

QUT Digital Repository:
<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/40207>



Ellison, Elizabeth (2010) *Flagging Spaces : exploring the myth of the Australian beach as an egalitarian space*. In: Ignite10! Creative Industries Postgraduate Research Conference, October 27th - 29th, 2010, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. (Unpublished)

© Copyright 2010 the author.

Ignite10!: Looking for Trouble?

Flagging Spaces: exploring the myth of the Australian beach as an egalitarian space.

By Liz Ellison

The beach has been, and continues to be a dominating image in Australia. Australians see the image on postcards, in films, in advertising, and read about it in novels. The beach plays an integral role in the lives of many Australian people. It is a holiday location, a hometown, a political space, and an international iconic tourist destination. It is also a setting of national fictions, both popular and literary. The beach, until the late 1980s, was often relegated to the edges of academic inquiry, considered less significant than the 'Bush'. However, Fiske, Hodge, and Turner published a chapter on the beach in their text *Myths of Oz* (1987) – specifically a discussion on semiotics of the beach space. This was a turning point for the beach's role in Australian cultural studies; no longer was the beach relegated to hedonistic popular culture, but instead it became a legitimate and important place for discussion of Australian national identity.

The Australian beach has been said to be the great leveller of class, gender, and race. On the surface, Australia appears to reject the class separations of its British heritage. Yet, there are class differences in Australia and the beach is a space that reveals these markers of difference. On December 11, 2005, mass rioting broke out on Cronulla beach between Anglo-Australians and Lebanese-Australians. The rioting resulted in several arrests and injuries and further violent encounters over the following week. As this incident showed, the beach can also be a place of discord. The Australian beach acts as a site that reveals anxieties about cultural and national understandings of Australia and Australian identity. Thus, this paper aims to explore contemporary representations of the beach in some examples of Australian fiction and discover how these reveal disparities in acceptance, power, and class.

Australia's beaches

Australian beaches are different from many beaches in the world. Geographically, the term 'beach' refers to the coastline of a continent where the land meets the sea. It must be a landscape with sand (of variable quality), and the ability to walk directly into the

water. Therefore the sand space between the land and the water is a prominent feature of beaches. Cliff faces do not have the same meaning as beaches. Although cliffs also act as barriers and edges in a similar way to a beach, cliffs are elevated areas of land without sand. They often have rocky outcrops directly below them in the water, whereas the beach is characterised by the open ocean that runs directly onto the sand. Significantly, the representations of cliffs are quite different, as seen in classic literature of Europe. Beaches in Australia usually have flat, open stretches of sand leading towards the ocean. Although cliff faces do exist, often they are considered extremely dangerous: for example, the Twelve Apostles in Victoria border onto rough ocean, rather than the safe swimming zones of the beaches.

The beach acts as a border, an edge, to our isolated island continent.

When I presented some similar ideas at a conference in Germany recently, I had some questions asked about the significance of our country as an island. There is, obviously, a strong thematic sense of island fiction that explores concepts of castaways and isolation. Yet I am not convinced that Australian beach fiction shares these ideas. Rather, I think there remains a sense of enclosure, or ocean borders, without a feeling of entrapment. It was interesting that the European audience associated our island continent as a place where people cannot escape from, whereas I think some Australians view it as a place where people cannot enter. The primary example at the moment of course is the ongoing debate surrounding the 'boat people' or asylum seekers.

In Australia, the beach plays an important role in the tourism industry. Internationally, the beach is represented as an iconic, mythic space of relaxation and leisure. Comparatively, the Australian beach still remains a very ordinary, everyday setting to many locals – for most capital cities, the beach is no more than an hour's drive away. The beach in these instances, rather than being iconic and mythic, is instead a common, urban space that is familiar to most Australians. The term 'myth' plays an important part in this research, and I wish to clarify how I use the term in this paper. Fiske, Hodge, and Turner (1987, xi) wrote about the myths of Australia in their aptly titled *Myths of Oz*. They viewed a myth as a "grouping of signifiers around a concept", an idea that borrows from Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957). Barthes discussed myth within the framework of semiology, as a "second-order semiological system": an idea that becomes

natural through its excessive acceptance (1957, 123). It is these myths that create a “focus for the culture” (Fiske, Turner and Hodge 1987, xi). My research uses the term myth to describe the excessively used and therefore *natural* ideas about the beach. Of particular focus for this paper is the myth of the beach as an egalitarian space.

