

USING ACTIVIST DIALOGUES TO UNSETTLE AND TRANSFORM THINKING

This chapter describes my activist journey as I moved beyond contemplating *What could or should be?* to address the *What can I do about it?* and *How do others see me as a result of what I've done?* questions from the cycle of inquiry, intervention, and self-discovery introduced in Chapter 3. Chapter 6 favors a more literary style than the other chapters. Adapting this style personalizes my experiences for the reader. I tell my story using a journal entry format which includes what I did, how others responded to me, and how this in turn made me feel, resee, and react. My critical and feminist lenses are foregrounded as I invoke autoethnographic techniques and critically reflective practices to deepen understandings of the risks and rewards of being an insider activist researcher.

Specifically, I set out to discover what transformative thinking or action was possible through a communal unsettling of phallogentric discourses of white male entitlement. Whilst others' views are represented in this chapter—via a selection of media articles and interviews—the emphasis is on understanding how I positioned others and was positioned by others as a result of my social activism. This phase of the research act was informed by theories of public pedagogy, resistance, and radical feminism. As an activist researcher I drew on Butler's (2004) work to combine theoretical knowledge with a

practical process of intervention capable of inspiring social transformations around issues of gender. I did this by publically questioning one of Wheatville's revered cultural icons. Strategically I set out to

[break] apart the ideas and structuring principles in a cultural artefact and then [re-assemble] them in a different framework that allows the limits of specific ideas and formalistic properties to come into view, while simultaneously discovering the new and vital elements in them that could be appropriated for radical purposes. (Giroux, 2001, p. 155)

The Letter

Thursday, February 4: *I am standing outside the office of the local newspaper feeling anxious. I have come to deliver a draft of the chapter I am writing for a book on educational research to the editor of the newspaper. I have spoken to him on the phone and he has agreed to read it. Much of the chapter's content is drawn from critiques of gender representations and implicit ideologies located in articles not only published in his paper, but also written by the editor himself.¹ I am curious about how he is going to respond. The female administrative assistant at the front desk gestures for me to enter his office. He is sitting behind a computer screen at a messy desk. He is affable. I have had dealings with him before when he has covered stories and advertised forthcoming events for the local high school.*

I hand him a printed copy of the chapter and ask if he could find time to read it and give me some feedback. I explain that it is a draft and, as such, is open to redrafting. I let him know that the chapter is part of a larger study I am conducting which seeks to explore and disrupt local gender discourses, ideologies, and, ultimately, practices which contribute to boys' schooling underperformances. I am talking too much, and hear myself sounding apologetic and obsequious: "I hope you are not offended by what you read....I will be very interested in your feedback." The disruption process is beginning, and it is I who am feeling unsettled.

The following is an extract from the chapter's introduction:

This chapter will argue that some students' poor schooling performances can be attributed to influences beyond teachers and their classroom practices. It will put forward a case for linking some boys' schooling underperformances to the ideological messages they are receiving from community discourses and practices that promote narrow masculine hierarchies and have, over generations, become entrenched. This chapter will further submit that a purposefully conducted critical examination of community discourses with students can work to make visible and disrupt limiting cultural beliefs and practices whilst offering liberatory alternatives. Such a process is

capable of inspiring transformative thinking which can, ultimately, lead to improved student outcomes.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the media's role in constituting, reflecting and perpetuating potentially restrictive gender binaries before narrowing its focus to make transparent some of the discourses and ideological messaging located in the texts of a small rural newspaper in Australia. Specifically the linguistic and visual features from a selection of this newspaper's texts will be analyzed for how they are discursively constructing relationships between males and females and for the ideological messages which might be resulting from these constructions. Whilst acknowledging that generalizability from such a singular approach is problematic, the chapter's content should be viewed as a demonstration of the potential usefulness of media texts as resources for disrupting gender binaries which work to limit and oppress lives. (Lennon, 2011, p. 196)

Friday, February 5: *I receive the following response from the editor. It is sent as an email.*

Sherilyn

In response to your chapter

To me this seems an oversimplifying of what you yourself say is a complicated issue. Re the academic success, or not, of boys in education. It's an attempt to mould what you regard as the facts to suit your own ideology. As you admit, you have "a gender justice lens." I however don't think "justice" has anything to do it with it. It is quite simply a "bias."

Your inference of "racial othering" is offensive. If you mean by visual cues that there is a photograph of an Indigenous woman who has been bashed, then indeed you are correct. But I would argue strongly that if the woman had been white, had approached us to do a story and had had her photograph taken, the story would not have been handled any differently. The facts are what they are and I'm happy to give examples of similar reports where there is no Indigenous person involved.

To suggest that there were "linguistic or semantic cues" is, I believe, nonsensical. And while I am not an academic, I'd suggest that to use "semiotic" in this sentence is grammatically wrong.

The real offence though is the sense throughout the article that this paper, and the media in general, has an almost sinister-like agenda. There is "complicity"—to do what? Report the news? To entertain? To be a forum for the debate of important issues such as why boys "appear" to be falling behind girls academically? Guilty as charged. I reiterate, to suggest, even vaguely that there was an attempt to "construct the Indigenous women as violent, anti-social, and poor parental models" is a nonsense and a

poor attempt at twisting examples to suit your own argument. You have extrapolated from one story and come up with nothing more than a generalization. A generalization, which I may add, neglects the context of location.

At the time this story was written there was, and still is, a concern about the level of violence in the streets where this woman lived. And I guess that is where I have the most difficulty with your work.

As you admit, your examples are “strategically” chosen. To say that this will be addressed later is like saying that the “cheque is in the mail.” I can only comment on what’s before me.

However, that all said, newspapers and the media live by a simple defence: Don’t shoot the messenger, and we can’t buck too much when that is also used against us. There are a number of points you raise that is fair comment and which newspapers and editors everywhere need to address. Perhaps surprisingly to many, that topic would be discussed everywhere from the coffee room at *The Wheatville Times* to the Murdoch boardroom.

Papers do attempt to be fair in their reporting. They are conscious of gender issues and stereotyping. And there is certainly an attempt, at least in *The Wheatville Times*, to show positive images of boys and girls in sport, in the classroom, and wherever they may excel. Could we do better? Of course.

The example of the “Plucked Duck logo” (something which we have no control over by the way) is a fair and strong argument (although the “health check” had absolutely nothing to do with what you obviously thought and was only a reference to whose bucks party it was). But that’s not the point. The point is that is how you perceived it, and newspapers and editors and journalists have to be more wary.

I can’t use that to defend your assertion that the story of—[name deleted] and co depicted them “in servitude.” Again I’d suggest that this is your own “gender lens” (bias) shining through. And while I see your point about “motherhood,” I must quite obviously be a misogynist pig because I thought the nurturing and care of babies is something important in all communities, not just Wheatville. To say this is a non-positive view and that this is somehow limiting women in their life choices, is, and again in my own personal view, drawing a long bow. Should women who do see these as positive attributes take offence? If you mean there should have been a boy in the picture then that’s another matter. It’s a valid point, but only if the class was offered to the boys as well. Perhaps it was...I don’t know. And again, that may very well be your point?

However the crux of the article, I gather, is how the media is reinforcing stereotyping of boys, and girls, in a way that is limiting them. And this certainly does deserve

clinical review. Binge drinking is a blight on our society and must be addressed, at home, in the school and in the media. No doubt. And it is.

And again, this is where I take exception to the “strategic” examples you give. There is no mention of the many stories that tackle this issue not just in *The Wheatville Times*, but media Australia-wide. In the end if, by acknowledging these efforts, you actually strengthen your own argument [sic]. If the media itself sees that there is a problem, it obviously supports your view that there is as well.

Instead you attempt, or so it appears, to do little more than defend women teachers when, I would suggest, from the vast majority’s perspective it is not “uncommitted women teachers” that are the problem but “uncommitted teachers” full stop. And again this is a view held by many if the number of letters that appear in newspapers across the country are anything to go by.

And finally, you tend to see the media as an entity acting alone, despite a paragraph which says otherwise. Or at least that is the perception I get from the overall text. In many ways, all media is just a mirror of the society it serves. It is an easy mark. What I get from this piece is an overriding purpose to defend teachers and the education system as a whole and find reasons to maintain the status quo. Some would say “excuses.” Perhaps that is my own bias?

The status quo, Sherilyn, isn’t working as well as it should, and while it’s easy to defend and say that it is complicated, and that the media is to blame, it is much harder to look critically at your own backyard and find fault, especially if you limit yourself by putting on that gender lens “bias” of yours. Why aren’t there more boys achieving to the same academic standards as girls at the Wheatville State High School? Why don’t boys make it on to the stage to accept academic awards to the same level as girls?

