Androgynous ethical intervention and living history

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Abstract: This paper explores how narratives of Australian belonging are formed through a quilted matrix of myth, history and memory. This is done through looking at the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras and the beach, tracing the mythology of the Surf Life Saver, the surfer and contemporary sexual and ethnic identities. I suggest that life is lived through layers of the past, organised in formal and informal, conscious and unconscious ways, connected in asymmetrical and symmetrical fashion. The aim here is not to add to the measurable, instrumental canon of history, but to activate what Greg Denning has referred to as "living histories", by exploring androgynous moments of belonging.
Keywords: androgynous belonging, Australian beach culture, living history, sexuality, colonisation, cultural imbrication, borderland

Introduction

The dominance of history as a project of the Western Enlightenment has truly fixed itself in our major cultural, political, economic and social institutions. In this sense, the Western mind with its ideas, ideologies and style has become, by and large, the primary template on offer and the sole arbiter for the organization of knowledge. As an effect of colonisation, the world has turned increasingly to the instrumentalisation of knowledge, or what the Indian political psychologist, cultural critic and futurist, Ashis Nandy calls the scientisatation of knowledge (2007).

History is a domain and mechanism in this instrumentalisation of knowledge, and has substantially helped to embed central notions of European Enlightenment thought. For example, it has entrenched ideas of progress, measurement and reliability, which are based on certain assumptions about the autonomy of the individual, equality, justice, truth, accuracy and tolerance. History is a pre-eminent tool in the management of Western hegemony and therefore of its values, and through the logic of domination, it has become, unfortunately for many in the South, the accepted template for building future societies (D'Cruz, 2008; Connell, 2007).

Nandy has approached these ideas in his two books, *Time Warps* and *Time Treks*. In the former, he argues that history is only one "way of organising the past… that there are other ways, represented by legends; informal public memories; family stories told, retold and reconfigured over generations, and private and public myths that process the past for us" (2007: xi). So, in Nandy's thought, memory and myth are *alternatives* to history. This is an important and powerful theoretical insight, as the significance of memory and myth then becomes cognitively charged and offers the capacity for coherent, informed

ethical interventions into the dominance of history in our lives. This is where narrative is then regarded as crucial to our own interpretation of the world and of that ability and capacity in interpreting our own lives to ourselves.

As Nandy would put it in his own attempts to counter the hard objectivity of history, the efforts now need to be towards demystifying and defying "'the tyranny of history' and to recover the past as an interactive part of the contemporary" (2007: xiii). I think this is both very grounding and emancipatory. I have thus taken up Nandy's thought to explore social and psycho-cultural intersections found in recent Australian narratives of belonging that are found in the quilted matrix of myth, memory and history.

In this paper I have chosen two intersecting sites, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, and the beach, as specific examples of how memory, history and myth become imbricated. They also demonstrate the intersection of sexuality with history and myth. I am suggesting that our lives are lived through layers of the past, organised in formal and informal, conscious and unconscious ways, connected in asymmetrical and symmetrical fashion. Therefore, the aim here is not to add to the measurable, instrumental canon of history, but to activate what Greg Denning (1997: 30) has referred to as "living histories". Here it is very useful to be quote him directly:

> Living histories and cultural memories have more than the rhetoric of all the varieties of institutionalised histories. Living histories are part of the theatre of life. Living histories recognise the significance of things more than their explanation. Living histories are more likely to well up in tears than in words, or come out in shouts and screams, or solemn silences. Living history does not belong to the artificiality of learning and schools but to human realities. It is about truth, not accuracy.

Thus, what I intend to do is relate the Mardi Gras to the layering of myth, memory and history, refracted through the beach culture of Australia. In this regard, I look at the mythology of the beach and two Australian icons, the Surf Life Saver and the Surfer. Underpinning these icons are dominant histories of masculinist Australia, a heterosexual nation that is also white. My main argument is that these histories are subverted by ethical interventions, and by stories told that are linked to living histories and the production of powerful myths.

Androgynous Moments
Androgynous moments have been increasingly apparent in contemporary Australia. For instance, in 2006, Byron Bay, bastion of conurban cultural diversity, was voted the sexiest beach in Australia (as voted by *Forbes Traveller* magazine, reported in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 December 2006). At the 2007, Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade, around eighty gay, lesbian and bisexual surf life saving club members, hosted their own float with the full support of Surf Life Saving Australia. This parade is characterised by its political and cultural intervention into mainstream Australia (see contrasting photos of the parade between 1978 and 2007 below). In 2006, the surf film *Tan Lines*, Bondi Beach's answer to *Brokeback Mountain*, was released, showing for the first time that there are queer surfers. This has been recently followed by *Newcastle* (2008).

[Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Surf Life Savers, 2007 Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, Sydney. Courtesy: *GLBT Life Saver Float blog.* 2007. (http://lifesaver2007.blogspot.com/).]

[The first Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras march. Reported in *Sunday*, 25 June 1978]

These moments happened despite an entrenched politics at the time that sought to strategically retreat from cultural and social complexity. This retreat was evident through vigorous public debate about Australian values and predicated upon ideas nurtured in a continuing colonial context. The Howard Government's push (*putsch*) between 1996 and 2007 emphasised social cohesion at the expense of support for cultural diversity and multiculturalism, and was driven by an ontological 'collective amnesia' (Gandhi, 1998) about the colonial project and a nationalist, reductionist ideology that although deeply irrational, was hyper-rationalised. For example, when launching the book, *The Conservative*, in 2005, John Howard remarked that he was a 'profound opponent of changing the social context in which we live' (Quoted in Wilson, Tim. 2007).

For Howard, the viability of the conservative social context was through the maintenance of borders – physical, psychological, political, cultural, – framed through specific values. But these fixed borders were and are unrealistic and are indeed transgressed, subverted and negotiated in borderlands, examples of which are Australian beach culture and collective spectacles such as the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

The Howard era systematically and strategically worked towards the maintenance of the 'colonial mind'. And there were two primary contexts in which this took place. The maintenance of the colonial mind is both form and informal, but nonetheless structured and pervasive. Ghassan Hage (2001: 350) comments that:

> This is what constitutes the objective difficulty of the Australian situation. For a long time to come, Australia is destined to become an unfinished Western colonial project as well as a land in a permanent state of decolonisation.

The following three points illustrate the effects of this 'difficulty'. First, support of a culture of whiteness in Australia has developed despite the demise of the White Australia Policy well over thirty years ago. Ien Ang (2003: 65) writes: 'what seems to be the object of anxiety today is the maintenance of the *culture* of white Australia'. Second, the Howard Government's rejection of multicultural Australia as a reality, and the downgrading of the policy of multiculturalism was systematically sustained through the production of a *culture* of border security and protection, fashioned around the motif 'we decide who comes here.' The 'we' in this motif appeared to be non-negotiable. Third, the Howard Government's change to the *Marriage Act* in 2004 to federally legislate that marriage can only be between a man and a woman, entrenched an anxiety about the maintenance of the *culture* of heterosexual and patriarchal Australia. For Howard, and it seems for Kevin Rudd as well, marriage is a bedrock institution of Australian society and must be preserved (see 'PM – Howard and Costello publicly reject gay marriage.' 2002. ABC Online. http://www.abc.net.au/cgi-bin/. Accessed 15.04.2007). These three examples form a specific axis of conservative border patrol over the nation.

Reading the beach as cutting edge

The beach, on the other hand, is perhaps the most significant example of how Australian values are in fact more real, organic and fluid. As a discourse, text, set of symbols and practices, iconography or narrative, the beach has come to represent one of the key ways in which Australia interprets and defines itself. As the site of European invasion, of the first encounter between minds that were separated by thousands of years of knowledge, experience and being, the beach in Australia is a powerful symbol of civilisation, its creation and destruction. As the (cutting) edge of the Australian continent, the beach has played a role in the Australian imaginary just as significant as the bush.

My reading of the beach follows Nandy's proposition that 'colonialism is first of all a matter of consciousness and needs to be defeated ultimately in the minds of men' (1983: 63). The beach in the Australian imaginary has held both the conscious and unconscious effects of colonialism (in terms of race, gender and sexuality). It's the place in the

Australian psyche where history and mythology are like oil and water: a crucible for nourishing Australian values; representation of invasion, masculinity, unity and nationalist ideology; but also, and counter to these colonising effects, a playground of cultural diversity, it's the place of abandonment, re-invention, and surfing. By using Nandy's notion of dissident androgynous cultural intervention, sexuality, gender and race in relation to contemporary Australian beach culture become the markers through which we can see the contest raging within the 'unfinished Western colonial project as well as a land in a permanent state of decolonisation,' as Hage (2001) stated earlier.

The beach as androgynous space: (Cape Hellas), surf lifesavers and surfers

Looking at the beach in terms of its history and mythology in Australia through the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, what is achingly revealed is the fluidity (and complexity) of the Australian psyche, where counter streams to the colonial project have been fecund. Although the myth persists of the masculinist bushman of the nineteenth century, embodied in white, Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual ideology, the beach has suggested a powerful, alternative engagement in being Australian, and importantly, belonging to Australia. There are androgynous cultural interventions in relation to the bush and masculinity, sexuality and race, as well, among them the film and theatrical versions of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. An absorbing and astute postcolonial, queer and critical race reading of this film and narrative has been recently published by Damien Riggs (2006).

