Belonging on the Edge of Australia: Narratives of Media, Representation and Surf Culture

Baden Offord, Curtin University, Australia

Introduction
Historian Caroline Ford (2006) has made the observation that in the twentieth century the Australian beach came to be celebrated as a unique site of ‘Australianness,’ where narratives of belonging were imagined and created through cultural practices such as sun bathing, surfing and surf life saving. Cultural and media theorist Clifton Evers, in his investigations into the beach as a privileged site in contemporary Australian culture (2008a, 2008b, 2009), has written extensively on how gender, masculinity and homo-sociality have been inscribed into the cultural practice of surfing. Cultural theorist Suvendrini Perera, in her exploration of Australia and its ‘insular imagination’ (2009), has identified the beach as a defining cultural achievement, particularly in reference to the effects of colonisation and the instalment of British Enlightenment values. What these Australian scholars importantly point out, is that to understand contemporary Australian culture, the beach stands out as a crucial marker and space where belonging is negotiated, contested and formed in complex and diverse ways.

In this essay, I take up the beach and its convergence with new forms of media, to explore how racially and sexually excluded modes of belonging in Australian cultural practices of the beach are being challenged and changed. I focus specifically on two examples of how media, including social media, are helping to transform this most significant iconic cultural imaginary and cultural site of belonging – the beach. The first is the Tropfest film, Between the Flags (2007) and the second example is the multi award winning documentary Out in the Line Up (2014).

The focus of these examples is on the way in which digital media has provided ways of ethically intervening into the hegemonic colonial structures of Australian society (expressed in imaginaries of the beach) and provided alternative visions or narratives of belonging through forms of cultural citizenship or alternative forms of bonding.

The thesis presented here is that certain facets of Australian beach culture are being transformed in a hybrid, cosmopolitan sense, which can be viewed as banal or transcendent (Ong: 2009), through a media convergence that is facilitated by an opening up of inter-epistemic dialogue and conversation occurring in everyday practices. This is being enabled by new waves of media that provide a means of cultural pedagogy, where cultural practice becomes a means of learning and teaching within the hegemonic frame. As Craig McGregor (1999) has argued, ‘culture, not formal politics, is the new arena for reform and resistance,’ in civil society. This is
where agency is enacted and provided with institutional and non-institutional ways of conceiving of belonging and citizenship.

My contention is that digital forms of media and social media are transforming Australian culture and society in diverse and perhaps surprising ways. Through mobile phones, blogs, websites and online forums, through Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Pinterest and Instagram, for example, Australian norms and values are being recreated and reimagined as new ways of communication enable people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds to become active participants in culture and society. This may mean to challenge taboos (such as homosexuality in surfing) or create meeting places in everyday sites (such as at the beach or in the surfing line up in the sea), enabling minor, hidden or marginalised cultures within the dominant cultural and social matrix.

Australian scholars Graham Meikle and Sherman Young in their book Media Convergence: Networked Digital Media in Everyday Life (2011) argue how such forms of communication through digital means are playing a decisive role in how narratives of belonging are evolving and being represented as well as contested through everyday creativity and practice. In contemporary Australia, this convergence is producing interesting ways for people from multicultural and socially diverse backgrounds negotiate their place in Australian dominant cultural flows and everyday life.

It is worth noting that Australians are apparently keen users of digital media communication. Recent statistics show that in Australia there are:

1. Facebook – 13,200,000 users
2. YouTube – 12,600,000
3. WordPress.com – 6,300,000
4. Tumblr – 4,700,000
5. LinkedIn – 3,650,000
6. Blogspot – 2,900,000
7. Twitter - 2,500,000 Active Australian Users

(Statistics compiled by SocialMediaNews.com.au for March 2014.)