From the examples you gave and the arguments you raised I see only limited reason to blame the media and society’s stereotyping, not that I don’t believe that they are out there. We only have to watch video hits on a Saturday morning to appreciate that, and as you have shown, even the pages of *The Wheatville Times*.

You also attribute assertions and views in the paper as the views and assertions of the paper itself. There’s only one place to discover the views and assertions of the paper itself, and that’s in the editorials. The suggestion seems to be that the media is the one promoting a campaign to denigrate women teachers. You ignore, or seem to ignore, the real concern by parents, and some educators, about the lack of male mentors in the education system. This is not driven by the media. We report the concerns and we’d be doing a disservice if we did otherwise, especially to the ones that none of us want to “limit,” our kids.

However, I genuinely take on-board that the media has its place in dispelling those stereotypes which do limit the expectations of boys and girls, and the media is willing to be used, and should be used to achieve that end. Or as you say “disrupt” the stereotyping. Improving those efforts will only come if, we, or others such as yourself, look critically at how we do our job.

But to come up with a real solution to the limitation society imposes on our children and young adults through stereotyping, then all sections of the community have to be willing to undergo the same analysis. That includes the academics and the politicians who bestow their expertise upon us and our children through the various education systems in each state. And that includes teachers whether they are male, or female.

Mark Smith

Editor: *The Wheatville Times* [personal communication]

Monday, February 8: *I ring the editor and thank him for his feedback. I ask him if I can incorporate it into my study. He readily agrees, and sends me written affirmation. I agree with him that I have been too narrow in my choice of articles and let him know that my redraft will incorporate more examples drawn from the Wheatville Times of images and articles that serve to disrupt and challenge gender binaries. I also agree to explicitly acknowledge in my book chapter that direct quotes used in some of the articles I have analyzed are not necessarily representative of the views of the journalists writing the articles. I can see that these alterations will help to give the chapter more balance. However, we agree to disagree on some things. I have found the editor's feedback provocative but insightful. It would appear he has been incensed by some of my assertions; however, over the phone he is still courteous and businesslike. Perhaps he is thinking he has offended me with his forthright feedback. He has definitely made me rethink some things. I wonder if the process will encourage him to rethink how he represents males and females in his newspaper. During our phone conversation I ask the editor, if I were to write a letter to the editor disrupting gender binaries, would he be interested in publishing it. I explain that I want to write something that could initiate a public discourse around some of the limiting gender messages being broadcast within and across our community. I am thinking of critiquing the Plucked Duck B&S logo. He is most keen for me to write a letter on this topic. I suspect he is operating from the vantage point that any controversy is good for newspaper circulation. I know the paper sometimes struggles to fill its opinion column. My idea is to write the article as a process of “consciousness raising” (Giroux, 2001, p. 110).*

Wednesday, February 10: *My letter has been published in the local newspaper (see Figure 6.1). I am pleased to see an image of the logo inserted into it. I believe*

the logo viewed in this context increases the letter's impact and will encourage others to reread—and perhaps rethink—the logo's gender messages.

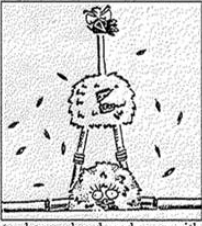
■ YOUR LETTERS:

IS it just me or does anybody else find the logo being used by the B&S committee to advertise their annual event offensive?

You know the one: a cartoon image of an aggressive looking male emu holding a can of beer and towering over a prostrate female emu who is sporting what appears to be a "just raped" expression with legs askew, the words "plucked duck" emblazoned underneath her, and feathers flying.

I noticed the logo being used again recently to encourage new committee members to come on board. I recognise that its creators were probably "only joking" and "just having a bit of fun" and "where's my sense of humour gone?" and I have to admit that...well yes... my humour does seem

"Plucked Duck" logo no joke



to have abandoned me with regards to this particular image.

My dilemma is: When do jokes like this become naturalised and so "normal" through constant repetition and/or over exposure that they slip into the everyday and nobody even notices them anymore or thinks to question the gender messages contained therein? Last year Australia's footballing community had a wake up call when a number of its high profile players were exposed for violent and/or misogynist acts against women.

At the time many of us were asking, "How can they possibly think that sort of behavior is OK?" But maybe it's images, dressed up in humour, like the one being used to market our own B&S that help to make it OK.

Please don't get me wrong. I have nothing but admiration for those people who give tirelessly of their time and energy to make community events like the &S happen.

I am also aware of how important these events are for maintaining a vital local economy and the generosity of committee members in giving to charitable causes.

I can also claim to have had three members of my immediate family proudly wear the Emus' colours at various times over the past 30 years.

My concerns lie not with the event or the club. They are with the sorts of messages that images like this send to our community about what is acceptable, or possibly even expected, behavior for males and females on evenings such as these.

Am I being too harsh? I would be interested in what others think.

Sherilyn Lennon
Wheatville

press.com

Figure 6.1. My first letter to the Wheatville Times.

Thursday, February 11: At school, the principal approaches me to comment on my letter. He was initially a little uncertain about my research but tells me that he is finally starting to "get" what my study is about and what I mean by the term "disrupting." He goes on to tell me that he has just come back from a committee meeting with a school/community group and that the letter was responsible for generating quite a lot of discussion. One of those present (a professional from the community working in the field of agriculture) told the principal that it was his brother-in-law who actually drew up the original logo many years earlier. The principal speaks very positively about the discussion the letter generated and congratulates me for writing it. I am feeling reassured.

On the way home from school a friend of mine who is a primary school teacher and married to a property owner rings. She has read the letter and is very supportive. She keeps repeating, "You are so right." She is keen to see how her husband reacts to it when she gets home, and promises to let me know. He is a staunch rugby supporter. Before she hangs up she applauds my bravery for writing it. I am surprised at her use of the word "bravery." I am keen to see if I get any feedback in next week's paper, and if so, what form it will take.

That night I receive two more phone calls—both from female friends. One is from a professional colleague of over 20 years; the other from a mother of four who is married to a landowner. My professional colleague tells me that her husband has always had a problem with “that logo.” (Her husband is a local health professional.) The mother of four is also very supportive. She tells me that she and her husband “are with you 100%” and asks, “Where do we vote?” She is astounded when I tell her that the logo has been in use for nearly 20 years without comment. She has never noticed it before.

Sunday, February 14: I return from a weekend in the city to clear my phone messages. There is one there from the former president of the B&S committee. He has also been, at various times, the president of the State School Parents and Citizens Association and the president of the rugby club. Mr. President leaves a message to tell me that he wants to talk to me; that he thinks I am wrong in the views I express in my letter; and that my letter “has certainly generated a lot of debate in this household.” I sense he is trying hard to sound unaffected and genial. I take a deep breath and ring him back. I am relieved when I have the opportunity to leave a message as well. I lie when I say that I look forward to having a conversation with him about the issue, and inform him that I will call again later.

Wednesday, February 17: There are two responses to my letter in the letters to the editor section of the newspaper this week (see Figure 6.2). One is from Mr. President. The other, a much smaller letter, is from an international source.

■ YOUR LETTERS:

B&S logo just good clean fun

MRS LENNON'S conclusions about our B&S logo represent both an alarmist and nihilistic view of youth behaviour. As a brief history lesson, the logo for the B&S was commissioned as part of a comic strip by a talented local artist 20 years ago. The story goes (as previous captions would show) that our male emu (Eddie the emu) was protecting the valour of our female emu (Emma the emu) from a gang of drug selling emus. Eddie the emu observed the situation and stepped in to offer assistance to Emma and dished out a whole can of whoop a... to the gang members (which would be shown in the following cartoon captions).

The drink in Eddie's hand

(could well be an energy drink?) was handed to him by his mates for sticking up for Emma in a spot of trouble. The mouth full of feathers could be those of the gang members from the ensuing scuffle. The long socks and garters merely show that our emus are both snappy dressers & may have nothing to do with rugby.

The absurd association that Mrs Lennon makes between rape, violence, rugby and our very successful B&S is ridiculous in the extreme. It was dis-appointing that Mrs Lennon wasn't able to see the positive side of our logo, perhaps she formed her opinion based on the media reports of incidences involving the poor treat-ment of women from some pro-fessional sportsmen.

Also, the B&S is run independent of the rugby club and neither condones violence, rape or the misuse of alcohol.

The B&S are obliged to pro-mote the responsible consump-tion of alcohol, which is a far cry from suggesting our logo promotes violence and rape as Mrs Lennon suggests it depicts.

Whilst acknowledging inci-dents in society involving vio-lence and alcohol, the over-whelming message promoted by the Ville B&S committee is one of fun and enjoyment for the youth with the opportunity to contribute by donating profits back to the community.

