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Australian Beachspace: The Plurality of an Iconic Site

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The Australian beach is frequently positioned as an integral component of international tourist campaigns as well as the featured exotic location of exported television shows such as Home and Away (1988—) and Bondi Rescue (2006—). The idea of 'one' iconic beach that fits and covers all desires is promoted by these representative monolithic images. The beach has come to stand in for the desirability of Australia at large. Kathryn James goes as far as to suggest that the Australian beach and coast have 'displaced the Outback or the bush as a stock image or theme' (James 2000, p. 12). However, this stock image often neglects the diversity and multiplicity of the beach as a site. There are many different beaches in Australia and even on the one beach there is a combination of different spaces. This article addresses the plurality of the beach and drawing on Soja's concept of Thirdspace (1996) and Doreen Massey's 'simultaneity of stories so far' (2005, p. 5) puts forward the term beachspace to account for this complex, dynamic, changing and plural site.

Doreen Massey in her book *For Space* (2005) draws our focus to the lack of attention given to everyday terms such as 'space'. She finds that this term is taken for granted and used as though its definition is final and closed. Massey, using concepts from Henri Lefebvre, reminds us that 'we have inherited an imagination so deeply ingrained that it is often not actively thought' (2005, p. 17). This lack of thinking in relation to space neglects that space is active and it is always part of a process in production. This article explores a space that is one of the most active processes of production: the Australian beach. The focus will be on Australian beaches because the beach as space is taken for granted in Australia and although it is a dominant image used by many to represent Australia it has not been thoroughly researched. It is a crucially important space for Australians and international travellers in their lived experiences, and yet, because of this joyous, hedonistic approach to using the space for relaxation, it is often not considered worthy of serious discussion. Frances Bonner, Susan McKay and Alan

McKee (2001) write 'we all dream of the sand and the sea, in Australia' (p. 269) and they go on to conclude that the beach holds a 'secure place in the national identity' (p. 270). But in a paradoxical manner this sense of security leads to taking the beach as cultural artefact and process for granted. People seldom stop, think about and reflect on how they are processing the beach as space.

Throughout this article the term *beachspace* will be used as this term allows more consideration of this active space. Reconsidering the beach as a *beachspace* will open up more stories for engagement and enable the rejection of or subversion of applied boundaries and borders. This article will use textual and contextual analysis to highlight the complexity and plurality of this active space. Yet, because of Australia's colonial past, it is crucial to contextualise the space within an Indigenous context. The Indigenous history of Australia is of great significance to the contemporary national identity. The beaches were places of conflict when Anglo-Saxon settlers began arriving. Representation of the beach reflects that, both in the significant texts written by and about Indigenous Australians and the frequent absence of Indigenous representation in non-Indigenous authored texts. Examples for discussion will be taken from Australian literary texts, popular texts, and films. The range and crossing over of genres is used to highlight the capacity of the *beachspace* to blur boundaries.

What is *Beachspace*?

As stated above this article will use the term *beachspace* when discussing beaches in Australia because the term allows for not only the differences in geographical location but also differences in how the beach is lived, represented and experienced compared to other spaces. The term *beachspace* borrows from Edward Soja's theory of Thirdspace (1996). It is worth noting that the Australian beach has frequently been examined as a space of binaries—that is, either ordinary (Meaghan Morris 1998) or mythic, as discussed by John Fiske, Bob Hodge, and Graeme Turner (1987) and more recently by Douglas Booth (2001). Other critics suggest the beach is an 'in-between', liminal, space that sits between the ordinary and the mythic (as well as geographically between land and sea). Sean Redmond, for example, explores how the beach is 'two sides of the same coin, the liquid, shared essence of beach, sand and shoreline, where one foot back connects you to the land and one foot forward carries you into the sea' (Redmond 2013, p. 727). Robert Preston-Whyte similarly argues that beaches are 'in short, liminal spaces' (2008, p. 350). While recognising the slipperiness of the space, the Australian beach is more than an in-between space. It is not merely the space that exists between the ocean and peopled land; rather it is a space in its own right that is simultaneously the imagined mythic icon of tourism campaigns while also being the everyday lived location of local families and the site of memories past and future. It is this complexity that allows Soja's concept of 'thirthing' to become an appropriate tool for developing the notion of *beachspace*. The beach in Australia straddles a number of