Myth of egalitarianism

The Australian beach has been regarded as a mythically egalitarian space. Ann Game stated in her paper about Bondi Beach that “no one owns the sun, sea, surf – or everyone, all Australians, own it” (1990, 115). As I mentioned, Australia, in comparison to the traditional English sense of class, has been considered a classless society.

Nevil Shute’s text *On the Beach* (1957) is an example of the beach as the ‘great leveller’. The novel, which depicts the aftermath of nuclear war, portrays a type of equality at its dystopian end. The beach witnesses the shocking demise of all humanity in this last city on Earth, yet the waves continue to roll. It is a stormy day, transforming the beach from idyllic beauty into a wild, natural scene:

The sea lay before her, grey and rough with great rollers coming in from the south on to the rocky beach below. The ocean was empty and grey beneath the overcast sky, but away to the east there was a break in the clouds and a shaft of light striking down onto the waters (311).

The natural motion of the ocean and the sands continue unrelenting despite the collapsing of human and eventually all animal life. The image of the beach’s eternal movement never ceasing is haunting. Regardless of gender, class, or ethnicity, *On the Beach*’s radiation sickness leaves no survivors. The beach alone remains ‘alive’ and in motion once all humanity is extinguished. The beach setting is shown as a type of utopian space in Shute’s dystopian world. It does not judge the actions of humans; rather it remains a natural, wild space untouched by the effects of the radiation.

On the Beach is an evocative image of the beach as an egalitarian space. Yet Leone Huntsman suggested in her book *Sand in our souls: the beach in Australian history* that, the beach becomes a place where people disregard differences rather than denying them (2001, 178). She believes that the beach does not erase differences, rather it ignores them temporarily. Thus, *On the Beach* is showing an egalitarian beach space

because the characters are *ignoring* the distinctions. In Australian life, there are still clear markers of difference between groups of people on the beach. An obvious example is the role that consumerism plays in beach identities. Brands such as Billabong and Quiksilver are popular nationally and internationally, sponsoring many surfing and other sporting competitions around the world. Surf brand clothing is a distinct marker on the beach of social status, especially for teenagers.

There are specific beaches that Australians identify with certain lifestyles. For example, Noosa Beach in Queensland and Bells Beach in Victoria attract different people and different beach activities. However, many people view the Australian beach as a conceptual space of equality as a whole. Particularly in tourist advertising, beaches are depicted as a place where everyone can enjoy themselves. Geoffrey Dutton (1985) suggested that the beach was a place of 'democracy', especially of the body. The absence of clothing creates equality amongst beach users, in a similar sense to the way dust and mud covers everyone in the Bush. Yet this democracy of the body is not as simple as Dutton believes. For example, Fiske, Hodge, and Turner (1987) read the beach as a place of zones, in which people are assigned to certain areas based on their usage of the beach; for example, families are more likely to appear on the 'esplanade' or 'central zone' with small children, whereas the swimmers, surfers, or body surfers are more likely to be in the water. Although all body shapes are perhaps accepted on the beach space, there remains a hierarchy of athleticism – surfers and swimmers are considered more authoritative than those floating in the shallows. Another sign of difference that Fiske, Hodge, and Turner identify is the tan. A lack of tan signifies a person as a "day tripper beachgoer" rather than "hard-core aficionados whose tans signify their membership of an elite" (1987, 56). Currently, there is a rising trend in the use of spray tans on the beach, yet this still is not considered 'real': a fake tan suggests an inability to naturally tan.

An example of this beach hierarchy can be seen in Tim Winton's recent text *Breath* (2008). The novel attempts to portray a type of idealistic egalitarianism through surfing. In the beginning of the novel, the protagonist Bruce Pike and his friend Loonie find themselves fascinated by the world of surfing. They hitch lifts to the beach and beg to borrow surfboards until they finally secure their own. Yet, despite the inherent equality of the ocean, the boys still find themselves within a hierarchy: the water is treacherous

and uncertain, and they are hampered by their ability. Almost immediately, the boys identify a 'guru' – Sandro is an older man with extraordinary skills, never intimidated by the unpredictability of the surf: "There was something special about his insouciance and the princely manner in which he cross-stepped along his long, old-timey board..." (34). The social order of the beach in *Breath* is not concerned with the urban concepts of money and class; Bruce and Loonie are certainly not wealthy characters. However, once they own a surfboard, they are judged on their skill rather than acquisitions. In *Breath*, the social order of the beach through Bruce's eyes is based on surfing skill. Sandro, as the most experienced within their sphere of knowledge, is therefore offered the most respect, despite his lack of employment, money, and educational qualifications. And although Geoffrey Dutton suggests that the beach allows for all shapes and sizes, in *Breath* being a talented surfer means being fit and wiry – there is not space for a multiplicity of sizes in Bruce's hierarchy.

