The Locals

Identity, Place and Belonging in Australia and Beyond

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Introduction

Object and subject

I open this account of being local by acknowledging that it is written in the Bundjalung nation, on the east coast of the Australian nation; and I pay my respect to the Bundjalung Elders and their ancestors who walk ahead of them for their custodianship of this place now, and over centuries and millennia before.

I would be dishonest, however, to give the impression that that acknowledgement is how this research began. Rather, it begins in a word, 'local'; and in a phrase, 'being a local'. Being a local is part of my being. The object and subject are not clearly delineated, not external to each other.[1] For much of my life, until around the year 2000, being a local, and the word local, were not objects of thought that had occupied me greatly. Michel Foucault argues that an object of thought is constituted when something has 'happened to introduce uncertainty, a loss of familiarity'. Furthermore, 'that loss is the result of difficulties in our previous way of understanding, acting, relating'.[2] Being a local became the object of my thought through a series of uncertainties introduced into my sense of belonging as a local.

I was and am born and bred in Lismore, on the far north coast of New South Wales, as were my mother and father. My grandparents moved to Lismore from other areas of New South Wales and from England. These facts did nothing to make being a local unfamiliar or uncertain, indeed they served to reinforce my sense of certainty regarding my identity as a local. In 1980 I left Lismore to study and work in Sydney, and in late 1999 I returned to Lismore. On return, once more I enjoyed a sense of attachment to the

1 Rabinow, P. (2003) *Anthropos Today*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, p. 20.
2 Rabinow (2003) p. 18 [quoting and translating Foucault].

place in which I lived that never seemed possible in Sydney. But it was a little different. 'Places change; they go on without you [...] So you can't go back.'[3] And just in this way did Lismore go on while we were parted, changing, with no going back. So too did I. When we met again, we were familiar but uncertainly so.

My initial loss of familiarity with being a local came with the awareness that my desire to begin where I left off, as a local in this place, was not possible; this longing was a fantasy. It was in this milieu, in the middle of this (un)familiar place, that being a local came to my attention. Bookish as I am, I conceived a project to understand being a local. Perhaps through understanding I could make some repairs to my loss, to make a chart whose landmarks of knowledge would lead my return to a place of belonging. However, attending a festival in nearby Kyogle in 2000 added difficulties to my 'previous way of understanding, acting, relating' as a local.[4] Through an experience that brought me face to face with a range of dispossessions settlers in Australia have inflicted and continue to inflict upon Aborigines, I became acutely aware that claiming local status was more problematic than I had allowed myself to think. Under what conditions am I able to be a local? How had my 'belonging' as a local, even when initially problematised, been put beyond question? What concepts and ideas inform the processes Australian settlers have undertaken to instal themselves as 'local' or 'original', thereby displacing Aborigines?

These questions frame an 'ensemble of difficulties' that require a response; a situation regarding being a local that is simultaneously problematic and 'about which one is required to think';[5] required in the sense of an obligation that is ethical, an obligation that is towards others.[6] If there were difficulties with my way of relating as a local, in the first instance they concerned the cutting of relations between locals and Aborigines,

3 Massey, D. (2000) 'Travelling Thoughts' in P. Gilroy, L. Grossberg and A. McRobbie (eds) *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*, Verso, London, pp. 225–232 (230).

4 Rabinow (2003) p. 18 [quoting and translating Foucault].

5 Rabinow (2003) p. 20.

6 Zylinska, J. (2005) *The Ethics of Cultural Studies*, Continuum, London, p. 15.

and secondly the locals' collective postcolonial amnesia that enveloped those acts of cutting.[7] Thus, the object of thought in *The Locals* begins with 'being a local' but comes to rest on the stability of 'being a local'. Or to put it another way, it is concerned with how the unstable subject position of 'being a local' is stabilised through the (cutting of) relations between the locals and others.