uncomfortable binaries as mentioned above; however, the significant factor is that the beach is more than one or the other. As Soja suggests, the *beachspace* is more than the 'either/or' choice (1996, p. 5). This resonates with Massey's second proposition from *For Space*, in which she suggests it is imperative to understand that space has 'contemporaneous plurality' (2005, p. 31). These multiplicities of space (especially when taken in conjunction with Massey's third proposition, that space is always under construction) again allow the Australian beach to become more than just the sum of its constituent parts. In this instance, Soja and Massey present complementary ideas that embrace complexity and nuance, that encourage a temporal and historical reading of space that exists alongside and because of the plurality inherent in the landscape.

Where Soja used the concept of the Thirdspace, and the active process of 'thirding', to discuss urban spaces (he initially proposed the term for Los Angeles), the term *beachspace* is more appropriate for capturing the complexity of a space that at times can fall into the urban, suburban, or natural. The Australian beach is a space that is at once natural and man-made; isolated and heavily populated; serene and dangerous. Although Soja's process of 'thirding' has been used in non-urban spaces before, in this instance the term *beachspace* allows for capturing the entirety of Australian beaches while not reducing the singular beach to a monolithic site. Soja's Thirdspace extends his First and Secondspace (or real and imagined spaces). The term *beachspace*, like Thirdspace, provides a way of examining the beach as something more complex and slippery than a fixed boundary. The *beachspace* is at once the one natural pristine beach representing the entire continent, and simultaneously the individual, named beaches that are so recognisable to many Australians and overseas tourists. The *beachspace* is also the imagined site of memories, dreams, and national myths. It is all of these things mingling and slipping back and forward during the actual lived experience. The *beachspace* can include many physical elements, such as: sandy stretches, the ocean, the esplanade, the playground, car parks, amenities, surf clubs and all the connotations that go with these elements as well as imagined and remembered experiences and images.

The *beachspace* then can be understood as a term that allows for the complexities of the Australian beach to be more appropriately captured and represented. The Australian beach is simultaneously a real and an imagined space. For instance, the Australian beach is often perceived in very ordinary ways. The beach is for many Australians a part of life that is not extraordinary. It may be a holiday destination but it is a comfortable, familiar one that is revisited over and over. Fiske, Hodge, and Turner (1987) instead aligned the beach as a key myth of Australia. A space of egalitarian beauty, the beach became a part of national identity. This reading of the space suggests the conceived beach is one of mythic significance, linked to the natural beauty of the location—the type idealised on postcards and in tourist campaigns. And yet, the beach experience is neither one nor the other—instead, it is a complex reimagining of this type of dichotomy: the *beachspace*.

Monolithic Images as National Icons

The Australian continent has a diversity of natural landscapes such as rainforests, desert regions, snow-capped mountain ranges, and bushlands. However, for many Australians and international tourists the beach is considered the most marketable, palatable and sought after of all of these landscapes. Kathryn James writes 'the beach and the coast have, in many respects, displaced the outback or the bush as a stock image or theme' (2000, p. 12). The beach is frequently positioned as an integral component of international tourist campaigns as well as the featured location of exported popular television shows such as *Home and Away* and *Bondi Rescue*. The term 'the beach' is used here because the beach in marketing and in critical discussion is frequently considered as a singular monolithic space. This concept of categorising spaces under a singular monolithic label is one that has been discussed before in relation to the iconic Outback space. Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra (1991 p. 147) note the bush is often labelled as 'not-here, the negation of the suburban experience'. Hodge and Mishra, however, challenge this understanding, suggesting instead that the bush has a 'shifting reality value' that contributes to its impact as a setting and landscape in Australian texts. The outback was, therefore, not one space but rather a shifting space whose boundaries changed according to who was doing the labelling. They also suggest the Outback myth plays a significant role in Australian life, 'and is more insistently constructed [than the American frontier] as a contemporary reality' (1990, p. 147). In the 25 years since Hodge and Mishra's discussion, the mythic Australia outback still continues to resonate with many but the beach location is now exerting its dominance as cultural myth. However, just as Hodge and Mishra highlighted how the iconic Outback was represented in terms of negation so, too, is the beach. In the case of Australian beaches this becomes even more complex because the traveller is often not there (at the beach) but desires to be there. The negation is used as a term of desire to be where one is not.