The fact that she takes such a dim view of the culture of our B&S event, suggests some unpleasant past experience. Let's give the current generation some credit and to my knowledge there have been no incidences of violence towards females at our B&S events to date. The message of the logo could well be the epitome of Australian character in 'sticking up for your mates'. I would suggest Mrs Lennon lighten up

to remember, and reward, the enthusiasm of youth.

Last report was that Eddie was still courting his female friend and that the relationship was going strong.

Former player and founding President

Mick Burr

Logo no joke

I WHOLE heartedly agree with the comments espoused by Sherilyn re the Plucked Duck logo. It is no longer appropriate to continually, however covertly, perpetuate powerlessness over and violence towards women.

Rape crisis and victim support groups have enough to battle without captions, like the one on the logo, however innocently, conveying the idea that it is "still okay".

Eli Walls
New Zealand

Figure 6.2. “Mr. President’s” response to my letter.

Thursday, February 18: My mother-in-law has asked me to come to a meeting to help organize a large family function. Whilst at the meeting, one of the other committee members—a property owner in his late seventies—approaches me to discuss the letter. I recognize him as a staunch rugby supporter, and I feel myself tense. He begins: “When I first started reading your letter to the editor I thought, ‘Here we go: Another feminist rant.’ But after I read it all, I found myself agreeing with you. You are absolutely right.” I am buoyed by his support, relax, and thank him for taking the time to give me feedback. His response pleases me immensely. It indicates to me that my disrupting is having an impact on local thinking. Others overhear our conversation and join in.

A 65-year-old widow tells me that she has read my letter and it has made her look closely at the logo for the first time. She admits she has seen it hundreds of times before without really seeing it. She describes it as “inexcusable.” This prompts yet another woman—a property owner’s wife who has a university degree—to comment, “And how ridiculous was that response to your letter trying to justify the logo? Oh please!”

That night, a young female teacher approaches me at a staff dinner. She tells me that she has attended the B&S and looked at the logo “a hundred times” and never thought about it until I questioned it. She is now appalled by it, and tells me that it has made her look more closely at other marketing campaigns for similar events. I am interested to hear from her that our local logo is not the only one being used by rural events to market misogynist gender messages. She exclaims quite passionately that “It has to stop!” I drive home feeling reassured, vindicated, supported. It is comforting to know that others are noticing and reading the logo’s gender messages in the same way that I am.

I arrive home late and tired and begin to clear the emails from my inbox. One intrigues me as it is from a well known local farmer in his late forties. Interestingly, he too has been president of a number of community organizations, including the rugby club. He has two sons attending private boarding schools in the metropolitan region. At first, I mistakenly think he is writing a letter of support. He uses humor to mitigate his words, but his oppositional views become clear.

Sent: Thursday, 18 February 7:35 PM

To: Sherilyn Lennon

Subject: Letter to the editor

Sherilyn,

Re your letter in last week’s *Wheatville Times*:

Yes I think it is just you!!

Funny how people see things differently. I had always looked at that logo and thought it epitomized a young man standing protectively over a young girl who had obviously over indulged and needed protection from those evil people (both male and female) who prey on the helpless. The wild look in the eye of the protective male I thought was a warning to those nasty people that "they had better stay away or else!!"

Never in my wildest dreams (and I do have some of those!!) had I thought that the prostrate female had that "just raped" look about her.

However, now that you have brought it to my attention and made me look closer at the logo I do see it somewhat differently than I had previously. Now I see a prostrate female who has obviously had a carnal encounter of some sort, but I don't think it is a look of someone who has just been raped. Rather than an expression of fear or terror or humiliation that you might expect from someone just raped, I see a look of satisfaction and possibly surprise, as if to say "well that was better than I expected." And the look on the male to me is more one of disappointment, as if he has been invited by the female for "a good time." He has obviously delivered his part of the deal and is now disappointed that she has not reciprocated. His look says to me "get up, bitch" which under the circumstances I don't believe is too harsh at all!!

I'm pleased that you sent your letter to the editor as it has made me, and probably many others, realize that there are often different ways to interpret images.

I hope it has also helped you to make that realization.

Good letter but!!

Cheers

Malcolm McDougal [personal communication]

His words unsettle me. I email him back straight away asking if he would permit me to include his email in a study I am conducting on gender roles in our community.

Friday, February 19: *One of the neighbors rings to talk to my husband about some cattle that have swum the creek and are now on his place. The neighbor is a country male in his sixties who has quite a reputation in the district for being cantankerous. He is one of the few people I know of with whom my husband has had "words." I am surprised when he offers support for my letter. He goes on to tell me that, not only does he want the logo banned, but he also wants the B&S banned. He argues that "It is only ripping off young people." I tell him that I don't have a problem with*

the event, just the advertising, and hand the phone to my husband. Then I start to wonder if that is really how I feel.

Later in the afternoon I receive a phone call from Malcolm McDougal. He informs me that he is “happy” to have his email included in my study and to forward him any necessary paperwork. He tells me that he is pleased he has been able to help and asks if there is anything else he can do. I don’t tell him that his words have made me feel uncomfortable. Instead, I hear myself saying, “It is an interesting perspective. Worth documenting. Although, I’m sure you will understand that I don’t necessarily agree with it.” I try to reflect on why I am not being totally honest with him about how his letter made me feel. Am I worried about what he will think of me, or am I more concerned about him withdrawing permission for me to use his email in my study?

Sunday, February 21: I am at yet another meeting. This one is a bus conveying meeting and is being held in a tin shed on a neighboring property at 4:30 in the afternoon. It is the middle of summer and very hot. I find myself seconding motions rapidly in order to get back home to the pool. When the meeting breaks the bus driver, who is a woman in her sixties, approaches me. She places herself so that no one else can hear her and almost whispers to me. “I read your letter in the paper and I just want you to know that I really understood where you were coming from. I used to have a bit to do with all the footy clubs in Wheatville 20 years ago and I can tell you those rugby union players were by far the worst. I would have to drive them home after their away games and the way they talked to me—and about women generally—well, it was really disrespectful and disgusting. In the end I refused to work for them anymore. I rang their president up and told him that he could drive the bus himself in future because I wouldn’t be. I didn’t want to have to put up with their rubbish anymore. They made me feel really dirty and low.”

Wednesday, February 24: This week’s issue of the Wheatville Times has devoted its street poll opinion section to the logo controversy. There are five photos of local residents who have been randomly interviewed in the street. Three are male and two are female. They have been asked, “What do you think of the B&S logo?” Their responses are recorded as follows:

- It doesn’t affect me and I think I’m normal. (Local property owner in his fifties, father, ex-rugby player, and successful local businessman)
- Each to his own. (Ex-rugby player, local junior rugby coach, chemical rep, and father in his fifties. He has coached one of my sons)

- To be honest, I'd never noticed it until Sherilyn pointed it out. (*Local property owner and father in his forties*)
- Perhaps they could come up with a new logo that isn't offensive to women or ducks. (*Teacher, mother, and partner of a local cotton grower, in her thirties*)
- I don't think it's very nice. (*Young female shop assistant*)

I am at a friend's house for dinner that night. She is no longer working in education, but is a trained primary school teacher who has recently returned from travelling overseas. She is laughing as she says, "And haven't you stirred up a hornet's nest? I was still at the airport in the city being picked up by Adam and Barbie when they said, 'Have you read Sherilyn's letter?' They were pretty cranky, and I said, 'No, but I'd like to.' When I got to—(provincial inland city) to visit the Brennans I was confronted with it again: 'Have you read Sherilyn's letter?' They even had a copy of it. It had been emailed to Ralph from someone out here. Apparently it is being emailed around quite a bit."

I am surprised at how much attention my letter is generating. I note that it appears to be those associated with the rugby club—past and present—who are having the most issue with it. I find myself trying to analyze why this might be. An uncomfortableness starts to settle over me.

Wednesday, March 3: *I have been told by one of the female journalists at the Wheatville Times that the paper has a blog site and that my letter has attracted a comment. When I come home I search for it. Whilst it was published a few weeks earlier, I decide to respond anyway, and make a mental note to check the blog regularly from now on. The blog site is headlined "Plucked Duck Logo Gets You Talking."*

Sherilyn, this logo has been used for a long time and you are a bit slow in your observation of it—get over it. (Posted by Donagh, February 10, 9:00:36 PM)

Donagh, does the fact that something has been in use for a long time and passed without comment mean it is appropriate or untouchable? (Posted by Sherilyn, March 3, 9:22:41PM)

There is another letter to the editor in the newspaper this week (see Figure 6.3). It has been written by my friend, Sonya, the farmer's wife who is the mother of four. I ring her and thank her for her public support. I am pleased to see that an image of the logo has again been published with the letter. I feel its repeated publication in this context will work to further the disruption process.

■ YOUR LETTERS:

The 'Plucked Duck' logo must go

THE "Plucked Duck" logo has feathers ruffled, but there is no need to get personal.