Most significantly, that engagement has been underwritten by profound cultural diversity, shown in the ways the beach has been used in terms of cultural politics, practices and artefacts. Three examples are offered here as a means of understanding the notion of the beach as an androgynous space, and therefore critical to de-colonising attempts.

First, the turn towards the beach as a defining feature of Australian culture rather than the bush occurred in the early part of the twentieth century, re-imagined through visual and literary narratives about Gallipoli in the First World War. Leone Huntsman has described the classical significance of the Australian campaign in terms of its location on the edge of Gallipoli, and the effect of the light horseman and soldiers swimming naked in the sea.

The beach and Australia's 'quintessential… war legend' known as Anzac became embedded in the Australian consciousness (Huntsman, 2001: 197). The later re-imagining of this event, which can be read as an androgynous cultural intervention, is the film *Gallipoli*. David Coad writes of the two central heroes, that 'the buddy bonding between Archy and Frank is mildly suggestive of ties between lovers as in the scene of nude bathing' (2002: 116). Although the film does not consummate their love, and was criticised for underplaying their sexuality, Coad argues that the narrative is a moment of complexity, difficulty and challenge for the super script of dominant heterosexual and masculinist Australia.

The reading of Gallipoli also involves acknowledging that the beach where the soldiers swam was located at Cape Hellas, and the symbolic meaning of Hellas has direct resonance with Greece and notions of civilization. Importantly, however, it reminds us of the ongoing debate about sexuality and identity that has preoccupied the Western mind since the time of Plato and Aristotle. The enculturation of the Australian

imagination has thus been formed through an imbrication of meanings that are related to notions of justice and a specific regard for cultural diversity that extend into the historical reaches of Western culture and its expansion.

Furthering an androgynous cultural interventionist perspective, the turn at Gallipoli was also inspirational and resonant with the advent of the Surf Life-Saving Club (SLSC) movement in Australia. Leone Huntsman traces the development of the SLSC phenomenon and compares the militaristic nature of the movement with the soldiers at Gallipoli (2001: 196). The Surf Life Saver became the embodiment of the 'bronzed Aussie' who is heroic and displays a certain uniformity of (exclusive) masculinity. These images below show how this mythology was communicated through the cultural practices of the SLSC movement.

[Stained Glass of Surf Life Savers, Byron Bay Surf Life Saving Club. Photograph: John Ryan]

[Byron Bay Surf Life Savers marching. On the wall of the Byron Bay Surf Life Saving Club.]

The image of the Life Saver became so important to the self-definition of Sydney as a civilized and masculine city, for example, that on the 70th anniversary of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the *Sydney Morning Herald* displayed the event with a souvenir showing a full front-page figure of a (male) Life Saver holding the Australian flag (see below). The conflation of the bridge, the Life Saver, the flag and two figures (male and female) sitting as if at the beach, with hints of sand, somehow conveys the establishment of white, patriarchal, Anglo-Saxon Australia, a new Kurnell, (where Captain Cook landed in 1770).

['The Sydney Harbour Bridge 70th Anniversary 1932-2002.' 2002. *Sydney Morning Herald*. 19 March.]

The history of Surf Life Savers and the development of beach culture through the later part of the twentieth century is significantly marked by the arrival of surfers, also male, but rebellious and unruly. Surfers did not work, used drugs, wouldn't go to war, and had an important and lasting impact on shaping the attitudes towards the beach from the 1950s to the present. Surfers were also perceived to be a departure from the type of masculinity characterised by Surf Life Saving Clubs, embodied in 'clubbies.' Leone Huntsman (2001: 102) notes that in 1966 there was a clash between 350 board riders and 'clubbies' at Palm Beach. She writes:

> Surfer's hostility towards 'clubbies' was expressed by the cartoon character in *Tracks*, Captain Goodvibes, who ridiculed lifesavers's sexism, homophobia, and predilection for beer drinking (qualities by no means lacking among board riders themselves!).

Thirty-nine years later in 2005, clubbies and surfers became pivotal to the Cronulla Riots (just around the corner from Kurnell), which involved the clash between Lebanese-Australian beach goers from southwest Sydney and Cronulla locals. The resonance of this event with the Howard era and its push for social cohesion based on paranoia is self-evident. But, what is remarkable is that two positive androgynous moments occurred in 2007 that speak back to this event, re-establishing the beach as a borderland.