One of the effects of this extensive uptake of digital communication and transformation in Australian culture is an intensification of the interpenetration and overlapping of peoples’ lives evident in the convergence of media and everyday life. As Australian culture and society has become an increasingly diverse, multi-religious, multi-sexual and multi-ethnic reality, its public culture has become increasingly defined by intense conversations and inter-epistemic dialogue that are cosmopolitan and potentially decolonising. These conversations can be viewed as new waves of cultural citizenship within the broader Australian polity and imagination.
Transformation of Australian Studies in a Globalising Age

For the purposes of this paper, cultural citizenship can be defined generally as the process of bonding and community building, together with active reflections on what that community means and how bonding matters (Burgess et al, 2006). Expressions of cultural citizenship can be seen in popular culture through texts of all kinds, from sharing stories, photos, film, voice and so on. In discussing cultural citizenship in the digital age, the question arises whether the convergence of new media and everyday life provides a means of enabling social and cultural diversity in a broader and deeper sense? How has it affected new representations of beach culture, or specifically surfing in the media? In what ways has the convergence of media with everyday social and cultural practices of the beach impacted on what it means to be Australian?

The Beach and cultural diversity
As mentioned above, the edge of Australia – the coast and its beaches - has played a hugely important role in the construction of contemporary Australian identity, and consequently its politics, values and culture. The cultural theorist Suvendrini Perera argues that the beach itself ‘stands as the signal achievement of Anglo-Australia’ (2009: 139), in reference to the ongoing effects of colonial conquest. In a deeply insightful account of Australia as an insular nation in terms of its social, political and cultural imaginary, Perera provides an analysis framed through beaches, borders, boats, and bodies. In her view, the story of colonisation and the installation of British Enlightenment thinking needs to be understood through the encounter with the sea, ‘a critical and defining feature of Australian national consciousness’ (2009: 9).

This has not been an uncomplicated story. The beach has come to represent a key site, for example, of how indigenous ontological belonging has been denied and not respected. Other contemporary responses to the beach are defined by hard expressions of nationalism and territory, where the coast, as a contiguous beach, becomes the border between citizens and ‘illegals’, that is, between those who are inside, and those who dare to cross those beaches and coastlines by boat and come ashore for refuge from oppression elsewhere. Notwithstanding the long-term ambivalence of British settlers with the vast interior landscape of Australia, no contemporary site in the Australian imaginary is so haunted and yet so beguiling at the same time as the beach.

Just as an estimated 600,000 pianos according to Peter Sculthorpe (2001) came to Australia in the 19th century to fill the ‘empty’ landscape with ‘proper’ music, the colonial expansion around the continent was defined by Enlightenment values being installed in and through the development of cities and urban areas, followed by the great suburbanisation and coastal urbanisation that occurred. The beach has become the ultimate borderland in the Australian consciousness, the place where the confluence between the civilised and non-civilised has happened, where progress and development has been etched deep. This can be seen in the
summation of the ideal Australian figure celebrated in beach culture particularly: a white, male lifesaver, holding the Australian flag up high, marching towards the future.

The beach, according to Leone Huntsmen (2001), is a key component of the Australian psyche. As a discourse, text, set of symbols and practices, iconography or narrative, the beach has come to represent one of the primary ways in which Australian culture 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 edge of the Australian continent, the beach has played a role in the Australian imaginary just as significant as the bush.

The beach in the Australian imaginary has held both the conscious and unconscious effects of colonialism. It is 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, patriarchy and hetero-normativity, homo-sociality, unity and nationalist ideology; but also, and counter to these colonising effects, a playground of cultural and social diversity, and the place of ‘abandonment’ as Tim Winton, the Australian author has noted, of re-invention, and surfing (2001).

At the meeting point of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia; at the edge of where nature and culture become a confluence of belonging(s); as a place that has been described as both democratic and tribal; as a market for consumerism and commercialisation; as a site, from which three quarters of all Australians live only twenty minutes away; the beach is primary evidence of how Australian values are made, tested and contested.

Thus, the beach can be viewed as an important site of how narratives of belonging are formed in everyday acts of bonding and community. The beach contributes to ideas of national belonging through markers of acceptable traditions as much as to the possibility of the formation of cultural citizenships through alternative ways of belonging and of being local.