Breath is surfing orientated, to the point that no alternative beach activity is ever mentioned in detail. Winton's novel is at times a nostalgic exploration of childhood on the beach, and setting his narrative in an earlier time period allows him to hark back to a time of conceptual equality on the beach. Yet, it is much more complex than a merely naïve exploration of mateship. Bruce's character becomes involved with Sandro's partner, an older American woman, and he struggles to cope with her sexual desires – especially that of erotic asphyxiation. He suffers continual feelings of inadequacy and views the beach as a place of security, where he can immerse himself in the waves. Yet even here, Loonie takes priority to Sandro as a potential protégée, and Bruce's hesitation at taking on the bigger, life-threatening waves leaves Bruce disappointed and uncertain. The beach then, is a complex site within Winton's work, both a place of comfort – especially to the older Bruce who narrates the story; he returns to the beach of his childhood and surfs the waves with more confidence as an older man. However, it is also a place of discord and is a setting for Bruce's struggles with fear, with Loonie's recklessness, with his desire to be recognised as a surfer by Sandro. This contemporary representation of the beach then is a more layered, complex exploration of the beach than other texts.

Problematic ownership

At this stage, it is significant to discuss the role of the Australian Indigenous population. The coastal beaches were the stage of early confrontation between the Aboriginal people and the non-Indigenous beginning in the 1790s when Captain Cook first arrived on Australian shores. Anne Brewster (2003), in her article titled "The Beach as 'Dreaming Place'", explored the beach in Aboriginal literature. She labelled it as a "border zone where the invader occupies the indigene's land" (39), but also as a "zone in which different temporalities conjoin" (35). The use of memory is significant for Australian Aboriginals, Brewster noted, because of its role in "[inventing] local future" (39). Therefore, Indigenous understandings of the beach differ greatly from Western understandings, as Brewster stated:

Aboriginal literature challenges the fiction of a traditional Indigenous identity fixed in time and for whom parallel worlds, time travel and the future are unavailable (2003, 40).

Byrne and Nugent (2004) suggested that a better approach to understanding Indigenous cultural heritage is through 'landscapes' rather than 'sites'. Thus, the beach landscape itself as a whole is considered a space of heritage rather than different, specific sites on individual beaches. Concepts of ownership of land are complex and significantly different between traditional Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous.

One interesting point I have come across so far in my research is that the use of water in Indigenous texts appears to focus on rivers and waterholes rather than the beach. One immediate point of significance is the importance of fresh water. This is not to suggest that the beach is unimportant in Indigenous life but rather that the attachment may reveal itself in a different way. For example, Terri Janke's novel *Butterfly Song* (2005) is the story of Tarena, an Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander. She returns to Thursday Island after she finishes her law degree to help her mother retrieve a family heirloom. *Butterfly Song* mentions the beach – Tarena grew up in Cairns – but it does not feature heavily in the narrative. Instead, Thursday Island appears to be more significant as an island whole: when Tarena arrives by plane, the sand is noticeable purely in that it borders the island and is a gateway to the ocean. Tarena's grandfather is a pearl fisherman, and one day his non-Indigenous boss leaves him behind in the ocean. Kit manages to swim back to shore, but again the focus is on the contrast of land and ocean, which still excludes

the beach space. Indigenous perspectives of the beach are limited perhaps because of the role of the beach in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history of Australia. The beaches were places of conflict when Anglo Saxon settlers began arriving. As Cathcart said in the introduction to his novel *The Water Dreamers*:

...the contact between white settlers and the Aboriginal owners triggered a battle for resources. In a country where water was scarce – and where it was central to the cultures of the Aboriginal peoples – the battle for land was also a battle for water (6).

