

Abstract

This paper contributes to the literature on the stigmatization of Australian public housing tenants and to the literature on Australian housing metaphors, explaining the usage of “the Bronx” as a means of stigmatizing country town and suburban localities dominated by public housing. It compares four Australian situations where the marginalization of the poor is expressed through the typification of the area in which they live as “the Bronx” by local usage, the media or both, comparing these with a fifth situation that matched the signal characteristics of this typification but escaped being so labeled. An examination of the Bronx’s (New York City) history shows the development of its reputation as a metaphor for the urban ghetto. The results of qualitative fieldwork undertaken in the Western Australian towns of Kalgoorlie, Carnarvon, and Broome are compared with media representations of analogous stigmatizations in New South Wales.

Keywords

Australian indigenous housing, public housing, stigmatization, housing metaphor, urban renewal

Introduction

In this article, I will discuss a metaphoric expression of cultural and economic stigmatization that draws powerfully on an international image of the lives of the poor that is used by both peoples and governments to marginalize poverty-stricken groups in specific urban localities to the extreme edge of social, political, and economic acceptability. This particular metaphor is that of the Bronx, the name of one of the five boroughs of New York City.

As Mayne points out:

It is poor history to conflate “slum” (an imaginary overlay that is properly studied in relation to urban popular culture) and the actual social geography of urban disadvantage. To study the first is to study the bourgeois imagination, and the complicated control and reform agendas pursued to comprehend and regulate an urbanizing world. To study the second requires us to set aside these agendas and frameworks, because otherwise this cultural overlay obscures our vision of actual people and places.¹

This article focuses mainly on the first rather than the second. That is, I want to look at the way the common usage the notion of the “slum” has, in particular instances, conflated all slums within the one signifier, the Bronx, and to do so in the context of the divide created by race and class in the Australian setting. Primarily, I wish to consider how such areas of deprivation are created in the mind (stigmatization). Inevitably, however, this will also involve (though, as Mayne indicates, should not be conflated with) some background information on how these areas are created in space (ghettoization).

I first came upon the use of “the Bronx” as a local metaphor for the roughest neighborhood in town in 2007 in the course of fieldwork on Indigenous housing in Broome and Carnarvon, on the northwest coast of Western Australia. In both Broome and Carnarvon, the metaphoric use of “the Bronx” to typify problem areas of public housing was used by residents of these areas in common with the rest of the townsfolk. Comparative inquiry revealed that “the Bronx” has also been used in the same way in reference to a public housing estate in Australia’s largest city, Sydney, the state capital of New South Wales. On this occasion, however, no mention was made of Indigenous involvement.

Interestingly, there is evidence that, in Sydney, the metaphor was first applied by the news media.² There is also some evidence that, while there was no mention of Indigenous involvement in the press, the Lebanese community was being targeted as the main source of criminal activity at Villawood.³ In Western Australia, however, I was unable to find similar evidence that the news media used “the Bronx” metaphor in relation to localized public housing trouble spots. As

I will show, this difference has significance for the inhabitants of these localities.

Perspective

“The Bronx” thus has wide-ranging national usage in Australia to indicate a locality within a larger municipality that is regarded by locals as the rough end of town. It would appear that “the Bronx” has become a special term signifying a stigmatized neighborhood, a metaphor for a place where deprivation and lack of external controls have created a place of danger so profound that people not only will refuse to live there if they have a choice but explicitly advise against merely visiting that place.

“The Bronx” is also used in this way in the United States where it is described as “the capital of inner-city ghettos.”⁴ It has also been employed as a metaphor for the wider effects of what some have termed the “demographics,”⁵ or the neighborhood effects, of a place like the Bronx on its inhabitants.⁶ In this context, we should not forget Wacquant’s injunction that urban space is a “historical and political construction,” that is, a “spatial retranslation of economic and social differences” and that this is distinct from neighborhood effects per se.⁷ Wacquant’s perspective is preferable in the context of this discussion because it is not the geographical space of economic disadvantage that I wish to examine here; rather, it is the stigmatization of that space through the stigmatization of its inhabitants. This is a straightforward examination of stigmatization in Goffman’s terms in that the economically disadvantaged in these case studies are the possessors of a spoiled identity and, in Wacquant’s expansion of the meaning of Goffman’s terminology, this includes the spoiled identity of the spaces they inhabit.⁸

In addition to this usage in the United States and in Australia, the residents of an Argentine shantytown use it to describe the conditions in which they live,⁹ so to some extent at least, the Bronx has become an international metaphor for a slum, or ghetto. This is further reinforced by the opening scene in Tom Wolfe’s international bestseller *Bonfire of the Vanities*.¹⁰ In this scene, the protagonist, Sherman McCoy, finds himself in the Bronx having taken a wrong turn on the freeway and (to cut a good story short) makes the mistake of perceiving the Bronx in its stereotypical terms as a place of danger, peopled by dangerous folk, speeds away, accidentally killing

a Black American Bronx man in the process. The result is, as the title suggests, the immolation of all of the protagonist's achievements, including his wealth and his lifestyle, all through his brush with the symbolically polluted space of the Bronx.