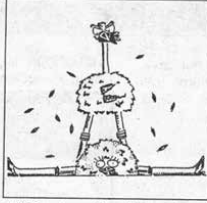
I am, of course, if you have been reading the paper referring to the recent letters of Mrs Lennon and Mr Burr.

Mrs Lennon's concern IS, that the B&S logo is no longer appropriate and socially acceptable and she questions its continued use in promotion.

Her letter was empathetic, respectful and responsible and she has voiced a very real concern.

She is not alone.

I do however applaud you Mr Burr on your powers of interpretation (re- the logo depicting "Eddie the Emu"



sticking up for Emma in a spot of bother) and can't help but wonder if you are taking the mickey.

You did say that the drink in Eddy's hand COULD well be an energy drink... Pleecease, doesn't it have "xxxx" on it?

Blind Freddy can tell what's intended by that image and if he can't, then he has the caption, "plucked duck" to help him!

To suggest that the cartoon is somehow selling an anti-drug or mateship message is absurd and, if that is truly its intent, then may I suggest you go back to the artist and try again!

If Eddie WAS truly a mate he would have picked poor ol' Emma up from the ground, dusted her off and helped her tidy her make-up.

He would most certainly not have wanted his mate to be seen in such a state. Energy drinks all round eh!

Mr Burr, even though I

found your remarks patronising and condescending I do admire your loyalty to the logo and conviction that no harm is intended by it. Unfortunately with any good business when dealing with the public you must keep one's finger on the pulse, move with the times and embrace change.

Woman will no longer put up with this sort of crap...Oops sorry about that, forgot I was a lady.

Let's remember and reward the enthusiasm of youth.

My vote is to change the logo.

Sonya Black

Figure 6.3. A supportive response to my letter.

Thursday, March 4: I am in town to conduct an interview when I run into a colleague of mine who used to work at the local high school. She is now a mother of three young children, and her partner is a local property owner. She has been following the debate in the paper and, whilst she endorses my view, she also challenges me: "If you are going to question something in the community you really should be prepared to offer an alternative." Her words keep replaying in my mind as I drive home.

That afternoon my husband comes home from town where he has been seeing one of the local mechanics. They have had a conversation about the impact of the letter. The mechanic tells my husband, "Christ! Am I ever sick of blokes coming in here tearing their hair out over what your wife's been writing in the paper. They keep asking me, 'What's wrong with him? Why can't he control his wife?'"

My husband tells me that he has retorted with, "They obviously don't know my wife!" We laugh about it but my sense of unease returns.

Friday, March 5: The jackeroo² is at the main house for morning tea. He is in his late twenties and is telling me about a conversation that took place on the sideline at his touch football game the night before. Many of the players in his team are also members of the local rugby club. He tells me they are quite incensed about my questioning of the logo. I ask him how he reacted to their comments. He says, "I told them they don't get what you're on about. They're missing the point. They think

you're attacking their club and the B&S. Lots of them haven't even read the letter. They're going on what they've been told by others. It's causing quite a stir in there, Sherilyn."

Sunday, March 7: *I have just picked up the jillaroo³ from the bus stop. She is my husband's niece and a single mother in her late thirties. She has spent the last year with us. She is relating a conversation to me that she has had with a passenger on the bus: a local farmer's son in his early twenties. I know him and his family. He has told her that he is really disappointed in me for "knocking" the B&S committee after all their hard work. The jillaroo asks him if he has read my letter. He replies, "No. But I have heard all about it."*

Monday, March 8: *I am at school when a young female teacher approaches me to tell me about her weekend. She says she was at a party where there were a number of rugby players and "They were all going off about your letter." She laughs as she repeats what they were saying: "Isn't that Jock Lennon's missus? What's his problem? Can't he control her?" Outwardly I laugh with her, but inwardly I feel my sense of unease growing.*

Wednesday, March 10: *I log onto the blog site. There is another comment. It has been posted the previous Friday.*

Sherilyn, are you also suggesting the big M of the McDonalds' logo looks like a set of women's breasts? Come on love. Lighten up. Let's not make issues out of this. In fact, let's save our energy for something that needs it. (Posted by Donagh, March 5, 7.30 PM)

I respond:

Donagh, haven't got a problem with McDonalds big M logo or women's breasts for that matter (unless they are being presented in a way which demeans and/or objectifies women). However, I think humor which uses sexual domination of—and violence against—females to pack its punch needs challenging. I don't find it harmless, amusing, or innocent. Instead I find it dangerous and derogatory. Imagine if the female (or male for that matter) emu in the image was Indigenous or Indian. Would we think that was okay? Or would that be considered inappropriate or possibly racist? Well why is it okay—or considered funny—for the logo to represent females in this way? Sorry, but not laughing at this one. Too serious! (Posted by Sherilyn, March 10, 12.54 PM)

Just as I push the post button my husband walks in the door with the Wheatville Times. He has returned from a trip to town. He hands the newspaper to me and

says, “You’ve hit the jackpot this week.” There is a letter to the editor and an editorial. I open the paper to read them. The letter to the editor attempts to trivialize my concerns and tells me to “lighten up.” It is the same one to which I have just responded on the blog site. Again the editor has inserted the logo into it. In attempting to remain neutral the editor has turned the issue into a generational one:

The joke’s on us

The Plucked Duck logo is offensive. To many people. But not the ones who will be dressing up, and dressing down, and undressing and generally having the time of their life once the B&S comes around later in the year.

To them, it’s a great joke, because it is on us, their parents and all those who try to imprint them with their own ideas of what’s right and wrong.

It’s their way of hitting back at those who believe they know better, and that youth and its exuberance is wasted on the unthinking and the ideological vacant, which of course anyone under 25 is. Aren’t they?

How quickly we forget.

Anyone old enough to remember the *Monty Python Flying Circus*, or the *Derek and Clive* tapes, or *The Goon Show*, or *The Aunty Jack Show*, or in terms that the Y Generation can relate to, *South Park*, should understand the joy of thumbing your nose at the “establishment,” and we people (anyone over 25) are just that.

The mistake we can make is to believe that everyone under 25 is a vapid nong. Not that some of them aren’t. But then the same can be said for plenty of us over 25, or even 50 as well.

District resident, Sherilyn Lennon, began the debate concerned that stereotypes and jokes can, no matter how distasteful, become the “norm” and “accepted” if we let them. She’s right.

We should question. We should draw a line and say, “This isn’t funny and it is offensive,” with no regard to the younger generation pointing a finger and saying that we are “all old fuddy-duddies.” The fact is, this is how our children, how we all grow up, eventually.

The danger is that, for the sake of an ideological or moral view, we don’t see the forest for the argument itself.

As our grandmothers (or grandfathers) most likely told our own mothers (or fathers), say your piece, tread lightly, and they’ll wake up—one day.

By drawing more attention to it, those who are offended are only setting themselves up for more of the same. Not surprisingly we haven’t heard a great deal from the B&S Committee.

The constant barrage of comment is pure gold when it comes to plugging the B&S. What’s the bet the logo doesn’t change any time soon?

The only upside for many is something our parents understood only too well: the same ones who love the logo now, will more than likely have a far different view once it’s their own children heading off to dress up, dress down and undress while having the best time of their lives. For those of us with children, it’s our only payback.

I ring the editor, thank him for keeping the debate going with his editorial, and ask that my blog response is not published in next week's paper. I am getting concerned at the level of hostility in the community, and let him know that I worry my original letter is being misinterpreted. He tells me that he has only ever seen the community so absorbed by an issue once before, and he has been working at the Wheatville Times for nearly 30 years. He encourages me to write another letter that will restate my position for readers who may have missed the original letter. I suspect his primary motive is that he is enjoying increased interest in his paper with the controversy that the letter has created. but take him up on his offer anyway. I am concerned the debate is being deflected away from a questioning of local gender messages and practices to a debate about the merits of rugby or whether to support—or not—a particular social event. I agree to write another letter offering an alternative logo and clarifying my standpoint.

Tuesday, March 16: Today I conduct an interview with a local businessman. He is in his mid forties and has two children away at boarding school. He also owns a property. His replies to my questions are very measured. He chooses his words carefully and speaks slowly. I sense he is slightly uncomfortable being digitally recorded discussing cultural gender issues. The interview gives me valuable insights into how my letter is being received by others.

Sherilyn: Tom, you were telling me recently of a discussion which was going on in your morning tea break about the logo being used for the Wheatville B&S. Would you mind elaborating on that?

Tom: Yes, Sherilyn. I'm an equity holder in a business in town. We employ 15 staff and most of these are women under the age of 25. I was having a morning tea conversation with these women and brought up the topic of the logo, which had had a series of articles written about it in the local paper. I wanted to know whether it offended them. And what I found interesting was that the young women in the firm couldn't understand why there'd been such a reaction to the logo. They really felt that it wasn't a significant issue and that there were other causes in our community that were perhaps more important than the image of women.