Since the newcomers mostly settled in coastal colonies for close proximity to coastal ports, the Indigenous population was pushed inwards to the centre of the continent. Thus, it is possible that their relationship with the beach landscape shifted after the arrival of Western settlers, and this is represented in their fictional texts.

When I recently presented some of these concepts in Germany, this concept of the Indigenous ownership, and also the postcolonial aspect of my research, was of great interest. I received many questions about my thoughts on the role of postcolonialism in our country and whether this movement away from the significance of the bush suggested a return to colonial ideas. However, I do not think this is the case – Australians have always visited the beach but it was considered a hedonistic holiday zone rather than a space that can reveal mythic meanings within Australian identity, and is thus worthy of academic inquiry.

The concept of egalitarianism on the beach also begins to problematise traditional non-Indigenous discourses of ownership. Usually in Australian society, it is accepted that working earns money, which allows us to gain ownership of property. However, the beach is not a space of work (except for the lifeguards on duty). Despite this, the beach feels like a communally enjoyed and earned space for relaxation. Game suggested that the lack of distinction between classes does not suggest 'we all work' (as would traditional discourses of egalitarianism), but instead means 'we all have the same fun' (1990, 115). Therefore, the beach is a shared space of relaxation rather than a space linked to a work ethic.

Yet the beach can also be a stage of discord. December 11, 2005 saw Cronulla Beach become the stage for violent rioting. Initially triggered (according to the media) by an attack on two male Anglo-Australian lifeguards by Lebanese-Australians, the ensuing

violence made international headlines. Slogans such as 'Aussie Pride' and 'We grew here, you flew here' were painted on signs, bodies, and the sand itself. Affrica Taylor, in her article "Australian bodies, Australian sands", suggested that the beach itself is not passive – instead, it is "co-implicated in the construction of the authentic Australian subject and must therefore be understood, at least partially, as a cultural construct" (2009, 115). The Cronulla riots stood against Australia's policy of multiculturalism. Australia as a country is primarily inhabited by migrants; 97% of Australians have ancestral origins from outside of Australia (Taylor 2009, 118). In this situation, the migrants, especially those of Lebanese descent, were marked as 'un-Australian', thus allowing the Anglo-Australians to affirm themselves as the 'real' Aussies. Yet, as Taylor remarked, this was a case of "selective amnesia of the White postcolonial 'custodians'", once again excluding the position of the Indigenous inhabitants of the country.

Multiculturalism is a significant element of Australian life, and some of the fictional texts written about the beach confirm this. Robert Drewe in particular has short stories that exonerate this multicultural idea, although I do not have time to explore this in more detail today. Taylor believed that "through immersions, revisitations and sensory imprintings, beach play becomes 'second nature' for many urban children and naturalises a passageway unto Australian adulthood" (120). Therefore, it can be suggested that the beach plays an important role in 'Australianising' people of different cultural backgrounds. Yet, comparatively, the beach can be considered a place that accepts different cultural backgrounds.

A recent text that does explore different cultural backgrounds is Stephen Orr's *Time's Long Ruin* (2010). It is a fictionalised story that re-imagines the disappearance of the Beaumont children in 1966. Orr's narrator is the next-door neighbour of three children who disappeared from Glenelg Beach in Victoria. The novel portrays the disappearance and the subsequent police search, along with the community's response to the incident. Henry Page, the narrator of the novel, is retelling his story as an older man. He has lived in the house of his childhood his whole life, highlighting the differences between 'then' and 'now'. His young eyes paint everything in an innocent naivety. He briefly mentions the struggles between 'old' and 'new' Australians, such as the neighbouring Greek family who lost their son in the sea. They are called "bloody dagos" (57), yet Henry's father smoothes the situation over time after time. Orr presents Croydon as a seemingly rose-

tinged perfect suburb, not ignoring the racial inequalities of the time but reimagining how the scenes unfolded. The beach itself is painted in a similar light, perfectly beautiful, yet becoming an unlikely stage for this horrific, unsolved crime that continues to plague Australian parents to this day. Yet, ironically, the beach life carries on just two days after the children disappear:

A few old couples waded through the shallows with their pants rolled up. There were other kids, in groups and pairs and alone, sent to the beach by parents who hadn't read the paper, or had and didn't believe lightning struck the same place twice. Police cadets and junior constables, in uniform shirts and their own bathers and shorts, still combed the foreshore (2010, 230).