This article deals largely with the symbolic usage of the name "Bronx" as a metaphor for "slum" and the fact that this symbolic usage is shared internationally because as Bourdieu points out, symbols have power.¹¹ The usage of the Bronx as a metaphor for slum is indicative of power relationships. The powerful can use it to attack factions of society that they find threatening and in need of external control and the powerless can throw it back at the powerful as a means of saying that they know well what the powerful are trying to do to them and, as will be shown in the succeeding case studies, they therefore resist this expression of intent to impose external control.

In summary, this article begins by examining the processes of degradation, deprivation, and stigmatization through which the Bronx in New York City achieved its international ill repute. It goes on to make comparisons with and between those localities in Australia that have been stigmatized as "the Bronx," and concludes by contextualizing these situations in the international setting.

The Stigmatization of the South Bronx, New York City

As a matter of historical accuracy, it is not the entire Bronx but only the South Bronx that has been noteworthy for the problems that have led to the use of its name as a stigmatizing metaphor. However, this distinction has been lost in the adaptation from place name to metaphor. What turned the South Bronx into the archetype for the worst neighborhood in town was a range of factors, but two of the most significant were the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway and a demographic shift of the middle class to the outer suburbs. This particular kind of demographic shift has been termed "white flight," a term used widely in the American experience of desegregation between the 1950s and the mid-1970s.¹²

The Cross-Bronx Expressway was built between 1948 and 1963. Designed to connect the Bronx-Whitstone Bridge in the east with the George Washington Bridge in the west, the Cross-Bronx Expressway cut the southwest corner of the Bronx off from the rest of the borough. In the process of the expressway's construction, thousands of lower-middle and lower-class homes were demolished. While this was occurring, slum clearance under New York City's Title 1 Proceedings¹³ were being pursued in Manhattan, pushing people into the southernmost corner of the Bronx to live with friends, relations, or in any accommodation they could find. Once the expressway was finally constructed, the high level of traffic noise and associated air pollution caused a second wave of migration from the apartments that remained along the route of the expressway. During the period of the expressway's construction, the New York City authorities continued to engage in the Title 1 program of slum clearance in Manhattan. Although some low-cost housing was built in anticipation of the resulting housing need, the rents were generally too expensive for many of the displaced poor. These displaced tenants also made their way into the South Bronx where they sought, and subsequently shared, housing with their friends and relations, leading to overcrowded dwellings in a pattern that came to be known as "doubling-up." In all, Berman estimates that 60,000 people were displaced from their Manhattan homes.¹⁴

Conterminous with these developments was the exodus of middle-class and skilled working-class residents from the Bronx to the suburbs. Low-income residents, many of whom were African American or Hispanic, did not have the same capacity to exercise housing choice and a crisis of affordable housing was precipitated, the ill effects of which reached a peak during the 1970s—by which time the South Bronx had been abandoned by a large proportion of its population and this proportion consisted primarily of the better off, the middle class, or the more socially

mobile population.¹⁵ This situation was exacerbated by the side effects of New York City's longstanding rent control laws.

New York City had rent control laws dating from 1943, brought in as a response to the war-time and postwar housing crisis.¹⁶ The rent control laws maintained a ceiling on the rents that landlords could charge, which was below market rates. New York City residential tenure patterns had long been dominated by renters, and few politicians would risk the public outcry that would ensue from the withdrawal of rent controls.¹⁷ In New York, the landlord pays for the utility charges and adjusts the rents accordingly. In the 1950s and 1960s, large migrations of poor Puerto Ricans and southern African Americans came to New York City. Even then, New York City had a shortage of low-cost housing. At this time, the City solved the problem initially by allowing landlords in the South Bronx to charge what were then above-market rents for taking those migrants in receipt of welfare as tenants.¹⁸ Eventually, the subsidies became insufficient to offset the rising costs. In the late 1960s, petrol prices began to rise and inflation increased. The number of welfare recipients in the South Bronx rose sharply over the decade 1962 to 1972, from 11,000 to 53,000.¹⁹ In this situation, landlords could no longer profit from their properties.²⁰ Around this time, residents recall, "The Bronx was burning" and "By the end of the 70s you could walk six blocks in any direction and you wouldn't see a light. It was like being in a ghost town."²¹