Method

In this project writing is method.[8] Writing becomes a way of concentrating then crystallising the product of an extended critical, analytical and ethical meditation on the local and the locals: an exercise of oneself as a thinking subject through writing. And as the object and subject blur, the goal of this written meditation goes beyond enriching one's own knowledge of the object. The meditation is aimed at forming the subject: a critique of the self that connects thought to ethos.[9] The central object of the study, the amnesia regarding the cutting of relations between the locals and others, particularly Aborigines, directs this meditation towards remembering and memory. As Anne Brewster writes, '[m]emory is a powerful tool to counter white disavowal of [...] the mutual entanglement of white and Indigenous subjectivities since white invasion of Indigenous lands'.[10] Thus, '[w]riting, in this undertaking, is not an instrument of the retrieval of stored informa-

7 Gandhi, L. (1998) *Postcolonial Theory*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, p. 10.

8 Richardson, L. (2000) 'Writing: A Method of Inquiry' in N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (eds) *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn, Sage, Thousand Oaks, pp. 923–948.

9 Rabinow (2003) pp. 4–10.

10 Brewster, A. (2005a) 'Remembering Whiteness', *borderlands*, 4(1), §1. Available online at http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol4no1_2005/brewster_remembering.htm [accessed 21 March 2010].

tion. Rather, it is characterized as a technology of memory, and memory as *tekhne*, writing'.[11]

Here, writing begins with the idea of 'the local', always with a movement towards relations of the local with the other. The word and the phrase, 'being a *local*', evoke a number of connections which might be explored: local, place, identity, belonging, settler, dispossession, familiarity, loss, race. The following discussion takes up a number of these in detail and each along the way. This is, then, necessarily a multi-disciplinary work of remembering, and because of the multi-disciplinary and critical stance of cultural studies, it is in cultural studies that I locate myself. Alongside the multi-disciplinary frames through which I problematise the idea of being a local I employ a number of approaches. Each frame calls on a particular method – a theoretical survey, a critical language study, critical self-reflection and autoethnography – and I respond to each method and discourse with a corresponding narrative style: respectively, a discussion, an empirical analysis, personalised narrative. Each style allows particular ways of understanding the local and the locals to emerge. Each allows a specific re-membering of the relations of the local(s) with others.

Argument and structure

The argument of this book is that the idea of being a local in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in Australia is 'organised' around, and stabilised by, a sense of *autochthony*, as if local culture and identity is *born of the earth itself*. We settler locals say we belong as though we and our culture have naturally emerged from *within the bounds* of this place. Through a relational understanding of place and scale, and supported by empirical evidence, I propose that this place of belonging as a local is both

11 Brewster, A. (2005b) 'The Poetics of Memory', *Continuum*, 19(3), pp. 397–402 (397).

local and national; that is, in terms of belonging, 'local' and 'national' are categories which bleed into each other. Thus autochthony becomes an organising principle of settler belonging not only for local identity but also for national Australian identity. As Anglo-Celtic settlers occupy the hegemonic position in Australia, I propose that autochthony is a core principle for calculations of belonging for all who dwell in Australia. The status of the locals and the born-and-bred settler Australians as pre-eminently belonging in place depends on selectively forgetting settler migration while, paradoxically, maintaining a memory of first settlement. Remembering settler migration and reinstating a multi-sited settler identity is, therefore, an ethical imperative in order that settlers become 'true' to themselves and to others, as well as to the past, present and future.