For Indigenous Australians the beach also has a diversity of meaning. There is not one beach for all Indigenous Australians but rather there are multiple beaches and each of these carries complex stories and memories. 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. Anne Brewster (2003), in her article examining the beach as 'dreaming place', explores the beach in Aboriginal culture and labels it as 'the zone in which different temporalities conjoin' (p. 35). She also finds that Indigenous understandings of the beach differ greatly from Western understandings:

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, p. 40).

Byrne and Nugent (2004) suggest that a better approach to understanding Indigenous cultural heritage is through 'landscapes' rather than 'sites'. The term 'landscapes' in this instance refers to

coastal regions as a whole, creating spaces of heritage on large stretches of connected land. Comparatively, sites tend to indicate individual areas of beach space—for example, individually named beaches like Manly, Surfers Paradise, or Cottesloe. Although landscape can be a problematic, homogenising term in regards to beach analysis it does connote a sense of the monolithic space required to better appreciate the interconnectedness of Indigenous attitudes, which appear to have shown an appreciation for plurality and diversity without demarcating rigid boundaries. This focus on wholeness rather than individual areas can be seen in Indigenous author Terri Janke's novel *Butterfly Song* (2005). In this text, it is Thursday Island itself that is significant as an island as a whole, rather than separating it into marked zones. The beach plays a part, but it is not a marked out boundary separate from the land.

The beach—the signifier of Australia in so many tourism campaigns and cultural events—like the Outback before it has a more complex meaning than the mythic overtones suggest. A beach in Australia could be the populated, touristy Surfers Paradise at the Gold Coast (south east Queensland), or an incredibly isolated and idyllic surfing location like Tombstones (north Western Australia). Nevertheless, advertisers and tourist slogans position a singular pristine natural beach as the promoted image of beach representing all of Australia. The beaches shown in advertisements are seldom named and therefore one image can fit and represent any location from the stretches of Northern Queensland beaches to beaches south of Melbourne, over 2000 kilometres away. Theano Terkenli (2008) drawing on David Crouch's work writes that discussions of tourism and landscape have often failed to recognise the 'fractured, multiple geographical knowledge ... that is closer to our lived practice' (Crouch in Terkenli, 2008, p. 345). Other examples of attempting to turn many beaches into a singular entity include the 2009 Tourism Queensland's 'Best Job in The World' campaign, which used a competition approach to advertise for a 'caretaker of the Great Barrier Reef'. Tourism Australia's 2006 campaign, featured Laura Bingle in a bikini on a beautiful beach infamously delivering the phrase, 'where the bloody hell are you?' The phrase worked on the notion that tourists desired to be where they were not. Both of these campaigns clearly portray the unspoilt natural beach that is used time and time again to promote Australian beaches to tourists and travellers. In 2013 and 2014, the Best Job in the World Campaign was extended by Tourism Australia to include all the states and territories, highlighting the lack of specificity when it came to discussing Australian beaches. As part of the campaign, Waterloo Train Station in London was transformed into the 'Australian Beach' with the stereotypical lifesaver and girl in bikini and people were encouraged to enter the competition and dream of being in this better place—this place where they were not. In this instance the better place was the imagined beach in Australia. This attempt to turn all beaches into one definitive imagined beach is really an attempt to force ownership and control over all *beachspace* lived and imagined. It is also an attempt to turn the complexity and plurality of these spaces into a monolithic site because monolithic sites are far easier to market and sell.