By the 1970s, landlords had found various ways of dealing with their worsening financial situation by abandoning their properties, ceasing to pay property taxes, selling their properties at a loss, and in some cases, arranging for them to be burned in order to collect the insurance money.²² There was a corresponding means whereby tenants could acquire improved housing. The City provided any tenant whose housing had been destroyed through fire with a relatively generous grant to cover their loss of possessions, and such families also went to the top of the public housing waiting list.²³ Arson and building abandonment increased in frequency to the extent that this era in the history of the Bronx has passed into urban legend. In 1977, during a World Series baseball match being played at Yankee Stadium in the South Bronx, cameras were directed away from the game toward a building burning in the South Bronx. Although there is some dispute that this was actually said, the commentator's remark is remembered as, "There it is ladies and gentlemen. The Bronx is burning."²⁴ It was in these circumstances that the Bronx became, not only the national but also, the international byword for a neighborhood seriously affected by crime, violence, substance abuse, vandalism, and decline in the condition of buildings and homes.²⁵

"The Bronx" in Western Australia

The research from which this part of the discussion is drawn was conducted in three Western Australian country towns: Kalgoorlie, Carnarvon, and Broome. The author conducted four studies into Indigenous housing.²⁶ All these studies were based on in-depth interviews with service providers, town officials and Indigenous residents. The Indigenous residents were recruited to the research through a process of cumulative referral, informally referred to as the "snowballing" technique. Service providers and town officials were chosen according to the relevance of their positions or services to the particular project.

The size of the Indigenous population varies among the towns. In Kalgoorlie, Indigenous people make up 7.5 per cent of the population of 28,242. In Broome, Indigenous people form 27.25 per cent of the population of 13,060 and in Carnarvon 19 per cent of 5,682.²⁷ The towns share a number of features in common. They are all major regional centers in relatively remote areas of the state of Western Australia (which itself is the largest and least densely populated state in Australia). They are all old towns (in Western Australian terms), established in the latter

half of the 19th century. Currently they have thriving tourist industries, although Carnarvon less so than Broome and Kalgoorlie. They may all be said to have well-established local fishing, agriculture, and/or pastoral industries that are resilient to economic, if not environmental, downturns.

In Carnarvon, the Bronx is a relatively small area of around twenty public dwellings, on a road fictitiously named Harley Street in this paper,²⁸ surrounding a moderately sized park. Established in the mid- to late 1970s, it was originally settled according to what was popularly known as the “salt and pepper policy,” which achieved a fairly even mix of Australian-born non-Indigenous and Indigenous tenants. Initially a few of these households were known for drinking and some fighting, but this was generally restricted to the house and yard of the people concerned. For nearby residents, the fights were a spectacle and their impact by and large was that the children of the house where the fight was happening would run to neighbors’ houses and sleep there overnight. On the whole, the area was relatively trouble free and well regarded as a “colorful,” but relatively successful, low-cost housing development.²⁹

This unremarkable pattern persisted for around twenty years. In the last ten years, however, the pattern and the prevalence of drinking and fighting have changed. Now, the violence often occurs in the street and can overtake other households, and include home invasions. As well, the social mix has altered and Indigenous tenants now make up the total tenant group at Harley St. According to other Carnarvon Indigenous people, these tenants are the public housing provider’s “problem cases.” They accuse the public housing authority of “dumping” all of its problem tenants into this one small area and, in their view, this is what has turned Harley St. into “the Bronx.” It is now characterized by street violence, home invasion, drunkenness, and, according to some, drug abuse.³⁰

In Broome, “the Bronx” is less well defined spatially, but generally the area in which people place “the Bronx” is within the old part of the town in a set of streets that were constructed on the site of the former Anne St. Native Welfare Reserve. The Anne St. Reserve was taken over by the state housing authority in 1983 and developed for public housing (Western Australia 1997).³¹ It now exhibits the same problems as Harley St. However, the Broome Indigenous people who were my informants blame the problems on a combination of high Indigenous population density in the area, and an intersection of the Indigenous drinking culture with “White” drug culture. The “White” drug culture, they say, has arisen in part owing to local government zoning that permits the development of medium-density housing close by. Some of this housing includes holiday rental flats that are said to attract “White” people who are drug dealers and backpackers who are drug users. Others are owned by the public housing authority. Indigenous people cite the resulting higher housing density as a factor contributing to the perpetuation of the Bronx phenomenon in Broome because it increases the likelihood of individual household violence spreading to neighboring homes. As well, former reserve lands tend to be contested heritage areas, at least for Indigenous people.³² Informants in Broome expressed the view that land formerly reserved for Aboriginal people should only be utilized for Indigenous organizations and housing. This point of view may be a contributing factor fuelling local resentment and possibly some violent confrontations.