Time's Long Ruin creates an uneasy sense that these children were ordinary and that the crime could happen to anybody. They were unlucky enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The beach continued to function as usual only two days after the disappearance. The beach landscape becomes a neutral zone, seemingly unforgiving and uncaring. Orr's nostalgic exploration of 1960s Australia idealises an egalitarian evocation of the beach space. Orr's text harks back to Nevil Shute's utopian/dystopian juxtaposition; however, in this instance, Orr's Adelaide is the utopian world that, because of the dystopic beach setting, is revealed as a cracked, flawed vision.

Conclusion

The mythically egalitarian space of the Australian beach therefore is a fractured concept. The Australian beach plays a continually significant role in our national identity and in the lived experiences in the Australian people. Traditionally, the beach has been considered a place of equality; where all Australians are welcome regardless of age, gender, size, or ethnicity. However, this excludes the problematic ownership between Western colonisers and Indigenous Australians of the beach space, and the markers of difference that the beach setting so often reveals about Australian society. In particular, social events like the Cronulla riots, suggest that in reality the beach is far from an egalitarian space. By exploring some Australian texts and cultural concepts in this paper today, it appears that some conform to the idea of the beach as a complex setting of egalitarianism, but other texts quite obviously challenge the myth. The more recent texts, Tim Winton's and Stephen Orr's, appear to be aware of the realities of the

lack of equality on the beach. Of the newer texts, Orr, particularly through a focus on childhood, portrays an almost naïve narrative of mateship. In comparison, Winton's text, although in some parts nostalgic, tells a more haunting tale of a young boy plagued by his inadequacies and diving in too deep to a world he did not understand. *Time's Long Ruin*, harks back in many ways to Nevil Shute's work, invoking a yearning to return to a classless setting of idealistic pleasure. By analysing these Australian texts about the beach, it is clear to see that the egalitarian myth of the beach is not embraced in all of the texts: Nevil Shute and Stephen Orr have conformed to some aspect of egalitarianism on the beach. Yet, it is a contentious idea and Winton has challenged the mythical concept of equality. The cultural examples suggest that it cannot be said that Australia is returning to a period where all Australians (or none) own the beach, yet it does remain that the beach setting is a complex site. Whether it is, as Game suggested, a place where all ethnicities, genders, and bodies can democratically interact without fear, remains to be seen.

References:

- Barthes, R. 1957. *Mythologies*. Trans. J. Cape. London, United Kingdom: HarperCollins.
- Booth, D. 2001. *Australian beach cultures: the history of sun, sand, and surf*. London, United Kingdom: F. Cass.
- Brewster, A. 2003. The beach as 'Dreaming Place': reconciliation, the past and the zone of intersubjectivity in Indigenous literature. *New Literatures Review* (40):33-41.
- Byrne, D. and M. Nugent. 2004. *Mapping attachment: a spatial approach to Aboriginal post-contact heritage*. Hurstville, New South Wales: Department of Environment and Conservation (NSW).
- Cathcart, M. 2009. *The water dreamers: the remarkable history of our dry continent*. Melbourne: Text Publishing Company.
- Dutton, G. 1985. *Sun, sea, surf and sand: the myth of the beach*. Melbourne, Victoria: Oxford University Press.
- Fiske, J., G. Turner and B. Hodge. 1987. *Myths of Oz: reading Australian popular culture*. Sydney, New South Wales: Allen & Unwin.
- Game, A. 1990. Nation and Identity: Bondi. *New Formations* 11:105-120 (accessed January 27, 2010).
- Huntsman, L. 2001. *Sand in our souls: the beach in Australian history*. Carlton South, Victoria: Melbourne University Press.
- Janke, T. 2005. *Butterfly song*. Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin Books.
- Morris, M. 1998. *Too soon too late: history in popular culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Orr, S. 2010. *Time's Long Ruin*. South Australia: Wakefield Press.
- Shute, N. 1957. *On the beach*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Taylor, A. 2006. Australian bodies, Australian sands. In *Lines in the sand: the Cronulla riots, multiculturalism and national belonging*, ed. G. Noble, 111 - 126. Sydney, New South Wales: Institute of Criminology Press.

Winton, T. 2008. *Breath*. Camberwell, Victoria: Penguin Group.