Looking at the beach in terms of its history and mythology in Australia through the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries, what is revealed is the fluidity and complexity of the Australian psyche, where counter streams to the colonial project have been fecund. Although the myth of the masculinist bushman of the nineteenth century, embodied in white, Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual ideology, is strong, the beach has suggested a powerful, alternative engagement in being Australian, and importantly, belonging to Australia through other forms of conceiving Australianness.

Most significantly, that engagement has been underwritten by profound cultural and social diversity, shown in the ways the beach has been used in terms of cultural politics, practices and artefacts.
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 (2001) 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.

As I have noted elsewhere, a 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. It reminds us of the ongoing debate about sexuality (currently in Australia through debates on same sex marriage) 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 European culture and its expansion. This has all been part of the installation of British Enlightenment values into Australia and its modernity (Offord et al, 2014).

The transformation of the beach as a core imaginary at Gallipoli was also inspirational and resonant with the advent of the Surf Life-Saving Club (SLSC) movement in Australia. Leone Huntsman (2001) has traced the development of the SLSC phenomenon and compares the militaristic nature of the movement with the soldiers at Gallipoli. The Surf Life Saver became the embodiment of the ‘bronzed Aussie’ who is heroic and displays a certain uniformity of (exclusive) masculinity.

The image of the Life Saver became so important in fact to the self-definition of Sydney as a civilized and masculine city, that on the 70th anniversary of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the Sydney Morning Herald (2002) displayed the event with a souvenir showing a full front-page figure of a (male) Life Saver holding the Australian flag. 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, conveys the establishment of white, heterosexual patriarchal, Anglo-Australia.

The history of Surf Life Savers and the development of beach culture through the later part of the twentieth century were 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 a highly significant impact on shaping the attitudes towards the beach from the 1950s to the end of the century. Surfers were also perceived to be a departure from the hyper-masculinity of the Surf Life Saving Clubs, but at the same time developed a form of hyper heterosexuality and masculinity and homo-sociality (Evers, 2009) in which surfing culture came to embody markers of exclusion based on gender, sexuality and also ethnicity.
Let me now turn to the first of two examples of cultural pedagogy where I argue we can see how the beach as a site and contemporary cultural practices is a place of cultural and social transformation, where media convergence and everyday practices are producing new narratives of belonging in a contemporary Australia.

**Cronulla Riots and Tropfest**

*Between the Flags* was a finalist in the international short film festival Tropfest, held in Sydney in 2007 and is a cogent example of how converged media and everyday life come together. Jayce White, the director, based the short film on the incubation of the Cronulla Riots of 2005, a racial conflict in Sydney that brought into relief a range of tensions around localism, territoriality, cultural difference, whiteness and inter-epistemic conflict and ignorance. White was inspired by the question ‘How many rioters does it take to start a riot?’ The film, as a form of cultural pedagogy, intervenes into dominant racial and ethnic discourses by introducing a comedic approach to the riots and suggests a powerful ethical intervention is possible through humour as a form of collective reflection.

The event that has become known as the Cronulla Riot occurred on Sunday 11 December 2005 in the southern Sydney beachside suburb of Cronulla (see Garbutt: 2011 and Offord et al 2014 for an extensive analysis of the media and this event). The riot was spurred on by media commentary about off-duty surf lifesavers from the North Cronulla Surf Club who were involved in a fight with young males of Middle-Eastern appearance. Suvendrini Perera (2006) described this event of localism on the beach as ‘a performance of native-ised territoriality’ by Anglo-Australians. This was a ‘watershed event... a key role in enabling and legitimising a resurgent border policing of Australian citizenship’ (2007).