It is not only advertising that uses the one beach approach. The television show, *Bondi Rescue* (2006-), may be set on Bondi Beach but it is implied that the same events are happening on beaches across Australia. The beach of *Home and Away* (1988-) is promoted on the show as a place of escape and community. However, the beach on the show is not actually one beach but rather a mixture of Palm Beach and the surrounding beaches of Sydney's North Shore. The beaches used are actually urban beaches rather than rural areas. One beach could never sustain all of the story-lines that the show promotes and, yet, the image of a monolithic site that accommodates all differences is promoted through these shows. This representation is far-removed from the many Australian *beachspaces* that are experienced and imagined every day.

Australian beaches have unique elements that emerge because of the geographical makeup of the continent. Australia is the largest island and the smallest continent and its coastline runs around the entire landmass, including Tasmania. In Australia, the beach is first and foremost a geographical border, a natural phenomenon and edge to the continent. Many sections are visually striking and made up of isolated beach landscapes. However, unlike a traditional 'island' beach (for instance, the beach as lifesaver that offers salvation in shipwreck stories), the Australian beach is a border space that keeps people out rather than draws people in. As such, its identity is not linked to concepts of 'island getaways' (more common in areas such as Indonesia or the Pacific Islands), rather it is an extension of the continent—often existing surprisingly close to urban or suburban areas (consider the famous Bondi Beach in Sydney and St Kilda in Melbourne). The beach as a term is taken for granted but the space of the geographical beach is quite specific and can be defined as a natural environment created in the space where the land meets the sea. It is accessible by land but more usually it is the connection and freedom of the ocean that is promoted rather than the continuing intersection with the land. Some cultures emphasise their connection to the ocean rather than the actual beach. Judy Rohrer writes in relation to Hawaii: 'perhaps the metaphor of borders is not so useful in Hawaii because borders suggest landedness. Perhaps, following native Pacific scholars, it would be more productive to think of Hawaii as nonterritorialised, as part of a region where the ocean, not the land, is paramount' (Rohrer 2010, pp. 15-16). In Australia, while the ocean is important it is the space that both joins and separates the ocean and the land that takes on cultural significance. However, Australia still has a complex understanding of this space that joins and separates the ocean. Its borders keep shifting and changing, and just as there are many beaches in Australia, there are also many *beachspaces* on these many beaches.

In Australia the beach may be a continuous geographical marker that runs around the entire nation but it is far more than one outlined geographical location. There are, despite the attempt to cluster them all under one brand as mentioned above, many types of beaches and each brings different experiences with it. Many beaches are far more

hospitable for travellers than others. For example, the water temperature of the ocean can be as varied as Bells Beach with a water temperature during January of 19°C whereas 2700 kilometres away in Far North Queensland the unpatrolled beach of Weipa South can have a water temperature of 29°C. One beach does not fit all requirements and desires. The northern beaches near Darwin are not considered safe for swimming because of the crocodiles (instead, they are often littered with people watching the sunset) and the southern beaches of Tasmania are usually more suited to picnicking than swimming because of the cool temperatures and isolated regions of coastline. The Cultural Studies Unit at the University of Sydney has counted 10,685 beaches in Australia (www.australia.gov.au). Some part of a beach is accessible in all states of the country (with the exception of the landlocked Australian Capital Territory), and all the major urban areas have beaches within easy reach. This plays a part, according to Leone Huntsman, of why the beach is so popular as a destination point in Australia: 'a combination of favourable climate, geography, accessibility, and—eventually—history and culture, have combined to enhance the ability and the inclination of Australians to respond to the lure of the beach' (2001, p. 11). The lure of the beach is, according to Douglas Booth, part of what makes the beach 'an integral part of the cultural envelope' (2001, p. 1). He goes on to list a number of artists, writers, and visual mediums that have attempted to capture beach scenes or motifs in their work. However, each beach does not have the same lure and even on the one beach there are many different lures.