Sherilyn: Do you mean they actually thought of it as a bit of light fun?

Tom: I think that's really what they did feel. They felt that it was light fun. It was all in jest; a bit of a joke; that this is the sort of thing that, you know, happens when you're young.

Sherilyn: So some of these women attend this B&S?

Tom: Yes. Some of the women—I think probably three of the staff—attended the B&S. They told me of an incident that occurred at the B&S which amazed me—you know—their reaction. Apparently, according to what they were telling me, one of the young women at the B&S was having sex

with multiple partners, and the boys were actually tag-teaming—there were about 10 boys who had sex with one girl in the back of the utility.

Sherilyn: And when they were telling you this, what would you say was their attitude to that event?

Tom: I think their attitude was they certainly wouldn't partake in that sort of activity, but they saw it as being quite amusing that a girl would, and that the boys were having such a great time. And I did get the impression that it's not necessarily uncommon; not that it would happen on every occasion, but perhaps, on a big occasion like the local B&S these sorts of things do go on. I also got the impression that, perhaps, not everyone would have been aware of it. Obviously these things can occur and you not be aware of it unless you're in the area, I suppose.

Sherilyn: So as a man in your forties who has a daughter, what's your take on that logo? How do you feel about it or see it?

Tom: Look, I think to be honest with you, I'd never really noticed the logo, but I'd probably agree with the interpretation that it's not the best choice of logo. I think it does depict women in a poor light. I understand that there was some history to the formation of the logo in a cartoon series and that if you saw the logo in series it would probably have less of an impact, but when you see the logo in isolation it certainly looks as if the female ostrich is being poorly treated, with her feathers flying everywhere and her legs spread and the male ostrich or emu standing over the female looking very satisfied.

Sherilyn: Why do you think the questioning of that logo in a public forum has attracted so much attention in this community?

Tom: I suppose it's hard to say and comment on how everyone reacts to it, but you'd assume that you are always going to get various reactions, and I would think that a big part of the negative reaction that we've felt in the community has probably been brought about by the fact that people feel threatened that their sport or their image is being portrayed wrongly, and they obviously feel passionately about that—

Sherilyn: Sorry to interrupt, but when you use the word "negative," do you mean my comments were the negative comments, or the reaction to the questioning of that local icon was negative?

Tom: The negative reaction to the questioning of that icon. Yes. I think people would have felt, you know, particularly people close to the sporting organization, would have felt threatened—that it was threatening their image. When people feel threatened, often their first form of defence is attack, unfortunately, rather than recognizing how others in the community might see the logo and then seeking to address that in an open way rather than in a defensive way—which is what I think we've witnessed in the local paper.

Sherilyn: One of the first and most hostile reactions I got was from an ex-footballer who was originally involved in helping to establish the B&S and, I'm assuming, its marketing campaign. Why do you think he reacted so aggressively in his response to my letter?

- Tom: *I think the reason for that is that when you are part of an organization, you give very much a group response rather than an individual response, so an organization will band together and, if there is a negative sentiment within the group, then usually the negative sentiment will be fanned and therefore the group will bond together and fight as a group rather than stopping and reflecting as individuals. So you get, I believe, a momentum which then carries your reaction beyond what would necessarily be the reaction of an individual. It becomes more of a group mentality. I think unless someone within the group is wise enough, I suppose, to ask the group to reflect more broadly, then you get a very narrow-minded response.*
- Sherilyn: *Do you think that drawing attention to this logo has achieved anything?*
- Tom: *Yes I do. I think it's great that we raise these issues in a community. A community needs to think about these sorts of issues, and unless you've got people brave enough to raise them, then it's never part of the debate. I think sometimes we need to reflect on our values and the things that we do in a community, and for that reason I think it's important that these various issues are raised. You know, what better issue than raising how we treat our women within the community? I think this is an excellent example. I think, hopefully, over time, while the reaction from a lot in the community has been very negative... I think over time, and particularly as those individuals age, their view will be impacted and as these sorts of things are talked about for a long time. No doubt it will be brought up in conversation in years to come, and when that happens, as individuals age, their attitude will change over time. Therefore I think you'll see less heat in the argument and more of a reflection about how their values have changed and how they might have reacted differently.*

Wednesday, March 17: My second letter is published in the Wheatville Times alongside a cartoon I have sketched (see Figure 6.4). I have deliberately kept the letter brief. My intention has been to offer a possible alternative to the existing logo so that my original letter can no longer be misinterpreted as part of a campaign to end the B&S or smear the rugby club. This letter to the editor has been submitted before my interview with Tom. I now find myself reflecting on whether I should have submitted it. Why did I feel the need to justify and defend myself? After hearing Tom's story, do I still support the event? The editor has also included a brief statement regarding an offer of \$500 for a new logo. It has been offered by the colleague who earlier challenged me to come up with an alternative.



Figure 6.4. My second letter is published.

Thursday, March 18: I am at a business house in town for a work-related reason, and I approach one of the administrative assistants. I am consumed by other thoughts and do not notice—until I am speaking with her—that it is Mr. President's wife. When she sees me she begins talking animatedly about the ongoing media debate over the logo. As she speaks the frustration in her voice builds: "I am so sick of all this stuff in the paper about the logo. I refuse to buy or read the Wheatville Times any more. I'm over it. Your first letter was enough, and Mark's response—well, that was just ridiculous. But why we have to keep going on about it now I don't know. Enough is enough. Point made. Now let's move on!" When I am outside I try to analyze her reaction. I wonder what others may have said to her or her husband. Has he, like me, been challenged by others over his public comments? Is he regretting them? Rethinking them? Then I wonder if perhaps my second letter was unnecessary. I drive home feeling unsure.

Friday, March 19: I receive a phone call from a colleague who has offered to pay \$500 prize money for a new logo. She tells me that the Wheatville Times wants to do a story on her offer but she is uncomfortable with the exposure and would rather just use the letters to the editor section of the newspaper to advertise her offer. I question, given my own experiences, whether a letter to the editor is any less conspicuous than a news article. However, she is adamant and wants me to draw an alternative to the current logo to include with her letter. She tells me she didn't like the picture I drew previously because it looked like the emus had just had sex. I reply, "I don't

mind if they have just had sex as long as it was consensual.” Somewhat reluctantly I agree to sketch another logo design based on her instruction.

Wednesday, March 24: My colleague’s letter to the editor is published (see Figure 6.5). Again the original logo has been inserted.



Figure 6.5. Another alternative and a financial incentive for change.

Wednesday, March 31: This week’s editorial is commenting on the complete absence of female councillors representing our community:

All boys together

The meeting of the Regional Alliance of Councils was definitely a boys’ own affair. Not a single Mayor, Deputy Mayor or CEO was a woman. Not one. Why not?

Wheatville Regional Council doesn’t have a single woman councillor any more. (Yes, we know Cr Johns left of her own accord.) Is it because women are reluctant to stand or is it because people won’t vote for them? That doesn’t mean you should vote for any woman at all, just because she’s a woman. Just don’t vote for any old man instead. And don’t be afraid to throw your hat in the ring and run for council. That goes for both men and women.

It’s not hard to see why women are reluctant to stand for political office. A female candidate sends much of the media almost insane. There’s fair criticism and there’s hysteria. Whatever you think of Sarah Palin, she doesn’t deserve the abuse heaped on her by most of the American press.

They couldn't call her ugly, so they called her stupid. Hillary Clinton they couldn't call stupid, so they called her ugly. When we reach the point when we criticize a female politician for her policies and not her appearance, the world will be a better place. We're just about there with —(State Premier).

Even closer to home, former Mayor of Charlton Council, Jan Whistle, must be in with a good chance at the next local government elections. She came a whisker away from winning last time. Julia Gillard seems to have survived relatively unscathed so far, except for the odd nasty remark about the fact she's not had any children.

Australians put up with Kevin licking his lips, so maybe they can put up with her Aussie strine which would even make Chip's Rafferty's teeth ache. We certainly can if it means having someone in office with brains and conviction. Julia fits the bill on both counts.

I wonder if the ongoing gender debate in the editor's paper has had any influence on the position he has taken. There is also another letter to the editor regarding the logo (see Figure 6.6).



Figure 6.6. The debate continues.

