions in wider political conflicts.

Finally, however, the everyday fishing of many individuals has gone beyond fostering the closure of ethnic or cultural boundaries in conflict conditions to which the two earlier types of fishing might have contributed. Instead, in the third form, of fishing as exploration, our research suggests that the practice of fishing offers a different way to 'produce locality'. This is a conscious mobilisation of fishing knowledge for opening up to new environments and new people, and for learning more about a new place by using the tools of the old. Fishing as an informal and everyday practice can offer ways for opening communication between people who might in more formal situations be found in opposing corners. Our research suggests that fishing is one of the practices that in low-key, informal and everyday situations can allow expression of

the underlying interest in cross-cultural communication that has been demonstrated to exist within the Australian public (Ang et al. 2006). This potential should be fostered. Producing locality does not need to reinforce divisions – it might instead enable the emergence of new social networks that link people far more widely than closed community identifications can do on their own.

Notes

1. Interviews conducted for the Parklands, Culture and Communities project, 2006–8.
2. Personal communication.

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Part V

Everyday Solidarities, Everyday Politics