The Lure of Where I am Not

Kathryn James writes, 'Beachscapes, often representing nature, work in a similar way to agricultural landscapes by evoking the literary pastoral, and particularly by association with the ideal of childhood: uncomplicated, natural, free, informal and physical' (2000, p. 12). These spaces may promote ideas of an uncomplicated existence but *beachspaces* are complicated and just as notions of the idealistic pastoral were confronted with harsh realities so too are the dwellers on the beach. What is also interesting about the *beachspace* in Australia is the space can be the space of idealised memories and feeling free but also the space of inadequacies, danger and fear. The existence of different spaces at the same time has led to the *beachspace* never fully being captured or contained in one visit. One experience may be considered a success, but a darker reality emerges at the same time causing a sense of unease rather than satisfaction. There is a strong sense of repetition associated with the beach for many Australians—consider for instance the tradition of families returning to the same holiday locations year after year. Recurring visits are needed to try to capture all the *beachspace* has to offer and to overcome the sense of not quite achieving the ultimate experience. However, this full capturing can never be attained thereby extending the desire for beach as destination or for new beaches being sought that will fulfil these different desires.

The idea of getting away establishes the *beachspace* as an escape, a space of difference from everyday life, and as such, a setting for self reflection before returning to work. Other people see the *beachspace* as representing a type of spirituality, a way to connect with something bigger than the self. The otherworldly, transcendent plane is brought to the earthly level. In other words, the *beachspace* can become a type of 'heaven on earth' (which instinctively allows for an awareness of 'hell on earth' and this occasionally manifests on the beach as well). The beach in this instance becomes a space that provides a connection with a higher power beyond our world. It is through this otherworldly transcendence that the 'Other' emerges. Lyn McCredden examines the concept of the sacred in her work *Luminous Moments* (2010), particularly investigating how the sacred can emerge in contemporary popular culture. Her understanding of the sacred, as a striving to understand human existence in some form (she notably does not link the sacred exclusively with religion), is useful when considering the beach. Firstly, McCredden's approach is welcoming of popular culture—regardless of its more frivolous or playful focus (2010, p. 12). And secondly, she notes the importance of 'being immersed in everyday life'. By examining the sacred at the beach, it is an acknowledgement of the otherworldliness significance of the everyday, assisting with making sense of the complexity of that space. This paper will now establish the initial dichotomy that presents the beach as either a safe haven of relaxation or a space of unprecedented, wild danger and awe-inspiring nature. However, the beach bleeds through this binary and instead also can become a place of transcendence that expands this opposition.

Safety and sanity

The beach has long been considered to have healing powers. English society during the 18th and 19th Centuries indulged in bathing in ocean water because it was considered to be a therapeutic activity. Alain Corbin in his book *The Lure of the Sea* (1994) finds that during the early 19th Century bathing in the sea was considered a medical therapy rather than a leisure activity. The beach was a healing space, both physically and psychologically. This was reinforced because of the fresh air so coveted during a time of pulmonary consumption and the emergence of the seaside resort with the advent of the railway system. People could travel to a seaside resort by train, have a weekend or day of bathing in sea water and return by train to begin work again. Holidays at the beach were taken because they were good for your body and mind. In Australia the health of beach rest was also emphasised. For instance, Dr William O'Reilly wrote in the 1873 *New South Wales Medical Gazette* that doctors should advise their patients of Manly's 'sanitary importance and advantages as a convalescent station' (cited in 'The Heart of Manly Heritage Walk', Manly Council, 1995). Booth writes, 'during the course of the twentieth century, millions of harried Australians flocked to the beach to escape the stresses, and complexities of industrial and post-industrial life' (2001, p. 3). This trend began to fade away slightly when Victorian society became more interested in the public decency problem of genders mixing than in

health issues. Bathing became difficult because of the strict moral codes that accompanied it. Bathers had to swim early in the morning or late in the evening or they had to use swimming booths. In Australia these problems were increased because early morning swimming before 6am or late evening swimming after 7pm was also the times when shark attacks would occur. Moral concerns and safety issues began to conflict. In 1903 the swimming laws were changed and daylight bathing was permitted on Manly beach. This was followed with all other major beaches in Australia also allowing daylight swimming. Although the primary focus on medicinal healing has shifted, it is still accepted that a holiday period at the beach is beneficial for personal health.