In Broome, there has been no particular response from any level of government to the evolution and designation of the Anne St. area as the local “Bronx.” The local government authority points out that it has no role to play in either public housing or Indigenous matters. In 2007, a new regional manager was appointed to the Broome office of the (State) public housing authority.³³ Among his first actions was to hold public meetings with Indigenous tenants to obtain feedback on the quality of service of the public housing authority. However, after a year, he received a new assignment and left Broome and so, in spite of these hopeful signs, the tenants are not expecting any imminent or effective solutions to their problems. Similarly, the public

housing authorities in Carnarvon have yet to make any particular response to the problems of Harley St. However, in Carnarvon, local government, the local court, police, and a number of nongovernmental Indigenous organizations representing health and employment initiatives joined with Indigenous community members to form a coalition to address the area's challenges.

Unlike the situations in Broome and Carnarvon, Kalgoorlie's Bronx experience is now a historical phenomenon. The suburb that was locally referred to as the Bronx (by both Indigenous and White town folk) has now been renamed. It was called Adeline, and has since been renamed Golden Grove as part of a program of urban renewal called the New Living Program.³⁴ As Adeline, nearly half the properties in the suburb contained public housing tenants. Originally, the suburb was designed to cater for the needs of lower-income mine employees who were predominantly Euro-Australian.³⁵ Over the years, however, the population of the suburb came to be dominated by unemployed and Indigenous people. The objective of the New Living program was to reduce the proportion of public housing properties in the suburb to 12% by 2008.³⁶ Soon after the start of reconstruction in 2003, the suburb was renamed Golden Grove.³⁷

As Golden Grove, the suburb is regarded as a success in that it is no longer known for the high levels of crime and social disturbance or the high turnover of the population that characterized Adeline in the years prior to the commencement of redevelopment in August 2000.³⁸ With the reduced proportion of public housing, it has become relatively stable in socioeconomic terms. There is no longer any concentration of public housing similar to the former situation of Adeline anywhere in Kalgoorlie. The actual number of public housing homes in Kalgoorlie has been maintained through the ongoing building of new dwellings that have been more widely scattered throughout the city.

The Bronx, New South Wales

The setting of the New South Wales case studies, in contrast to those in Western Australia, is the city rather than the country towns. As well, neither of the New South Wales case studies involved Indigenous populations. It is important to demonstrate that the stigmatization of people and place takes place across a variety of settings and need not be limited to a single category of citizens. Although all of these case studies are examples of public housing-dominated suburbs that became the locus for unwanted people and disorderly behavior, the responses of the authorities, in New South Wales as in Western Australia, are very different in each case.

In Australia, the best-documented case of a locality being stigmatized, in this case by the media, as the Bronx was not dominated by Indigenous tenants, but by Euro-Australians and migrants. This was the former public housing development of East Fairfield at Villawood, in southwestern Sydney, New South Wales. Arthurson describes the process of stigmatization that occurred in response to neighborhood violence at East Fairfield.³⁹

While the residents of Broome, Carnarvon, and Kalgoorlie (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) spontaneously took up the use of the term *Bronx*, East Fairfield was nicknamed the Bronx by the tabloid press.⁴⁰ This is a point of comparison and contrast between the Western Australian examples and Villawood. While the process of giving a name to the terms of the stigmatization of the places and the people who lived there was not the same, the reaction of the people was surprisingly similar. Just as Indigenous Australians refused to be housed in a neighborhood stigmatized as "the Bronx," the Villawood inhabitants rejected the news media's stigmatization of their neighborhood:

Look at how many things people been sayin about this area. Look, we're not that bad, man. Look, every other kid's here, we're not bad, we're not killin youse or nothin.⁴¹

The housing estate was regarded as notorious for patterns of gang behavior, drug dealing, and violent crime.⁴² It was the opinion of the New South Wales Department of Housing and the Local

Council that the design of the estate was a key factor behind the behavior problems there primarily, it would appear, because it was “ugly.”⁴³ The housing on the estate was dominated by medium-density units, a mix of one- and two-storey town houses and maisonettes. To quote Arthurson’s succinct description of the housing:

The medium-density housing was set at a 20° angle to the street to gain northern orientation, in order to benefit from the sunlight and reduce exposure to south-westerly winds, and consisted of a series of pedestrian walkways and cul-de-sacs with large areas of public open space according to Radburn design principles. Apart from the contrast between the appearance of East Fairfield with the traditional grid-pattern of the surrounding suburbs, it is not clear why this Radburn design evoked such a strong reaction.⁴⁴

As Arthurson says, it was not clear why the Radburn design itself should have evoked such a strong reaction. For example, the Radburn designed suburbs which characterize Canberra, the Australian capital city, where I lived myself for six years house primarily a solidly middle-class, and complacent, population.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, four major reports were commissioned regarding East Fairfield,⁴⁶ one of which (Stanisic et al. 1996) canvassed demolition of the estate as the preferred option. In mid-1997, this was the solution that was finally adopted, but it came with high costs financially, largely in consequence of the loss of a large amount of public housing stock. In the resulting demolition programme, 253 dwellings were lost and more than 900 residents displaced, resulting in an increase in public housing waiting periods from approximately five years to seven years and a net capital cost to the New South Wales Department of Housing of \$17.4 million.⁴⁷ As Arthurson noted, the social cost of relocation to the tenants has not as yet been explored.

