## From The Area For The Area

by Emily Greenwood

As a child I wasn't even aware Western Sydney was *not* the centre of the universe. Like I knew other parts of the world existed, my biological dad immigrated from Tonga. But like, even going to Darling Harbour or up the coast to great nana's, was like leaving the headquarters of Earth. Western Sydney is considered anything west of Strathfield and anything east of Lithgow. It is anything south of Singleton and anything north of Shoalhaven. Those are the clinical and respective boundaries of Western Sydney according to Western Sydney University[1]. But Western Sydney is more (or less) than these anthropologic and academic boundaries. Western Sydney turns from simply a geographic location and into a region that spawns its own culture, people, cuisine, language and accent when we acknowledge the self-defining concept of *The Area*. I don't know exactly where the terminology came from, but I started referring to the suburbs I grew up in as *The Area* before I knew it was a collective terminology, outside of my friend group and family. My inception point for this term *The Area* was in 2011. There was a massive rumble at Parramatta station. All these teenage boys were fighting; I don't know exactly what they were fighting about. But I remember the next day at school my friend, who was neighbours with one of the main contenders of this fight said, *"Yeah, he told me, all the boys from* the area *are gonna meet at the park and talk it out."* From there on out we started referring to our area as *The Area*.

*The Area* is a collective identity, self-defined by those from *The Area*. No academic or anthropologist, no state or federal level government, better yet no non-natives have had the opportunity to clinically define *The Area*. This renders the very concept of *The Area* for us and by us. Even as gentrification seeps into Western Sydney, *The Area* can never be taken away from us. It is ours. I have discussed this with my friends from *The Area* numerous times. Even as they change the physicality of my home

[1] Itaoui, R., Merrillees, D. Gerace., G. (2023), State of the Arts in Western Sydney, Parramatta, Centre for Western Sydney, 14. https://doi.org/10.26183/tvye-5r23.

suburbs of Granville and Parramatta, they can't change the people, they can't change the culture, they can't change our idiosyncratic accent and vernacular.

About five years ago, the New South Wales state government invested $255 million to upgrade my high school situated in the middle of Parramatta[2]. It was a much needed upgrade. When I went there in the late 2000s/ early 2010s we spent 40-degree celsius days in demountables with no air conditioner and windows that were nailed shut (they nailed the windows shut so no one could break into them). When they unveiled the seventeen-story skyscraper that included elevators, turnstile entries and state of the art facilities the first thing my friend Sarah said to me was, "*Watch that be graffitied in a week!"* According to Sarah's little sister Elham, it was.

I was a teenager before I realised people from other parts of Sydney hated on Western Sydney. My friend group in high school consisted of the misfits. In a public school that was heavily segregated by race, the people in my high school friend group were the people who were rejected by the respective racial groups. It was a winter's day in 2010 when I first found out people not from the west had a negative view on the west. As all teenagers do, we were laughing, joking and swearing during lunch on the playground. I don't even remember the full context of the conversation, but essentially, in a loving way, my friend called out to me and said *"Oi cunt..."* After leaving Western Sydney and the continued globalisation of the internet, it is interesting to look back on this event. Referring to your mate as a cunt was apparently always a part of white Australia's culture. This language and comradery are not a symptom of Western Sydney. But the response we got from the teacher on duty was accusatory, suggesting it was a negative symptom of Western Sydney. As an adult it is an obvious reaction to tell some kids to stop swearing, but that is not what she said. She ran over to us and said, *"You will be a Westie low life forever if you speak like that."* Our reaction was to laugh in her face until she walked away. But we only laughed at her outrage. We weren't laughing at what she

[2] Baker, J. (2019), Classrooms with a view: Inside Sydney's new $225 million high school, Sydney, The Sunday Morning Herald. https://www.smh.com.au/education/classrooms-with-a-view-inside-sydney-s-new-225-million-high-school-20190723-p529zy.html.

said and what she meant by that. We all looked at each other, familiar with white teachers speaking to us like we would never amount to anything because we attended a Western Sydney public school. With her double standard reserved only for children from Western Sydney and the ignorance of white Australia's greater influence on such, she insinuated we already were Westie low lives. We were children from low socio-economic backgrounds, most of which were either first-generation immigrants or from single-parent families or both. We were children and we knew it was wrong that she spoke to us like that.

My earliest memories are of the fibro house in South Granville. The first houso[3] property mum got when her psychiatrist wrote a letter to the New South Wales Department of Housing, after the stress of being abandoned by our biological father started caving in on her. The three-bedroom, one bath with a large backyard which included a mango tree was located at the end of a cul-de-sac which halted at the back of the Duck River. The boundary between the Burramattagal and Wategora clans of the Dharug nation for tens of thousands of years. I used to imagine great bushlands were on the other side of the Duck River. In reality it was the back of that golf course in Auburn. The smell of freshly cut grass mixed with petrol reminds me of 12 Maubeuge Street, South Granville. There will never be a simpler time for me. As a three-year-old, the cosy little dead-end was peak middle-class suburbia, like that portrayed in my favourite movies and television shows. Realistically, Brendan's dad was only scary to me because he had dark circles under his eyes and smelt like alcohol. I only felt safe around womxn because basically all the families - besides Bredan's and to be honest Brendan's - on our street were single- mother families living in fibro houses.