Friday, April 9: *I receive a phone call from Sonya's brother. He owns and runs a newspaper in a neighboring district. His sister has told him about the ongoing logo debate in our community, and we begin talking about it and my motivations for generating it. Halfway through our conversation I realize he is taking notes. I ask him why and he tells me he is going to do a story on the controversy for his newspaper. My initial reaction is to begin censoring my words and I can't help but see the irony in suddenly being positioned as the interviewee. I can now empathise with those who have been generous enough to participate in my research. I ask him to let me think for a minute about whether I want another story appearing in a newspaper about the logo and my objections to it. I feel I have done enough public unsettling. However, he is very persuasive and eventually I agree, consoling myself with the knowledge that his publication is not circulated in the Wheatville district.*

Wednesday, April 14: *Sonya rings me to tell me her brother is sending 30 copies of his paper to the local Wheatville newsagent this week. I suddenly feel panicked, and express my concerns to her that members of our community have heard enough*

on this topic. We hatch a plan whereby we will buy 15 copies each as soon as the newsagent opens.

Thursday, April 15: By the next morning I feel less panicked, and ring her to cancel the plan. I resign myself to any fallout. I have rethought my actions and am starting to understand why my friend called me “brave” for publically challenging the logo. The story is on the front page of her brother’s newspaper. It spreads over 2 pages. Again I am pleased to see that an image of the logo has been inserted into the article.

Big Ruck Over Plucked Duck

B&S cartoon under the magnifying glass

A fine controversy has raged for a couple of months a few districts further east around the rich cotton and grain town of Wheatville. Where they get 24 inches of rain most years and prefer the private school game of rugby union. It’s bountiful country stocked heavily with silvertails.

Every year Wheatville runs a big and boisterous B&S called The Plucked Duck. Strictly black tie, \$80 at the gate, \$65 prepaid. The noise for last year’s ball came from a DJ and two bands, notably Wheatville hard rockers Hammer Heads, pulled a crowd of 3000 and funnelled 45 grand to the local Ducks rugby club and various charities.

The Plucked Duck ball’s logo is a cartoon of a bachelor bush chook clutching a can of XXXX [beer] and standing over a spread-eagled spinster in stilettos. The rampant male sucks on a mouthful of feathers while more float in the air around him.

Few appear to have taken issue with the B&S emblem since it went into circulation 18 years ago until high school English teacher Sherilyn Lennon tendered her interpretation in a letter to her local rag on 10 February. She suggested in *The Wheatville Times* the female emu looked like she’d just been raped. While the cartoon’s creators would defend it as a joke, she believed such humor entrenched gender messages undermining women. She also made the connection with last year’s group sex scandal involving highly-paid NRL [National Rugby League] players.

But the 46-year-old mother of three and farmer’s wife was also careful to praise the work of the B&S organizers and their efforts for charity, and pointed out three members of her family had played for the Ducks.

“My concerns lie not with the event or the club. They are with the sorts of messages that images like this send to our community about what is acceptable, or possibly even expected, behavior for males and females on evenings such as these,” Sherilyn wrote: “Am I being too harsh? I would be interested in what others think.”

The Wheatville Times editor Mark Smith said the letter caused a huge furore. One of the first to return fire was ex-Emu and founding president of the Plucked Duck movement, Mark Burr. He accused Sherilyn of an alarmist and nihilistic view of youth behavior. "The absurd association that Mrs Lennon makes between rape, violence, rugby and our very successful B&S is ridiculous in the extreme," he retorted in a letter to *The Wheatville Times*, telling her to lighten up.

The 41-year-old agronomist told our publication he was not defending the logo so much as defending the B&S and rugby club. "The debate has moved on and now everybody's looking at the logo. But to me it was not about the logo, it was about rape and violence and the B&S."

Mr Burr said the cartoon was created by a talented local artist whom he declined to name. It was meant to be provocative while representing the spirit of having a good time at the B&S. "Twenty years ago, it seemed cutting edge and offensive," he said. "It's about the younger generation sticking it up the older generation. It's a shame it's taken 20 years to get a reaction."

Reigning Plucked Duck president Harvey Brown, 28, said the cartoon had not upset anyone before and claimed the debate was being largely driven by a handful of older people well past attending B&S knees-up. "I don't see a problem with it to be honest and I think there are bigger issues in the world to worry about. All the kids I've spoken to over the years have not paid much attention to it. To say it condones rape... well, those people need to grow up a bit."

Harvey said the modern B&S was a tightly controlled event unlike the shenanigans of B&S balls of decades past. "I can proudly say we have not had one major incident. The worst they've had is drink driving and last year it was a record low of three."

While he didn't rule out a change to the design, if the B&S committee was in favor it was unlikely this year as marketing of the next ball in September was well advanced. "A lot of people in town who've been part of the B&S committee feel very strongly about keeping it."

But Sherilyn said the issues ran deeper and wider than a mere cartoon and that her criticism was also seen as a challenge to male behavior in a macho, highly patriarchal society.

She was unprepared for the hostility the letter aroused. District stalwarts have told friends they can't comprehend her stance. She'd heard reports that many of the men around town were ropable. Ducks players have vowed to attach the cartoon to their jerseys in defiance of political correctness.

"It's caused a lot of anger in the community," Sherilyn said.

The letter derived from her research probing cultural differences between the sexes. Her research was inspired by the way boys underperformed at Wheatville High despite programs over the years aimed at motivating them. Some boys denigrated school achievement as a girl thing and were more interested in excelling at sport, making money and business success, Sherilyn said.

A farming family in the district has pledged \$500 for a competition to design an alternative Duck. The easiest way out appears to be a straight swapping of roles, with Emma emu rampant and a sozzled Eddie supine on the ground. Sherilyn has sketched a hen and a cock back to back under a languid moon. Both are smashed—her idea of B&S equality and youthful exuberance.

Saturday, April 17: *I am at the home of a successful district cotton farming family. It is the male's 50th birthday party. The garden is extensive and well maintained. The party is being held under a marquee located beside a naturally occurring lagoon. Bar staff have been hired to serve the guests. The party has been underway for a number of hours, and some of the guests are rather inebriated. One of the guests, a male cotton farmer, approaches me. He wants to talk to me privately about the on-going logo debate: "I just don't understand it, Sherilyn. Why did you need to stir up all that trouble over the logo? I just don't get it. Help me understand why you did it."*

I tell him I have written the letters for two reasons: "Firstly, because I believe in what I am saying—there are certain practices out here that need challenging—and secondly, because it is part of a cultural gender study I am conducting."

I am surprised by his reaction. His whole demeanor suddenly lifts and his face breaks into a smile: "Now I get it. It's commercial. There's something in it for you. You're getting something out of this. That's why you're doing it." He seems reassured, as if he hasn't misjudged me after all.

I quickly reiterate that I believe in everything I have done and said, but go on to admit that I probably would not have gone public with my thinking if it had not been for academic reasons. But he does not hear these words. He is not listening to me anymore. He has heard what he needed to hear. His reaction plagues me for days, weeks, after. Are my motives ethical? Why am I really doing this? Who is my activism helping? Am I being honest with myself? With my community? What is my real purpose? Am I just using my community for my own personal gain? Uncertainty settles over me again.

Later at the same party I am talking to another male farmer. We are discussing the pros and cons of private schools when I hear my name being called. I turn. Standing behind me is a group of six men. Robbo (refer Chapter 5) is standing confidently in the middle of them. He taunts me: "Sherilyn, we're just talking about

your letter. Why don't you come over here and defend yourself?" He is grinning at me from the centre of what, to me, feels like a pack. I reply that I would, except that I am involved in another conversation, and turn my back on him. I try to appear composed and to exude an aura of confidence, but inside I am feeling extremely vulnerable and small.

Saturday, May 1: *I am at the local Wheatville show and a friend of mine approaches me to talk. She is a board member of a large, and highly successful, company that markets its products to women. She is appalled at the contents of a sexist joke she has just heard broadcast over the public loud speaker system (see Chapter 5: Field note for May 1). She wants to talk to me about it as she is aware of my public stance on gender issues. During the course of our conversation she makes a decision to use her influence to remove her company's financial support from the association running the event and responsible for broadcasting the joke. Her reasoning: "The company doesn't need to be associated with that sort of thing, and unless we start acting on these things nothing will ever change. I would rather see the money used to support a different cause that doesn't think it's okay to publically demean women." I applaud her decision and feel reassured that the public irritating I have begun is inspiring others to genuinely rethink and transform their actions.*

Tuesday, May 11: *The next week my friend drops in to see me on her way home from work. We are having a glass of wine and discussing the psychological impact of the ongoing drought on our farming husbands when the phone rings. It is a pig hunter who occasionally shoots on my husband's farm. I have spoken to him briefly on the phone before but never met him. I try hard to finish the conversation so I can get back to my friend: "I'm sorry, Harry, but Jock isn't home at the moment so I really can't give you permission to shoot here until I speak to him and see if anyone else is shooting tonight. Maybe you could try his mobile number." I start to recite it when he interrupts—*

"I don't quite know how to say this so I'll just go right ahead and say it. You're the one who's been writing them letters in the paper about that logo, aren't you?"

Instantly I am intrigued and just a little apprehensive. "Yes."