One of the ways in which East Fairfield was effectively stigmatized was the depiction of its residents as being composed of a moral underclass.⁴⁸ The estate was described as a “focal point for poverty,” a “haven for criminals,” and further, that it was “run by criminal elements.”⁴⁹ The identification and local attribution of a moral underclass is an important element in the stigmatization of a neighborhood as “the Bronx.” In this process, the residents of the neighborhood, especially young men, become distinguished from the general population of the town or city by their perceived patterns of dangerous behavior.⁵⁰

By this process of interweaving symbols into a narrative, a town or suburb thus becomes dualized and the neighborhood becomes, as Wacquant terms it, a site of “urban perdition.”⁵¹ The judgmental bias involved is extreme, to the extent that the stigmatization extends to anyone who lives in “the Bronx.” In Western Australia, most Indigenous people in need of public housing try to avoid living in such areas and take offense if the public housing authority offers them a home in a “Bronx” neighborhood because this suggests that the public housing authority considers them to be the sort of people who fit the stigma.⁵² Likewise, as already noted, the stigmatized residents of Villawood objected to their suburb being labeled “the Bronx” by the news media.

It is possible to see, in this process of territorial and personal stigmatization, the elements of a moral panic.⁵³ Certainly, this is what happened to East Fairfield. The policy solutions that the New South Wales Government adopted in response to East Fairfield were “both punitive and judgmental,” which, Haworth and Manzi contend, is consequent upon the successful launching of a moral panic.⁵⁴ The occurrence of a moral panic in response to violence in public housing estates does not necessarily result in a punitive policy response however.

A Case of the Avoidance of “the Bronx” Metaphor: Macquarie Fields

A similar discourse developed around Macquarie Fields, another Sydney public housing estate, in February of 2005. On this occasion, an estimated 150 residents (non-Indigenous) battled with

police, throwing stones and Molotov cocktails.⁵⁵ The rioting was triggered by the death of two local teenagers in the course of a high-speed car chase with police. The media coverage that followed the riot stigmatized Macquarie Fields in much the same terms as East Fairfield had been ten years earlier.⁵⁶ Like East Fairfield, Macquarie Fields became a political problem and it was subjected to Parliamentary inquiry.⁵⁷ Also like East Fairfield, Macquarie Fields was characterized very much as a home of the moral underclass. Statements by politicians tended to echo these terms and the tone of the earlier media coverage. The problem of Macquarie Fields was held to stem from a small number of young, predominantly male, violent, variously “psychopathic” and socially “dysfunctional,” “hoodlums” living there.⁵⁸ Unlike East Fairfield, however, no one ever labeled Macquarie Fields as “the Bronx” and no one attributed the problems of the suburb to the design of the public housing estate. This is despite the fact that, like East Fairfield, Macquarie Fields was built according to the Radburn design.

Why Was Macquarie Fields Never Referred to as “the Bronx”?

Although the moral underclass stigmatization of Macquarie Fields was at least as thorough as that applied to East Fairfield, Macquarie Fields was never referred to as “the Bronx.” Nor was it ever suggested that this public housing estate be demolished. The Standing Committee on Social Issues’ report of its Inquiry into Public Disturbances at Macquarie Fields made thirteen recommendations that addressed facilities, social and police services, and community empowerment. While the “rhetoric” surrounding the four days of rioting was couched largely in terms of individual accountability and law and order, the State’s response bears little relation to these themes. Instead, the report took the need for community engagement as its primary theme.

Possibly, following a decade of rising housing costs and increasing housing densities more generally, the contrasting response was due to the fact that the stigmatization of East Fairfield as the Bronx had encompassed the structures and design of the estate as well as the residents. Housing structure and neighborhood design never entered the government or media discourse surrounding Macquarie Fields. It was the way that the stigmatization of East Fairfield encompassed both the built and the social environments that led to the demolition of that estate and the displacement of its residents. Furthermore, it is very likely that the New South Wales State government had learned from its experience with East Fairfield that the extreme nature of the East Fairfield solution was simply too costly. It may be that, for this reason, the State Premier decisively led the public debate in the direction of stigmatizing only the people of the housing development, leaving the question of its design strictly out of the debate.⁵⁹ By avoiding the use of the stigmatizing label, “the Bronx,” in reference to Macquarie Fields, the New South Wales government made it possible for other avenues of reform to be followed, thereby saving millions of dollars in real estate costs, as well as the relocation of tenants and thus avoiding the social cost to the community of the destruction of an entire suburb.