The riot, the language and the media representations that followed this event in the marked out a spatial sense of Australian belonging based on gender, ethnicity and everyday practices. Clifton Evers has noted (2008b) that localism was very much at the heart of the Cronulla Riot. Although there is a tradition in Australia that beaches are not owned by anyone, according to Evers ‘many local surfers would disagree’ (2008b). He states that ‘they regularly extend their policing and knowledge of safety from the water to the sand. In surfing culture this process of dominating a territory and imposing its cultural laws on others is known as localism’ (2008b: 895). Surfers are known for their possession of beaches with spray-painting of ‘locals only’ being evident up and down the east coast of Australia.

In White’s film, we see two men, one of Middle Eastern background and one who is a white Australian. They have arrived to be part of the riot but have no idea how to respond to each other in their encounter at the beach. As Johanson Katya and Hilary Glow write (2007: 42),
In Between Flags the two men find that they are similar in many respects, they share a cultural interest in certain kinds of music and cars, and as they get to know each other, it becomes apparent that what they have in common is more important than their differences. The film suggests that the two characters, paradigmatic ‘blokes’ share a quality of masculinity that overrides their cultural differences. They use their mobile phones, send text messages in the same way, and end up playing cricket on the sand.

As we watch this short film, we can see how forms of media and communications are pivotal to the interaction between the two men. The (mis)use of their cell phones to send and receive text messages, and their consequent uselessness in the film, speaks to the way the riots began in reality. In a broader sense, we might read the film as a text that deliberately interrupts the short handedness of some forms of media communication, such as text messaging. Their waiting on the beach ends in the formation of their own mutual conviviality at the very site of the beach (through playing cricket), which is the trope of their belonging.

Out in the Line Up

After almost 100 years since surfing began in Australia (Murphy, 2015), lesbian and gay surfers are now explicitly acknowledged and represented in the media. The second example of new media flows of communication and everyday life coming together around the beach can be seen in the nationally and internationally awarded Australian documentary film, Out in the Line Up (2014). This film actively challenges the hegemonic structures of Australian society. Surfing culture in Australia is considered to be a heterosexual, white male dominated, deeply homosocial and homophobic culture where there are a range of discourses about ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ surfers, which traditionally have excluded the visibility of surfers who were women, lesbian or gay or ethnically different from the Anglo-Australian. In recent years, however, surfing culture in Australia has been radically changing.

There has been a developing scholarship by Australian academics who have begun to examine the everyday reality of surfing as a key cultural and sporting practice in Australian society. For example, Rebecca Olive’s recent work (2011, 2013) on women who surf and Clifton Evers’ research about surfing masculinities (2009), together with a number of other researchers have taken ethnographic approaches to surfing that engage with how both women and men who surf understand and experience surfing.

Evers has noted that surfing culture is pervaded by homophobia. As he comments:

This is reflected in how heteronormative the culture is. For example, see the surfing media’s lack of representation of homosexuality and normalisation of
heterosexuality, which therefore positions homosexuality as somehow “not normal” or “other”. The representations – images and words – repeatedly emphasise heterosexual relationships. Consider the exclusive emphasis in the mainstream surfing media on a heterosexual male gaze which treats women as primarily sexual objects and how this same media would never dare sexualize a male body (unless, this was cloaked in irony). You can see this at work on websites, in magazines, in social media, and even in how the Association of Surfing Professional’s world tour is packaged, operated, and sold. (2014)

Out in the Line Up is the first Australian documentary film to look at how lesbian and gay women and men who surf understand and experience surfing within the dominant heterosexually identified male surfing culture. Rebecca Olive (2014) writes in her blog about the key themes of the film:

‘Out in the Lineup’ uncovers a culture that has strayed from its foundation of freedom of spirit, open-mindedness and connection to nature. David [Wakefield] and Thomas [Castets] learn about the dominance of male rituals in surf culture and the way this has marginalised minorities. They also hear about the pivotal role sponsors and media play in maintaining out-dated stereotypes. On ground level they hear stories of fear, isolation and self-doubt, but they are also inspired by tales of hope, self-empowerment and transformation.