This glimpse of lower-class suburbia sparked a loyalty to Western Sydney, *The Area*, and my houso roots that will *never* leave me. Even at the first party I attended when I moved to Melbourne I was explaining to the inner-north, upper-middle-class-posing-as-working-class attendees,

[3] "Houso" Australian slang for someone living in public housing.

*“Sydney people are... I don’t know how to say it…”*

*“I’m actually from Western Sydney…”*

*"...so stuck up… and corporate.”*

*“Yeah, but I’m from Western Sydney. It’s almost a completely different city from Circular-Quay-Opera-House-Harbour-Bridge Sydney.”*

Pleased to report they did not appreciate my clarification and the next time I saw them they crossed to the other side of Lygon Street. After we left Maubeuge Street we moved to Merrylands. Mum said she hated the cold in the fibro house, so we downsized to a two-bedroom apartment on the second floor, which was a ten-minute walk to Stockies and Merrylands station. Jas and I learnt to read there, we learnt to ride bikes there, we tried Coca-Cola for the first time. There were people of different races, religions, job statuses, education statuses and visa statuses. I first learnt about the concept of ‘university’ when our neighbour Liz, drove us to the Western Sydney University where she was writing her PhD. At the flats we met the Dibs. As children we didn’t realise, even mum and Houda didn’t realise, that when a four-year-old Sarah asked if we needed a hand moving in, that we would all still be friends twenty-eight years later. I can’t imagine my life without the Dibs. They are what you’d call my chosen family, but I’ve known them so long I don’t even feel like I chose them. They simply are my family. The Flats on Walpole Street were as closest definition of community that I feel I will ever see. Sure, some people didn’t get along - Natalie’s mum was so uppity considering we *all* lived in public housing. But that was a community that supported each other, cared for each other, looked out for each other. The single-mothers and elderly womxn in that community carried you when you couldn't carry yourself.

It usually feels like a grey cloud, or a chunk of apple stuck at the back of my throat, whenever I'm away from Western Sydney for too long - It could be that and a mix of child of a single-mother guilt. Like during the 2021 lockdown, when I lived in Ashfield. That was hectic (and not in the good way), seeing all the video footage of literal children getting tackled by gangs of police for simply being outside or hearing family friends weren't allowed to go to work until they got vaccinated, but there

were no vaccines. Or even when we'd conference call on Facetime and we'd have to pause our conversation because the army were flying helicopters so low and close to mum's apartment, trying to seek people who were outside for longer than an hour. All while the Double Bay CEOs, CFOs, COOs, and GRWM Influencers with FOMO were at Bondi Beach working out, the Western Sydney "LGAs of concern"[4] were being arrested for literally walking down the street. They really try to give Western Sydney the worst of reputations. We are continually vilified by the media, by politicians, by anyone not from Western Sydney. But still we rise. Western Sydney became some of the most vaccinated LGAs in Australia at a point and most of that success can be attributed to the strong sense of community in Western Sydney. During lockdown I missed mum, nana and our cats, but the thing I missed the most was El Jannah. And before you say 'there's El Jannah' in Burwood, there's El Jannah in Newtown' I grew up directly behind the OG El Jannah in Granville. I remember when it was a hole in the wall chicken shop, so small they didn't even have tables inside. I won't be eating fried chicken on King Street, Newtown and calling it El Jannah. Anyway, real Westies know El Jannah is just touching the surface. If you want real restaurant grade Lebanese charcoal chicken, you gotta go to Hawa. El Jannah is for tourists, Hawa is for the locals.

In recent years, a point of contention in Western Sydney is deciding on what is considered *The Area* exactly. *The Area* is not all Western Sydney[5]. If you're from the Hills, Blue Mountains, Camden or Wollondilly you are not from *The Area*. If you're from Bankstown you are from *The Area*, but you're not from *The Area* if you're from the Hawksbury River side of Western Sydney. I grew up in five different public housing 'houso' dwellings across Western Sydney. They were in Granville, South Granville, Merrylands – all *The Area* – and Wentworthville – not *The Area*. We represent so hard for *The Area*, and Western Sydney because they tried to tell us it was nothing and undesirable. They tried to tell us we were nothing and undesirable for simply being from Western Sydney, for being from *The Area*. In the true underdog, or better yet white Australia's concept of the 'little Aussie battler', all of

[4] Department of Planning, Industry and Environment (2021), Sydney, New South Wales Office of Local Government, 2.
[5] Disclaimer: These are myself, my friends and my family's definition of *The Area*. This is not a definitive definition of *The Area*.

the people who were sitting in the canteen on that winter day and labelled a *"Westie low life"* have gone on to be the first in their families to graduate university. When I think about the pride I have for being from Western Sydney, I think about my family and friends. Western Sydney, and *The Area* would be nothing without the people, the people who create the culture, cuisine, accent and vernacular. Gentrification is vastly upon us in Western Sydney, but no matter how hard they try, they will never take our self-defining concept of *The Area*, they will never remove the people, they will never remove our pride.