"Well I just wanted to say that I reckon this district needs more women like you. That's all I wanted to say. I'll ring back later and speak to Jock." I thank him and feel a flush of guilt over how ready I was to dismiss him. I am surprised at how comforting I have found his words.

Wednesday, May 12: *The next day there is a full-page article in the Wheatville Times about the controversy surrounding the logo. It has been written by a local female cadet journalist in her early twenties.*

B&S is laughing all the way to the bank over logo uproar

Budding journalist and B&S veteran Rosie Gloster gives us her view on a controversial issue: The B&S logo...

Hello, I'm 22 and a proud fan of the Wheatville B&S. (This feels strangely like a confession). And I'd like to say that the "Plucked Duck" logo is iconic, a harmless representation and a good old-fashioned laugh. No judgement please.

Oh go on and say it. I've heard it already: the logo is not socially acceptable anymore, it suggests offensive and inappropriate behavior, the negative gender misconception labels are a mile long and it's a joke that's been taken too far...

Well, I'd like to say that the political incorrectness is the genius of it. Speaking from personal experience of a few very memorable (well "memory" is coined loosely) nights at the famed annual Wheatville "Plucked Duck" B&S, I must say I'm jolly proud to have that bright orange sticker in all its outrageous glory plastered to my old station wagon.

For as long as I can remember, the Wheatville B&S was always that party that I couldn't wait to attend when my 18th birthday rolled around. A black-tie event means a new black dress. Everyone who is anyone is there. An outrageous band is lined up to play those classic country anthems, which means shameless, shameless dancing all night long!

Who ever said anything about rape, physical violence, misogyny, objectification of women, dangerous or offensive behavior and the comparison of the Duck's Rugby Club to national rugby players?

According to some who have written in to *The Wheatville Times* over the past few months, these are all the suggestions that the "Plucked Duck" logo supposedly represents? Could have fooled me.

The "plucked duck," to me, has never meant anything more than the chance to misbehave (innocent, harmless fun—keep your pants on), drink too much and enjoy the company of 2000 of my closest acquaintances. Never have I sat down and considered, "Ooh hang on, this logo is offensive to me!" To a young woman such as myself, it certainly doesn't seem dangerous.

My memories of B&Ses past (alright they're a bit hazy) are clouded with champagne, dust, dancing, and who I thought at the time, were dashing young men. Does that sound dangerous? I hardly think the meaning behind the logo is one for encouraging violence, rape or behavioral misconduct.

The same name has stuck for more than 15 years and has fashioned the Wheatville B&S into a very successful, very popular, very SAFE social event for the town. The B&S website describes the event as “a great opportunity to catch up with mates from all over.”

And there can be romance amongst the ruckus. Perhaps people don’t trust the behavior of today’s youth? Are they really suggesting that the B&S is about sexual conquest and nothing more?

Now personally I’m getting a little old for the B&S scene—I am 22 after all. But there comes a time when that dusty, dirty hangover is something you no longer savour. However I have plenty of older friends, both the blokes and the ladies, who still love to travel out for this great big party, and who have never had any negative experiences that some people attribute to the so-called “derogatory” “Plucked Duck” logo.

And to those who dare challenge changing the logo, I put this question to them: Do they also dare to come face to face with some of the girls who frequent the Wheatville Plucked Duck B&S? Let me assure you that “socially acceptable behavior” goes right out the window for some “bush birds” at the B&S. The ladies have learnt how to ruffle their feathers in public too.

And they aren’t afraid to squawk. B&S does stand for bachelors and spinsters after all.

The logo might deem the bloke emu as the dominating gender and armed with a can of XXXX [beer] but there are plenty of birds out here equally capable of drinking the men under the table, no problem.

Maybe the logo should be reversed? Would there be any qualms then? Now to me—that sounds like the danger! Gender misconstruction plucked upside down. And isn’t that what today’s world is all about, equality amongst men and women and freedom of action. The blokes get tied to all the negative gender misconceptions. Give the lads a break.

So the logo has got to go you say? And what would it be replaced with? “Two Ducks Sitting in a Swag,” “Responsible Ducks Ball,” “The Luv-a-Duck Ball”...I don’t know about you, but to me, they just don’t seem to have the same ring.

The simple fact is that to most people of my age, and gender, the Plucked Duck logo is a harmless cartoon. It has been around for years already and never ruffled any feathers...until now. And my take is this, there would be even less feathers ruffled, if older generations stopped drawing attention to it.

Leave the Ducks to their own and let the B&S goers get back to good old-fashioned partying. (Please don't make us think too hard). They will anyway, no matter what anyone else says.

Coming soon—What really happens at a B&S.

Thursday, June 3: *I meet Sonya for an interview at a local coffee shop. Sonya was one of the first to publically respond supporting the ideas presented in my original letter (see Figure 6.3). I am keen to find out what her experiences have been since.*

Sherilyn: Sonya, I'm interested in why you chose to get publically involved in the logo debate. Can you talk to me about that?

Sonya: Well, your article was the first time I had been made to notice the logo. I'm not in the B&S-going age group anymore, so when it was pointed out to me—the logo—I went “Ohh.” Now whether it's me being an artist or something, I noticed the subtleties in the image which were just so blatantly wrong to me. I thought they were really really wrong.

Sherilyn: Wrong in what way?

Sonya: Well, what they represented. You know, the logo represented obviously to me a very aggressive male astride a not very happy, you know, what she was involved in was not consensual sex. To me it was just very easy to see that. You know, I saw the image and I went “Ohh der!” And I thought, “Yes, Sherilyn. I'm so with you on that one.” To me it was very straightforward.

Sherilyn: And you'd never noticed it before?

Sonya: Never noticed it before.

Sherilyn: So you saw it as a condoning of rape?

Sonya: Yes, definitely.

Sherilyn: And the use of that as a marketing tool?

Sonya: Definitely. Definitely. You've pointed it out. You've made me look at the logo with new eyes, and I went, “Not good! Can't be done. No longer. Might have been funny years ago. Can't be done.” There would have been racist cartoons out and about years ago. They're not allowed to be used publically or as a form of promotion at all. So then, both Andrew [Sonya's husband] and I said, “Yeah, you're so right, Sherilyn. We're so with you.” And then with Mark's reply I thought it was just so unsophisticated and insensitive and he covered a whole lot of stuff that wasn't your initial concern. He brought in a whole lot of other things.

Sherilyn: Why do you think he did that?

Sonya: Guilt? I don't know. I think he sort of felt that you were questioning the use of the emu and the use of this and that and therefore the use of the rugby team to use it as their local emblem on their jersey because they are the Ducks. I think he got it wrong. He just went “Bang.” And I think that when you get a knee-jerk reaction like that it's because they're finding it unsettling and that maybe, well, they're not brave enough or man enough

to say, "Well, yeah. I can see that point. I can sympathize with you. I get it. Because it does look like rape. I think you're probably being a little bit overreactive but, yeah, I get it. I can see your point." So when I read his article I then went, umm. I felt he was trying to probably bully you into silence by the way he mentioned that you, personally, must have had a bad experience at a prior B&S because how could you possibly find this B&S logo so offensive. I think he completely missed your point, and why somebody would completely miss a point like that is maybe because they do have a little bit of guilt or responsibility associated with the logo. I don't know. So having read his article I was then continually surprised that there wasn't more "We get you, Sherilyn. We really get you. Come on, Mr. Burr [Mr. President]. Have a look at it. Take a deep breath. They have pointed out that it's an aggressive male that has just, you know, done the wrong thing. This has been pointed out to you. It's a general concern. Deal with it." And I have been very surprised and saddened at how insensitive the general public has become to that sort of image, because they don't see it. Even when we point it out to them.

Sherilyn: So your response was then to—

Sonya: My response was then to try to get him back on track and say, "Let's just deal with the logo. How can you possibly see that logo for anything but what it is depicting, which is rape of a female—nonconsensual sex?" And it was also important to use humor because I didn't think he had that much humor in his article. I think he got a little bit dirty and a little bit personal. That was a very important thing that I wanted to get across in my letter, that "Let's not get personal. Let's not get dirty. Let's stick with the facts. It's been pointed out. It's not appropriate. How can you not see that image for anything but what it is depicting?" So, yeah. I was blown away. I thought, "How thick are these people?" or "Why aren't they going, uh-huh, alrighty"—it depicts rape. You know. Here you are, voicing a very real concern, and I'm just surprised that it hasn't been taken more seriously.

Sherilyn: One thing that I have noticed is that people who are supportive often speak about it quietly to me.

Sonya: But why? Why are they afraid to speak out, because it's okay. Society has said time and time again, "It is okay to voice your concerns. It is okay to step up." Like where would paedophilia be? Uncovering the dreadfulness of paedophilia has come such a long way. It had to start somewhere.