This film has been created by a convergence of media and everyday practice in a number of ways. The film is the outcome of a project begun by a French Australian surfer, Thomas Castets, who as a gay male surfer in Sydney, found himself searching for other gay surfers and through new media he created a website called gaysurfers.net in 2011.

The film, Out in the Line Up, was an outcome of this venture and a further means to ethically open up broader discussions about such an iconic Australian cultural and sporting practice. Castets has noted that the combination of the website and social media was crucial to getting this film made. With the creation of GaySurfers.net in 2011, there were 4500 gay surfers from around the world who joined. In 2014 there were more than 5500 members. Underscoring the importance of social media in its role of opening up a previously taboo area in surfing culture, Castets comments that:

We asked the whole community if anyone would accept to tell their story and about 80 gay surfers responded.

We selected the most compelling stories and to plan the interviews we travelled to 5 locations (Hawaii, California, Mexico, Ecuador and around
Australia). In each of these locations, again though social media, we found volunteers through the community of gay surfers (gaysurfers.net) but also on Facebook and twitter who accepted to help with film production. We found camera-men/women, sound recordists, assistant producers... all through social media.

Even though everyone worked on the film as volunteers (without getting paid), we had some costs that we could not avoid, especially around post production and distribution. So we launched a crowd funding Campaign through Kickstarter, and again through social media, we managed to raise AU$25,000 in 30 days. (Castets, 2014)

*Out in the Line Up* is a form of cultural pedagogy that demonstrates how such a powerful cultural imaginary of surfing can be re-imagined through various media flows. Castets represents in his own way the changing cultural flows of Australian society. As a French Australian he has created a film text with multiple voices that provides innovative ways of understanding Australian narratives of belonging. His use of film, blogging, Facebook, twitter and Kickstarter has given agency to Australian lesbian and gay surfers (as well as others) for the first time, creating an online community that meets in the everyday practice of surfing. Rebecca Olive suggests,

Websites like gaysurfers.net and films like ‘Out in the Lineup’ are really important in helping to give these experiences a voice in surfing. For gay and lesbian surfers, they highlight that there are other gay and lesbian surfers around, and for straight surfers, they provide a chance for us to listen, watch and learn, and to try to understand that there are a raft of things going on out in the lineup that we might not notice or understand. (Olive, 2014)

**Conclusion**

The examples shown here of *Between the Flags* and *Out in the Line Up*, demonstrate how participation in Australian cultural practices at the beach happen through the convergence of media and everyday encounters at the beach, whether through swimming, meeting friends or fellow rioters, surfing and sunbaking.

These might be merely ephemeral moments, but they indicate as well what Habermas (cited in Burgess et al, 2006) has called ‘episodic publics’, where people come together in shared activities and practices that require negotiation of public and private space and invoke questions of participation, inclusion and exclusion. These films actively and ethically address contemporary concerns of belonging through various markers of difference. They are examples of how cultural citizenship is created through the convergence of media and everyday practices.
Surfing culture, as a prominent source of narratives of Australian belonging in the public cultural sphere has become increasingly scrutinised over the last few years for its highly gendered and sexualised hierarchy (see for example, Workman: 2014). What can be seen in the examples discussed in this paper is an evolving cosmopolitan dialogue enabled by new waves of media in a socially and culturally complex and diverse society. As Burgess et al write:

Fostering human talent and digital creativity outside formal school or workplace environments will favourably nurture societal and cultural values – promoting not only an innovation culture and economy but an inclusive society. (Burgess et al, 2006: 13)

Between the Flags and Out in the Line Up are two recent contemporary examples of creative as well as critical narratives that tackle the very edges of belonging in Australia. They address serious social questions about sexual taboos and racial borders by introducing contexts of engaged citizenry, where the objective is to clarify what participation means in an enabling and educational manner. What can be gleaned from these examples is the potential that the media, including social media, can provide a crucial space in Australian culture for reflexive understandings of what it means to belong.

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