

GRAEME TURNER

## towards an ethical multiculturalism

SCOTT POYNTING, GREG NOBLE,  
PAUL TABAR AND JOCK COLLINS

*Bin Laden in the Suburbs: Criminalising the Arab Other*

Sydney Institute of Criminology, Sydney,  
2004.

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I should have written this review ages ago. I have had the book since 2004, and I am now sitting down to start writing at the end of October 2005. I imagine this is not an unfamiliar feeling to those who might read this review; since the inception of DEST points, performance indicators, and (soon) the Research Quality Framework, it is getting harder to find time to write reviews, and journals are finding it harder to find reviewers. A bad situation all round, and not one that will develop a lively and informed culture of reception for our work.

However, I do have a slightly better excuse than that. The reason why I have not got around to reviewing this book is because I have been using it: so far, I have drawn upon it for a couple of conference papers and one published article. The reason why I have done that is because it fulfills a most important function.

*Bin Laden in the Suburbs* is in one sense a continuation of the Poynting, Noble, Tabar and Collins project that produced *Kids, Kebabs, Cops and Crime: Youth, Ethnicity and Crime* (Pluto, 2000). That is now looking like a remarkably prescient project, given its focus on the demonising of Arab/Muslim–Australians, and particularly young men and teenagers. Before September 11 and before Bali, maybe this looked like a bit of a local (even Sydney-centric) issue rather than a fundamental crack in the face of multicultural Australia. Not any more, and I am only one of many who have found increasing reason to focus on the public representations of this group of Australians as a location where tolerance has given way to discrimination and where the process of national

belonging seems to have been catastrophically derailed.

One of the problems with folk such as me turning to this topic, though, is that we really don't know much about it. We haven't sat down with Lebanese–Australian kids and discussed their lives, we haven't hung around the Bankstown railway station at peak hour or late at night to observe the passage of everyday life there, and we haven't talked to community representatives or social workers about their specific concerns. We haven't investigated policing strategies in the suburbs concerned, or the impact that short term political opportunism may have had on important areas of social policy. In many cases, we haven't even engaged in a detailed examination of the media representation of these ethnicities over the last four or five years. So, although the political concern is both genuine and justified, there is a bit of a research deficit there. The great value of *Bin Laden in the Suburbs* is that it does this work—pretty much all of it.

The research that informs the book is not only a detailed account of media representations—although it does provide that. More important, from my point of view, are the other, less frequently used and far more time-consuming and challenging, methods: 'open-ended conversation-like recorded interviews and (to a much lesser extent) participant observation'. The authors point out that their interviews draw upon 'various projects over the last six years ... with people on the less powerful side of "ethnic relations"', and they state that they are committed to attempting 'to incorpor-

ate their standpoint(s)' into the interpretations outlined within the book. (6)

The book covers pretty much the full range of sites where these debates have taken place over the last five years: the moral panics over so-called ethnic crime and the infamous Western Sydney ethnic gang-rapes, the politicians' shameless use of what the authors have famously called 'dog-whistle politics' as a means of implicitly licensing racism, and the complex of discourses unleashed by the temporal convergence of the Tampa incident and September 11. The focus of the research is upon the process of 'othering' the Arab, but it also includes what appear to be non-racialised analyses of the crises it investigates. The tendency to describe young Arab men as 'lost between two cultures', for instance, on the face of it a well-meaning attempt to understand their points of view, is exposed to closer examination. A wealth of interview material is discussed in order to demonstrate that rather than experiencing 'a "loss" of cultures or a failure to integrate', second generation Lebanese immigrant young men are supplied with 'complex and "hybrid" resources which ... [they] ... deploy strategically in their everyday lives'. (7)

The focus of the book is clear, and the process of making its argument involves the presentation of large bodies of evidence. A downside to this is that it can read as a little repetitive in its relentless excavation of ever more detail, ever more supporting media representations and personal interviews. A further downside for the reader (paradoxically) is that it is such a great title—*Bin Laden in the Suburbs*

describes exactly what the book argues as well as providing a sense of the toughness and irony that characterises the tone of the analysis throughout. The problem with this, though, is that there can be no mystery about the argument and where it is taking us. Although the starting points in each chapter may differ, the journey we take does become fairly familiar by the end.

The book does have a positive end in sight, though, which is to resituate arguments about multiculturalism and national belonging in ways that recognise the particularly urgent challenges embedded in our national response to the ‘Arab other’—to Australian citizens from Arab and Muslim backgrounds. Aiming at ‘rebirthing multiculturalism’ to reclaim its positive political potential, the authors call for the recreation of a multiculturalism that is ‘deeply critical but ethical’. ‘It should be critical’, they say, ‘in challenging the assumptions and essentialisms that pervade multicultural policy as it currently stands, undertaking a constant interrogation of its social, economic and moral bases, the rules of its possibility’. (264) This is a respectable objective, and the evidence marshalled in this quite formidable book will certainly assist those who wish to enlist in such a project. It did so for me.

the Humanities. His most recent book is *Ending the Affair: The Decline of Television Current Affairs in Australia* (UNSW Press, 2005).

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