Physical benefits are not the only improvement in health that the beach can offer. The psychological benefits of relaxation and stress-relief are considered benefits to beach trips, perhaps even more important than the physical benefits. It is also a type of safe space. Of course, Australia is not the only country that emphasises this holistic cure. Hollywood in particular captures this tendency in many mainstream films: one example is *Casino Royale* (dir. Martin Campbell 2006), an instalment in the James Bond series that sees Bond recuperating in a beachside location after being tortured. It is implied that it is not only James Bond's body that is healing but also his mind; and importantly, he is also safe from external threats. Textual representations are one way of examining how this understanding of the beach has infiltrated popular culture. Robert Drewe, the well known Australian author, in his autobiographical story 'Buffalo Grass' describes a moment as a boy that helped him connect with the environment in a meaningful way for the first time. He describes the scene using the senses:

The buffalo grass under my back, the warmth of the sun, the sky's clarity, the self-satisfied ruckus of the magpies, the aroma of the Sunday roast wafting from the kitchen: this place where we were now living—at that moment at least—was perfect. (Drewe and Kinsella 2010, p. 22)

It is a moment that Drewe says resonated with him, that it was a 'valuable feeling, one worth remembering' (2010, p. 22). He describes it as a 'meeting of body and spirit and environment' (2010, p. 22), and a moment that allowed the stresses of everyday life (in this instance, a mean school teacher) to fade into insignificance. Even for a young boy, the power of the coastal landscape and the healing possibilities of the sensory experiences were unmistakable, and stuck with him throughout his life. The meeting of the body, spirit, and environment in this story is an example of the *beachspace* (both the lived experience and the physical space), as a safe space. However, this sense of wholeness cannot last.

It is not only children who benefit from a sensory connection with the *beachspace* environment. Helen Garner's short story 'Postcards from Surfers' (1989) is another example of the healing properties of the beach. After a relationship breakup, the unnamed protagonist goes to

the Gold Coast in Queensland to visit her aging parents. The familiarity of the family holiday and the beauty of the coastal environment help her regain her momentum and begin the process of moving on. The protagonist writes postcards to her previous partner but ultimately fails to send them, instead throwing them in the bin outside the post office. Rather than a failure, this instead gives the impression that her equilibrium is beginning to return. The stay at the beach, allowing for an immersion in 'the moment' as Huntsman (2001) suggests, brings a new perspective and distance from the heartbreak; it is something that could not be achieved in the city. One of Australia's most awarded authors, Tim Winton, uses the sensory imagery of the beach to great effect in many of his works. Winton himself is open about the role the beach played in his upbringing and he suggests the beach resonates with him. In his autobiographical memoir *Land's Edge*, he discusses arriving home after being away for some time, writing: 'Call it jet lag, cabin fever, but I am almost in tears. There is nowhere else I'd rather be, nothing else I'd rather be doing' (Winton 1993, p. 3). Similarly, in his novels, Winton's characters often use the beach as a touchstone, an environment that provides a type of relief. Bruce Pike, the protagonist from Tim Winton's *Breath* (2008), uses the beach—and in particular the surf—as a way of regaining his perspective. The waves represent a place of safety and comfort for him, even as an aging man and after his life has not gone the way he once thought it would. Surfing allows him to regain a sense of control over his life, which at times escapes him in his career as an ambulance officer. In this instance, the beach is a reprieve from his regular life and his inability to control death. The coast is the sanctuary, providing a place to return when the waves are rough or unforgiving.

The beach is most significant in its ability to represent an 'Other'—something that is far away from the realities and hardships of the everyday. However, as Drewe's story mentioned above (2010) suggests, the beach is not just an escape: it is a complicated setting of memory and emotion. The *beachspace* therefore becomes an active space of past, present and future memories. It is beyond time and linear concepts. The *beachspace* is more than just an entity in opposition to the city. Instead, it draws on the experiences of the city in conjunction with those of nature and allows a healing to occur but it is a healing that is only ever temporary. Author Frank Moorhouse writes humorously that Surfers Paradise in Queensland is where he travels to quietly suffer through his nervous breakdowns:

When having a nervous collapse, I would load a bag with books, videos and bourbon and fly to a highrise luxury hotel on the Gold Coast, draw the blinds, lie in bed, call room service, read, stare at the ceiling fan, watch movies and listen to the breakers in the dead of night (2011, p. 17).