In Chapter 1, 'Within and beyond the clearing', I begin by clearing a place for discussing these issues. The clearing is a place as well as an event in which the locals are able to make an appearance and in which I am able to begin problematising aspects of that appearance. This chapter provides an overview of the underlying concerns of the book. The following chapter, 'Local geographic', provides a theoretical discussion of the idea of 'local' in general terms, though always returning to the key question regarding Australian settlers' installation of themselves as the locals. After considering the etymology of the word, I review selected literature from human geography. This geographic focus is on 'the local' as a geographical scale and the close connection made between 'the local' and place. I argue for a relational geography of the local, and also for an inhabited and experienced sense of the local that is not abstracted from actual places. The third chapter continues the discussion of 'local' with a review of literature that specifically concerns itself with 'the locals'. In sociology the locals are often defined in relation to cosmopolitans, while in tourism studies it is the tourists who stand in the oppositional relations to the locals. The literature surveyed in this chapter also includes empirical anthropological and sociological studies which document the lives and concerns of the locals on the United States mainland and in Hawaii, England and Scotland, together with the diverse literature on the locals in Australia. While being a local is commonly thought of in terms of the importance of place in shaping identity, in this survey it becomes clear that being a local is also historically contingent:

people make place important to their identities in particular situations, including situations that may extend over a lifetime.

The first three chapters form a conceptual basis for Chapter 4, 'The local word', which embarks on a critical language study of 'local' in Lismore and other sites within Australia. This analysis centres on a discourse analysis of uses of the word 'local' in Lismore's daily newspaper the *Northern Star* over a period of eighteen months during 2004 and 2005. An examination of texts in which 'the locals' make an appearance, provides the foundations for an analysis of race and place in Lismore and Australia more generally. The next chapter takes up the link between race and 'the locals' through personal reflection and journal writing. This is a critical exploration in which personal embodied experience is interpreted through concepts drawn from critical race and whiteness studies. The discussion continues the critical language study begun in Chapter 4 by beginning to explain how it is that settlers think of themselves unproblematically as the locals. Chapter 6, 'White "autochthony"', concludes the critical language study by proposing white 'autochthony' to describe the set of ideas that enable settlers to frame themselves as the true locals. I propose that Western conceptualisations of autochthony – that is, of being born of the earth itself – are a useful frame for understanding the settler Australian idea of 'being a local'. The Western tradition of autochthony underpins the implicit moral virtue of one people's exclusive claim to a specific territory over that of others. The virtue of being a local – of a local place or of the nation – rests on a false claim of white 'autochthony' that in order to perform its social function must conceal Aboriginal autochthony and project colonial migration as a process of settlement on *terra nullius* or empty land.

The final chapter, 'Towards an ethics of location', concludes this extended meditation on 'the locals' by considering the implications of being a local and white 'autochthony' in postcolonising Australia. This chapter returns us to the clearing in which the locals appeared in Chapter 1 and proposes that *the clearing* as a self-sufficient enclosure be exchanged for *a site* of coexistence with others. This is not a site that is necessarily harmonious, but it is a site of care and responsibility in which relations with others and their places, within place and beyond, are assumed as a precondition for our being.

Just one defining voice: On being a local

Up to this point, being a local has appeared as a phrase that I have left undefined. A dictionary definition of 'local' could quickly remedy the situation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides 'an inhabitant of a particular locality', but this does not give a sense of the connection between place and identity as it is lived.[12] The idea of being a local is an identity named in English that has travelled and taken its meaning in a diverse set of contexts. The locals are particular. They reserve their meaning: not all is revealed, unless perhaps one goes to a specific site and finds out how the word 'local' works in practice. This physical and embodied way of inhabiting the word is a practical problem for writer and reader.

A dictionary definition, then, falls well short of what is required for understanding a set of practices, a way of being in the world. And rather than continue to mention the locals of Lismore and Australia in passing, and rather than ill define them, I propose to move this introductory discussion to a more appropriate narrative space. To introduce the locals and give them voice, just one voice amongst many, I will offer a personal narrative in order to give a sense of who it is that I am writing about. This voice is itself particular and limited in scope, my own: an able-bodied, middle-aged, Anglo-Celtic, heterosexual, middle-class, tertiary-educated, settler, Australian male.

This personal narrative is from one of the journals that form my method of writing my own relationship to the research I undertake in this book. It is a local autoethnography, an attempt to write my own culture of being local. As with other excerpts from my journals, in *The Locals* I will use italics to set this reflective voice apart from the more rigidly squared and vertical discussion in the majority of the book.