Three years after the Macquarie Fields riots, the State Government embarked on a program of urban renewal. Some homes were demolished, an aged care facility built, and tenants were encouraged to purchase their homes. The government was quite frank about what it now saw as the problem at Macquarie Fields. Consistent with the Standing Committee’s report on Macquarie Fields, the housing minister announced, “We want to empower and change the social mix of Macquarie Fields.”⁶⁰

The Process of Stigmatizing Australian Neighborhoods as “the Bronx”

The danger, certainly in Western Australian country towns where the Bronx neighborhoods are or were dominated both by public housing tenure and Indigenous people as tenants, is that the

taint attaching to that neighborhood can extend to include all the Indigenous people in the town. In these circumstances, local Indigenous people work to distinguish themselves from the residents of the Bronx neighborhoods. They do this by refusing public housing in those neighborhoods or dismissing them utterly with statements such as “Too many blackfellas living there.”⁶¹ The reputations of those tenants who live there, but are not engaged in the Bronx activities, are to some extent protected by their more fortunate friends and relations who will marshal their own good reputations in defense of their kinfolk. “Yes, poor thing, she lives down there, with all her grannies and her daughter, and I don’t know how many times she’s had to fix up her windows where those boys have broken them.” When the tenants themselves were asked, “Is it really as bad here as they say it is?” a typical response was “Yes it is. It is just that bad. You look at it now, in the daytime, and it looks ok. But come night time, this street will turn into a race track and those boys with their cars just go round and round, at top speed, doing burnouts and all.”

A Bronx neighborhood is thus tainted space whose taint extends to those who live there—and potentially to those who share certain cultural characteristics with those who live there. It has become a powerful and an impressively universal metaphor for socially excluded places and people. As Herbert says, exclusion constitutes a demarcation between “the favoured and the disfavoured, the hygienic and the dirty.”⁶² It is also an expression of the degree of power that the majority has over excluded minorities. The media plays its part here, as we have seen in the extreme example of East Fairfield. The government, in theory representing the majority, also shares in the process of demarcation. The statements made in the New South Wales State Parliament were very clearly public expressions of fear and, in some cases, outright loathing.⁶³

However, while the majority can exclude minorities, it cannot make the excluded minorities disappear, nor can the majority readily alter the behavior of those excluded to make them conform. In Australia, there is a large and longstanding literature documenting the resistance of Indigenous people, in particular to the attempts to force them to conform to mainstream images of acceptable behavior.⁶⁴ It is of great interest that the authorities will bring this same pressure to bear on a portion of the non-Indigenous population that similarly fails to conform. This resistance is one of the reasons for the stigmatization of a neighborhood as a Bronx. The Bronx is the label that is characteristically applied to places that are the site of long-standing, apparently intractable and unwanted behaviors. While the label is by no means always applied to all such neighborhoods, where it is applied, this is what it means.

The City versus the Country Town

Why is it that in the highly contrasting settings of the city and the country town, people tend to use the same images when stigmatizing localized trouble spots? Let us approach this by discussing the differences between the city and the country town regarding the images called up by labeling an area as the Bronx and consider how these are reflected in the differences of meaning in the two applications of the metaphor of the Bronx.

There is clearly an element of fear, in that the use of the term *the Bronx* has the power to call up those images of the big city and, at least traditionally, the inner city that are most associated with danger, threat, and what Jacobs describes as the “dark and foreboding irrationality or chaos of cities.”⁶⁵ Similarly, Davison notes that, historically, “the slum was dense, dirty, unnatural, disorderly and disease-ridden.”⁶⁶ It is not only in the country town that this fear can be roused. The word suburb also tends to conjure an image of a place where people live out a quiet, orderly, if uneventful existence. As Davison notes in the same article, “the suburb was open, clean, natural, orderly and healthy.”⁶⁷ Originally, the suburb was conceived as providing the benefits of country town life to city dwellers, in opposition to the crowded tenements of the old world cities. Although Davison was discussing the late nineteenth-century conceptualization of the suburb,

this image has been surprisingly durable over the years, to the extent that the residents of the suburbs respond in ways similar to the residents of the country town when this image of their locality is threatened.