Sherilyn: You mean people had to question it?

Sonya: Yes. And it was about the church. So that's a big body to challenge.

Sherilyn: So do you think it's got something to do with certain people or groups holding power in the community that makes others worried about having a voice or questioning things?

Sonya: Do you know what? I don't think they realize how dangerous that sort of thing [images such as the logo] is. I don't think they realize it.

- Sherilyn: So you think these sorts of jokes in which women are publically denigrated have become so acceptable and normalized that they just don't get it when you question it?
- Sonya: Well, there would have been a lot more support for your letter and my follow-up letter if they did.
- Sherilyn: So how does that make you feel?
- Sonya: I'm really worried.
- Sherilyn: Worried?
- Sonya: Worried. I don't want my children to look at that image and be insensitive to what it is depicting, and this is what your article has really shown me. How insensitive the community is to that sort of image or, if they are sensitive to it, if they do get what you and I are saying, they still don't feel that they have a right to say, "It's wrong."
- Sherilyn: So would you go so far as pointing that out to your kids when they're old enough to understand what the image is representing?
- Sonya: Absolutely. Why not? Why not? I would be feeling very concerned for my children if they can't see that image and be responsive to what it is actually saying and know where I stand.
- Sherilyn: Do you think you would have preferred to remain "unknowing"?
- Sonya: No. Not for a second. Not for a second.
- Sherilyn: So, knowing has put you in an uncomfortable place at times, hasn't it? You've had to defend your position at times, haven't you?
- Sonya: Oh, yes. All the time. And it's quite extraordinary, you know. We were with a group of people and I could see somebody was obviously sympathizing with your way of looking at it and she didn't say anything. There was another girl who was very vocal.
- Sherilyn: Was this in mixed company?
- Sonya: Yes. Mixed company—and she was saying, "I don't find a problem with it." And she was out there vocalizing this and I said, "How can you not look at that image and see it's representing nonconsensual sex?" But this woman felt more comfortable to voice her opinion, and yes, it was mixed company. It was mixed company, and it would have been interesting to see if she had been equally as comfortable voicing her opinion if it was all females. Because I bet you this other woman would have piped up if it had been all girls.
- Sherilyn: So do you think that the male presence cowered her?
- Sonya: No, I think she was trying to gain kudos with them by saying it was fine.
- Sherilyn: No. I was referring to the one who stayed silent. Do you think the male presence had an effect on her?
- Sonya: Well, she smiled rather vaguely and just hoped that the subject would change. And I knew she was getting uncomfortable so I just ended it by saying, "Well, yes. It's interesting and I have been quite surprised."
- Sherilyn: What do you think has given you the courage to speak publically? Why aren't you silent?
- Sonya: Because it's so bloody obvious, Sherilyn.

- Sherilyn: Now?
- Sonya: Well, had I seen it before or ever really looked at it I would have had exactly the same reaction. The only reason that I've only had the reaction now is that I wasn't aware of it. And this is, as you say, the dangerous thing. You've actually put it out there to people; made them take notice; made them look at it; made them really explore it—and, excuse me, you really don't have to look that hard. It is pretty obvious. And despite that, people just don't want to—I don't know why. I know how I feel about it and I hope my children are sensitive to the image and they can see it for what it depicts. I would be very upset if they looked at the aggressive stance and the aggressive look on that emu and found that okay. If they don't get that and they don't feel, "Oo gee. That's not right," then I'm not doing my job as a parent.
- Sherilyn: So final question then. You have actually already been an activist in that you have written a letter; you've indicated to me that you are challenging people on their thinking in conversations in social forums; and you are prepared to talk to your children about it as they get older. So this has fired you up, hasn't it?
- Sonya: Yes.
- Sherilyn: That's exciting. That's exactly what I set out to do with my original letter.
- Sonya: Because nothing's changed. And then you get gorgeous little rose-tinted glasses—gorgeous girl that she is—and she writes an article defending the logo describing a part of the B&S that is a part of it, but your problem was never with the B&S. Your problem was with the logo and how it can be interpreted. That was your concern, and that is where it stopped and started. I get a feeling that all these people are thinking your questioning the use of the emu and the use of drinking or even the right to have sex—
I really think society needs to be checked and made responsible for all those sorts of images, because they are insidiously sitting under the surface feeding, I think, society's depreciation of behavior, of their morals, of everything, and this is why I get so cross with so many people in our community. You know, when they say, "Oh, where's the harm in that?" They're trying to say it's benign. It's not. It's very nasty.

Thursday, August 5: I am in a nearby regional city at the funeral of the father of one of my closest friends. On the church wall in front of me is a plaque claiming "Community is knowing and being known; loving and being loved." I can identify with the first half of this statement but wonder about the second half. Five priests are celebrating the life of the deceased: a true community man. The church is packed. Mourners spill outside.

Once the service is over I begin mingling with the other mourners. Many I have not seen for over 20 years. One of those present is an ex-Whetville teacher in his

mid-forties. I was head of his department for many years when he taught in Wheatville. He left Wheatville High 7 years earlier, and is now teaching at a private secondary school in the city. At this school he is the head rugby coach. We have always had a rather strained relationship.

I bite the bullet and approach him to say "Hullo." Immediately he tells me he wants to talk to me about the B&S logo. As usual, I find his manner aggressive, and try to deflect the conversation by telling him I would be very interested in talking to him about the logo but would prefer to do so elsewhere and when I could record the conversation for a study I am conducting. I think this might make him back down, but instead of being put off he becomes more insistent.

"Yes. Yes. You do that. I would like you to record what I have to say very much." I find his manner bordering on menacing now. At this point a mutual friend joins us and the subject changes. I am grateful and make a mental note to myself to avoid the male teacher should he attend the wake.

It is 10 o'clock at night. The wake has been going for more than 5 hours. I have stayed inside the house and not ventured outside where many of the men have gathered around a bar. I try to convince myself that this is not cowardice; that it is the cold and not the thought of bumping into "him" that has kept me inside. Then "he" is suddenly there confronting me again: "Do you even know the history of that logo? Well, do you?"

He has caught me unawares and I stumble to find words: "Ah—well, I know it has been used to market the B&S for nearly 20 years and—"

"But do you know its history? Where it came from? Do you even know that?" He is being very aggressive. Very insistent. He is standing over me and in his hand is a can of beer.

I do not want to incite him further, so again I stumble a reply: "Well, I have heard that it was drawn up by the brother-in-law of Michael—"

"Jonathon Smith-White drew it up when he was in year 10 and yes, he is Michael Black's brother-in-law. Jonathon was in my English class and I asked him to draw it up."

I am repulsed, intrigued, mesmerized all at the same time. Why is he telling me this? Why is it so important to him that I know this? I try to sound calm: "How did Jonathon come up with it? What guidance did you give him? What made him draw it like that?"

He knows I am hooked and he is smiling now. Gloating. "Because I told him I wanted him to draw a male emu standing aggressively over the top of a female emu. I told him to put a beer in its hand. I told him I wanted it to look like the male emu had just drilled the female emu and for there to be feathers flying everywhere. Underneath

it I told him I wanted the words, “Come to the Wheatville B&S and pluck-a-duck.” As an afterthought he adds, “but for some reason the committee decided to change it to ‘The Plucked Duck B&S.’ They thought that was less offensive.”

I am confounded. Speechless. Mortified. I feel like the ground is shifting under my feet. I have spent the past 2 years excavating and unsettling Wheatville’s limiting gender beliefs and practices inspired by concerns I have had over boys’ schooling performances. Now here in front of me is a former teacher telling me that he had a student create the logo—the logo that, for me, perpetuates one of the most toxic gender messages being produced and reproduced within and across Wheatville. And perhaps he knows this. Perhaps this is why he is telling me. Why he seems to be revelling in divulging the origins of the logo to me. Perhaps he is enjoying the power he has over me right now, right at this moment, knowing how sickening I am finding it that the logo was designed by a 15-year-old boy in my own backyard and on my own watch.

This chapter documented my emotional and experiential journey of using the local media as a platform for initiating activist dialogues around narrow representations of gender. In it I merged aspects of autoethnography with critical reflection in order to personalize the research and expose the covert and overt ways that hegemonic masculinity can be legitimated, reinforced, perpetuated, and, occasionally, destabilized. By documenting my vulnerabilities, feelings, thoughts, and actions, I provided insights into how I was positioned by others, and how I was able to position others. Kincheloe and Berry (2004) support such an approach, claiming that “Life...simply cannot be understood without careful attention to the emotional, affective, and value-laden aspects of human behaviour” (p. 34).

Notes

1. The male editor was the only full-time journalist employed at the *Wheatville Times*. Two female journalists worked part-time.
2. A term used to describe a male who works with stock in rural Australia.
3. A term used to describe a female who works with stock in rural Australia.