12 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989, p. 1079 [B1a].

Territory

Local is a territory of the mind – my mind, here. Local is home territory that is distinguished from territory for travelling through. Of the mind but also a physical location with boundaries. It is real. I never expect an endless play of difference here, stretching ad infinitum. I see a finite play of difference that has a within and a without.

Local is the place of no culture. Being a local is a sort of transparent belonging in this place. It is the resting point of the subject where the inner most reasonably fits the outer: where the outer is so much of my mind and body that it is hard to see culture in the local. The proviso is, of course, that I am thinking in my local territory when I write this. In your local territory, I see culture in abundance.

Getting to know a local

Of course the reality is that local culture abounds here too. You can see it. So can I, but through constant repetition, it's not so obvious to a local. And when I see local culture I observe different things to you.

Let me take you for a drive into work.

This mostly rural drive takes about twenty minutes, and is about fifteen miles long. We turn right out of the driveway, go past the big house on the right with the white tile roof, and head to the Nimbin Road. A left and the next right, and we'll zip along here for five miles passing beef and dairy farms on the way to Tuncester. Now we turn left towards town. Soon after we turn there's a white farmhouse close to the road on the flat broad Tuncester plain (Figure 2). Another five miles or so and we drive into South Lismore, turn right at the roundabout and go past the bulk petrol place just over the railway line on the right. Now we go across the bridge, through numerous roundabouts to Southern Cross University in East Lismore. We park, walk into B Block and I'll unlock my office before we head upstairs and get a cup of coffee to end this transition, and mark the beginning of the next.

So what was that trip like? It's a pretty trip most of the way, through farmland and then the last bit goes through South Lismore, bypasses the town

centre and heads out to the university. What can you say? The countryside looks green enough though the winter has browned off the longer grass, and it's a pleasant 25° Celsius. As for Lismore, it's just a rural New South Wales north coast town. Not necessarily attractive at that. The river looks like a wide brown neglected ditch.

The things I picked out on the way – and these were a paltry few from my mental map – I will describe again to you like this.

The big house on the right with the white tile roof is the 'murderer's house'. Ask no more, that's the local gossip. Just be warned.

That farmhouse close to the road that we sped past? That's where I spent the first three years of my life (Figure 3). Mum and Dad dairy farmed there, before the strain got to Dad (a bad back I think) and we moved in to East Lismore. Two big figs on the creek bank way over the back spaced half a mile apart are the corners of the farm. Mum told me that. My brother Kev made a canoe to use in the creek but the Aborigines from the Cubawee reserve kept putting holes in the bottom so he gave up on it.

Mum grew up in South Lismore. Just next to the bulk petrol place, well, where it used to be, is a lane where her grandparents' house was. It's called Bannister Street after them. It used to be Bannister Lane, so Mum is pretty impressed it's a street now. Very swish. Mum's grandfather worked on the railway and had a Good Job there. A Good Job by definition pays well enough, is stable (probably with the government), and comes with some authority. A deputy station master on the railway, perhaps.

When we went over the bridge we crossed the Wilsons River. That's what it was renamed by the Geographical Names Board but to most locals it's still the Richmond River and I can't believe 'they' changed it without an outcry. Lismore is a conservative and complacent place at times. The Authorities used to be given more trust than they sometimes deserved, and most older people would still say they have our best interests at heart (assuming the conservative Liberal-National coalition is in power, of course). Anyway that is The River and I was here in 1974 when the big flood occurred. It was even bigger than the 1954 flood when the Queen was here.

Now this hill the University is built on is at the foot of the hill where Mum and Dad moved to after they sold up at Tuncester. I lived over there until I was eighteen. When we were at primary school in the 1960s and 1970s my best

friend Dave and I played and explored in what was then a series of paddocks complete with forests, creeks, ponds, and all manner of creatures. Without a tinge of overstatement, more profoundly than I can express, this place and time is my spiritual home, from whence my 'localness' comes into being (Figure 4).