In Sydney, the evidence from the media reports and parliamentary debates regarding the usage of the Bronx indicates the very worst excesses of urban anarchy and very likely an identification of this social condition with the larger scale and more widely publicized nature of this problem in several American cities. In the country towns and in the suburbs, therefore, the usage of the Bronx metaphor represents the conceptual opposition between the city and the country.

Urban versus rural, settled versus remote, constitutes an enduring opposition deeply embedded in the symbolism, literature, and discourse of Western society.⁶⁸ Residents of the country towns differentiate their experience of life in the country from that of the city according to the ways in which country life is supposed to protect them from key negative features of city life. These are the complexity of the city versus the simplicity of the country town, the safety of life in the country town as opposed to the threat of crimes against the person and property in the city, and the greater social connectedness of people in country towns as opposed to the anonymity of the city. Indeed, this latter aspect of social connectedness is probably, if rhetorically, still seen as the signal feature of country town life. The Western Australian state capital city of Perth is commonly said (both by its citizens and visitors from larger capital cities in the eastern states of Australia) to be “still just a big country town” (even as its population approaches two million). This is said partly in reference to the comparatively slower pace of life in Perth as opposed to Sydney and Melbourne. However, it is also said with reference to the high degree of social connectedness that it is possible to discover in this, as yet, relatively small and isolated city.

None of the Australian Bronx neighborhoods described above are at all like the real Bronx. Apart from the obvious distinctions between New York City and Australian country towns, and even suburbs of the state capital cities, the Australian Bronx neighborhoods have not undergone the decades-long decline to the level of urban decay to which the South Bronx of New York City was subjected, when its population declined to the point at which it could be said that it had been abandoned and indeed, that New York itself was a “fallen” city.⁶⁹ Neither have the Australian Bronx neighborhoods discussed here been created out of such brutally dividing urban engineering structures like the Cross-Bronx Expressway.

However, there exists in people’s minds the conceptual city that, in addition to its attractions, contains those dark spaces where the good people ought not to go, and in the imagined postmodern industrialized city, it is the Bronx of New York that symbolizes those dark spaces. Stigmatizing some part of the country town or of outer suburbia as the Bronx is therefore also an expression of the fear that country town or suburban people feel that this most dangerous aspect of city life has come to their neighborhood. In this process of stigmatization, a binary opposition is set up in which those who live within the Bronx are in danger of becoming, in Goffman’s terms, disqualified from full acceptance by others.⁷⁰ Among other things, this binary permits people to arrive at a simplified understanding of what has occurred to produce the Bronx neighborhood (Sibley 2001).⁷¹ In these circumstances, the problem is not the factors underlying the formation of a Bronx neighborhood; the problem becomes the neighborhood itself. In East Fairfield, this encompassed both the housing and the people that made up the neighborhood. In Macquarie Fields, the problem was framed as being that of a moral underclass of violent young men. This view is encapsulated in the words of the New South Wales Premier at the time, who said:

There are no excuses for this behaviour and I am not going to have it said that this behaviour is caused by social disadvantage.⁷²

Conclusion

As Arthurson points out,

In Australia as elsewhere, changes to targeting of public housing, restructuring of the welfare state, economic and industry restructuring and fiscal constraints mean that public housing is the repository for the most excluded tenants, rather than the cause of problems per se.⁷³

The presence of the troubled areas that develop as a result of these processes in towns and cities worldwide is the result of larger international, social, technological, and (in the end) economic processes that are commonly disguised and denied in public discourse.⁷⁴ These are processes over which, because they are the result of international developments, the residents of the troubled neighborhoods have no control, but over which governments can exercise at least some control in that governments can decide on policy responses to the effects of international developments within their own borders. Stigmatization is one element of the disenfranchisement, marginalization, or exclusion of certain groups. There exists an international similarity with regard to the terms of this stigma, as Wacquant shows:

In every metropolis of the First World, one or more towns, districts or concentrations of public housing are publicly known and recognised as those urban hellholes in which violence, vice, and disequilibrium are the order of things. Some even acquire the status of national eponym for all the evils and dangers now believed to afflict the dualized city: Les Minguettes and La Courneuve or the Mirail housing complex in Toulouse for France; South Central Los Angeles, the Bronx and the project of Cabrini Green in Chicago for the United States; Duisberg-Marxloh and Berlin-Neukölln for Germany; the districts of Toxteth in Liverpool, Saint Paul in Bristol, or Meadow Well in Newcastle for England; and Bijlmer and Westlijke Tuinsteden in Amsterdam for Holland. Even the societies that have best resisted the rise of advanced marginality, like the Scandinavian countries, are affected by this phenomenon of territorial stigmatization linked to the emergence of zones reserved for the urban outcasts.⁷⁵