First, the Cronulla Surf Life Saving Club introduced Muslim-Australian female and male Life Savers to their patrols along Cronulla's beaches. In response to the Cronulla riots Surf Life Saving Australia, the federal Immigration ministry and the local council established a program called 'On the Same Wave', to promote participation by Australians from very ethnically diverse backgrounds – Chinese, Sudanese, Somali, Lebanese, Syrian, Libyan, etc., - in Surf Life Saving Clubs (Bonner, 2007). New cultural formations emerged of the Surf Life Saver, which underscores a transformation of Australian beach culture (see image below).

[The Burqini meets the Surf Life Saving. Photograph by Matt King/Getty Images
Source: http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2007/02/photogalleries/wip-week15/photo3.html.
Accessed 20.01.2009]

Second, at the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in 2007, about 80 lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Life Savers from beaches around Sydney and further, participated with a float.[i] Indeed, the iconography of the Mardi Gras Party was based on a queer interpretation of this most traditional of Australian identities.

[Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Party image. Original artwork: Jozef Szekeres www.blackmermaid.com. By permission of the artist.]

The representations used in this image above can be regarded as dissident androgynous cultural interventions. Not only is there an inclusion of an Asian-Australia surf lifesaver, but there is a play with gender and beach culture that is expressed in the wearing of both speedos and boardshorts, the latter being associated with the culture of surfers.

In the following picture of Sean Ashby, the gay founder of AussieBums, which is a hugely successful swimwear company that actively promotes male sexuality as fluid, the images of the statue of David surfing, the model in briefs, and the entrepreneur, all resonate with a powerful counter-heterosexist meaning, somehow linking and playing with notions of enculturation that link back to Cape Hellas and living on the edge or borderland (the beach). AussieBums (see: aussiebums.com) supported the 2007 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Kylie Minogue float, while advertising in *Men's Health* about who has got the 'world by the balls?'

[Photo: Jacky Ghossein, by permission.]

Reporting on the Mardi Gras surf lifesaving float, The *Sun-Herald's* editorial (28.01.2007) stated:

TALL, powerfully built and a patrol captain at Bondi beach, Drew Lambert is the very model of a Sydney surf lifesaver. He's also gay and looking forward to marching in his surf lifesaver's uniform at this year's Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) is to be applauded for its decision to back a proposal by gay members to put a lifesaving float in this year's parade.

The movement, which for many years opposed the admission of women into its ranks, has learnt from the mistakes of the past. By embracing members of different ethnic and sexual backgrounds SLSA will better reflect Australian society and build bridges to its constituent communities.

Gay men, lesbians, Muslims and other groups within society who take up the opportunity to provide community service by becoming lifesavers in turn win respect for their communities.

All round, it's a win-win situation.

Although the editorial questionably normalises Drew Lambert, the overview is, however, illustrative of cultural values challenged within a masculinist, heterosexual context and therefore an acknowledgement of actual diversity. The Co-float Organiser, Ruairi O'Connor of Tamarama Surf Life Saving Club, stated:

> Whether you are a woman, Muslim, gay or lesbian; surf lifesaving is a great way to give back to the community and make life long friendships, while also being a fantastic way to keep fit. I urge every gay and lesbian who loves the beach to find out how they can become a lifesaver at their local surf club (reported at: http://lifesaver2007.blogspot.com/. Accessed 1.12.2008).

[Cover of *DNA* 100th Issue, 2008 with Drew Lambert on the right.]

Both these moments of androgynous cultural intervention, actively use a language of values that invokes respect for difference. Bringing together gender, sexuality and ethnicity into an accord through a shared love of the beach demonstrates the fluidity and possibilities of the Australian psyche (which is clearly not homogenous and monolithic).

In conclusion, what this paper has suggested, through its brief journey into the cultural borderland of the beach, is that Australian narratives of belonging are evident in the quilted matrix of myth, memory and history. They can be seen refracted through the beach as a site that has produced cultural practices such as Surf Life Saving and surfing, demonstrating both tradition and change. The Australian beach has become a key site of androgynous moments (and living histories), as well as a key marker of contemporary claims to belonging. As a response to the European mind (and its colonising effects) inserting itself into the great southern landscape, the beach speaks to us of social and cultural complexity, where sameness and difference are in mutual negotiation about possible and alternative futures. New waves, so to speak, of attempts at decolonisation.

Note

A version of this paper appears in D'Cruz et al (eds.), *As Others See Us* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Press, 2008).

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