Then I went to Sydney to university. Twenty years later [that was ten years ago] I moved back here. I'm a local, but not quite as local as someone who never went away, whose family has always been here, the real locals. I've got a bit of Sydney in me and I come out with some strange ideas. Always did really. It can feel uneasy when they come out. It's impatience with the parochial and local that sometimes gives me away: certain behaviours and ideas not expected of locals.

Coming from, (un)naturally

Everywhere I turn the local is a known place: being a local is being at home in this place here, the place where I'm a local, Lismore (Figure 5). It's somewhat paradoxical that in searching for my mis-placed identity (this territory of the mind I called it?) my first turn is to that with which I identify, that which is outside me, to place, to my place.

At issue for the locals is one's claim of coming from here. J. Macgregor Wise says this 'attachment was produced and not natural (though often presented as such)'.[13]

I say, being a local may not be natural but it is only presented as such. We are from here. We belong here.

Local retaliation

What a bloody surprise! Just what you'd expect from a boffin. Natural. Unnatural. What is this? This local doesn't care. Locals come from this place, now, and always did.

13 Wise, J. (2000) 'Home', *Cultural Studies*, 14(2), pp. 295–310 (305).

What about the Aborigines, you say? Victors don't mourn the defeated. Just get out of sight with that stuff. You have no … Look, there's plenty of other places if you don't like this one. We come from here. We locals belong here.

Bloody blow-ins and their ideas! Who do they think they are? Trying to change things, make trouble. Things were nice and quiet until they arrived.

Local presence: Local absence

Activist Judith Light recalls an overheard conversation in town in the mid-1970s regarding property values: 'this place is going to pot – first the Abos [Aborigines] moved in, now it's the hippies'.[14] *Natural stability: no hint of irony regarding Aborigines 'moving in'. And hippies I liked. In 1973 there was a big hippie festival at Nimbin, twenty miles away, and Lismore was never the same again. As for the Abos, a derogatory term, I didn't know much about them, or that many Aboriginal kids at school were Bundjalung people, indigenous to Lismore. There's locals. There's tourists. There's blow-ins. Then there's Abos and hippies. This is the language I grew up with, the language of order that I come from. Oh, and there's Labor Party supporters. Not many. And there's commies. And there's long-haired uni students.*

And there's us locals. Always have been. Always. It's time the rest of them started to fit in.

Moving into and beyond the local

That narrative provides an initial voicing of what the word 'local' *does*. How 'local' sets identity apart through place; how both identity and place are bound, and bound together. Something too is expressed of the mood in

14 Light, Judith (2003) Interview with author [transcript from tape], Goonellabah (NSW), 17 March.

which that binding and bounding occur: care, nostalgia, defensiveness, hostility, quiet and exclusive enjoyment. Local, in its articulation, does intricate and complex work. This book is firstly a movement into that articulation of people and place that the word local enables. Its relation to its other – whether in terms of space or outsiders, the global or tourists – always draws one out from the local, however. There local is always in relation with its outside. It is never self-sufficient. The local, then, is an idea that leads ultimately to a focus on the connections and disconnections: the flows and blockages that create places for communities, for people, for societies, and the effects that these relations have for others and ourselves.

Underlying *The Locals* is an assumption, a local assumption, that the relations between people and place are important, and that this relation should be a relation of care. But this relation as a focus for our care makes me uncomfortable because for us locals belonging to place is very much about care for the same, for those like us. I want to say, with Levinas, that consideration of our relations with others, not with the same, should come first and should precede us.[15] This continuing tension provides the energy for this book.

It is time, now, to unpick this set of relations between the local, the locals, and others in contemporary Australia. I will begin by locating this book in its context: a place and the events which cleared a space for the research project of which *The Locals* is a product.

15 Levinas, E. (1989) 'Ethics as First Philosophy', Seán Hand and Michael Temple (trans.) in S. Hand (ed.) *The Levinas Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 75–87.