The ruination of the South Bronx had a wide audience, to the extent that it took on international and media significance as the aspect of American culture that no other nation wanted to see imported. International developments in policy on urban poverty provide an example. At the same time that urban decay, deprivation, and disorder in the South Bronx was at its worst in the mid- to late 1970s, the notion of social exclusion was first promulgated in France arising out of circumstances of serious unrest in the *banlieues* to the north of Paris.⁷⁶ It had become an important element of European Union policy on poverty by 1989 and, by 2003, it had been taken up in Australia. In the process of its internationalization, the Bronx had merged with the *banlieues*, the *favela* and the ghetto into a globalised idea, or image, as the space of urban danger that, by its nature, threatens the cohesiveness of the societies wherever they are situated, from remote country towns in Australia to the largest of European cities.

While the metaphoric Bronx is drawn from the popular international imaging of the worst and most dangerous elements of American culture, it relates to a more generalized, cross-cultural heritage of understandings of industrialized, Westernized, city culture. According to the mechanisms of social categorization derived from these understandings, people across a wide range of

cultures and contexts organize their perceptions of the territories of destitution and disorder that develop in their towns and cities. This social categorization has serious impacts on the ways in which national, state, and local governments, driven by media representations and opinion polls, conceptualize and operationalize policies and programs intended to manage poverty and disorder at an institutional level. By such means, residents of these territories of destitution and unrest are subjected to a process of stigmatization, and this exoticization achieves material expression in the enduring conditions of the outcast urban poor.

The development and stigmatization of what Australians have termed a “Bronx” neighborhood is not necessarily a cultural or an inner city phenomenon. As we have seen in Australia, it can happen in outer suburbs, country towns, and in a variety of cultural contexts. Furthermore, the processes involved in making a place into a “Bronx” neighborhood are characteristically external to the social group that is the object of that process. It is the local concentration of public housing in a situation of a housing shortage that is the one common feature of “Bronx” neighborhoods worldwide.

Acknowledgments

My thanks to the anonymous reviewers and to Professor Roy Jones, Dean of Research and Graduate Studies at Curtin University, for their very constructive comments and advice on the revision of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

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20. Julissa Reynoso, "Putting Out Fires before They Start: Community Organizing and Collaborative Governance in the Bronx, USA," *Law and Inequality* 24, no. 2 (2006): 213–68.
21. Trish Hall, "A South Bronx Very Different from the Cliche," *The New York Times*, Late Edition, East Coast, February 14, 1999, 11.1
22. Jonnes, *We're Still Here*.
23. Robert Worth, "Guess Who Saved the South Bronx?"
24. Commentator Howard Cosell's statement during the World Series of 1977 has passed into urban myth and has been used repeatedly in regard to this period of the history of New York City. However, there are those who claim that a review of the television footage of the occasion reveals that this actual statement was never made. See the official blog site of American Major League Baseball at http://bestblog.mlblogs.com/archives/2007/08/did_howard_cose_1.html. See also Jonathon Mahler, *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Bronx Is Burning: 1977, Baseball, Politics, and the Battle for the Soul of a City* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977).
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28. The street name is fictionalized because Carnarvon is a very small town. As well, a great many Indigenous people who are kinfolk of the Indigenous townfolk travel through Carnarvon on a regular basis. There is also a great deal of research into Indigenous society undertaken in Western Australia and while laypeople may not read academic journals, researchers do and this is the danger of providing too much detail in my description of the street. Researchers do discuss the knowledge of Carnarvon they gain through their literature reviews with Indigenous people who participate in their research projects. Should the real name of the area might be accurately guessed, this might jeopardize the anonymity of participants and informants involved in my research. There is more than one area in the town that may be referred to as “the Bronx” of Carnarvon. If the street name is fictionalized, it cannot be said for certain exactly which of these areas this paper discusses, thus providing some protection of participants’ anonymity, which is a standard ethical undertaking for all anthropologists.
29. De-identified references.
30. Street fighting in this part of Carnarvon has become somewhat notorious. An example of this notoriety was the vision of Indigenous street fighting which was posted on YouTube in 2008. It has since been taken down due to terms of use violations. I am unable to say how many hits it had, but it seemed that everyone I spoke to in Carnarvon had seen it.
31. In the Western Australian government’s listing of former Aboriginal reserve lands, the Anne St. Reserve is described as “one of the worst in the State” (Western Australia, *The Lost Lands Report* (Perth, Government of Western Australia, Department of Indigenous Affairs, 1997: 131). This is not the author’s recollection from having lived there in the course of PhD fieldwork in 1981 and 1982. However, Kennedy Hill, another Broome town Aboriginal reserve was indeed a dangerous and violent reserve at that time. Possibly the reputations of these two reserves have become confused over the years.
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Bio

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