The beach is not purely a space of contemplation and its healing properties are complex. It is not merely a placid environment, and it is also never solely a reflective space. Instead it is a shifting landscape, with a more multifaceted role to play because of the intrinsic

relationship between outer and inner beauty. The physical beauty of the beach inspires positive wellbeing, particularly in regards to mental health.

The Emergence of Fear

It is clear that the beach can be a haven—and this is the image often actively utilised in tourism campaigns. And yet, the natural health and safety properties of the beach are frequently contrasted with the inherent sinister elements that the beach may contain, and this juxtaposition is held within the beachscape itself (Huntsman 2001). Huntsman's phrase 'serene and sinister' (p. 146) is an apt one in relation to the *beachspace*. The sinister elements of the beach can still be natural—yet they are not the parts of the beach that people enjoy and they can become sites of fear. Sharks, bluebottles, stonefish, sea snakes, sea lice and drowning are a few of the natural dangers that beachgoers fear. Uniquely to Fraser Island off the Queensland coast, there is also a significant issue associated with dingoes as there have been a small number of fatal dingo attacks, prompting calls for culls. Frantic media coverage frequently surrounds dingo and shark attacks on Australian beaches. Helen Tiffin, in regards to the shark, calls this the 'shadow of the shark' and suggests that Australians have an inherent fear of the animal that results in 'disproportionately widespread fear and sensationalist media coverage' (Tiffin 2009, p. 77). Statistically, shark attacks (especially those that result in death) are very rare and Tiffin argues that:

paradoxically it is actually because shark deaths are so rare that the image of the shark as a malign, inscrutable force, metonymic of the universe itself, persists. Like death, the shark's unheralded attack can occur at any time, and like death itself the shark seems cold and remote, erupting into life from 'nowhere' to carry the victim off. (2009, p. 80)

Recently, technology has been developed that lessens some of these natural fears. An iPhone application called 'BeachSafe' was developed in 2011 and was sponsored by the Lifesaving Association of Australia. The application lists information and photographs about a beach's amenities, surf and swimming conditions, known hazards, and UV ratings. There is also the Coastalwatch website that provides 'surfcams' as a way of providing current information about surf conditions, beach conditions and weather. There are also innovations such as coastguard helicopters being used for beach surveillance watching out for troubled swimmers and sharks. However, it is not only the fear of the natural that causes unease among beachgoers. There is the fear of not fitting in or not looking the part which leads to buying the 'right' equipment and getting a tan as quickly as possible, setting up a type of false egalitarianism of the beach (Booth 2001, Ellison 2014). There is also the more sinister fear of crime. The beach is an interesting location for criminal activity; it can provide isolation and is a place where people are often not closely watched as it is the ocean that is considered the most pressing danger and not the sand. Therefore, people spend their time

looking outwards towards the ocean and what it may be hiding rather than looking at what surrounds them. One of Australia's most baffling crimes occurred on Glenelg Beach in Adelaide, South Australia on Australia Day in 1966. The Beaumont children were taken by an unknown person and they have never been found. The invisibility of the ordinary is a chilling aspect of beach crime that disturbs the serene setting. Another haunting disappearance that has become embedded in Australian mythology is the disappearance of the then Prime Minister Harold Holt in 1967. It is interesting to consider that these disappearances are so frightening because of the inherent uncertainty of what happened. Imagine the fear of an unknown shape in the water; the sudden appearance of a tsunami that swells from nowhere only to disappear once more—the uncertainty and temporality of these incidents is a key component of what makes them terrifying.

What these examples show is that the Australian beach exposes itself to be too complex to be captured by monolithic understandings of a 'safe haven' or a monstrous landscape. In fact, considering the beach as a monolithic, mythic space causes problematic interpretations. In 2005, Cronulla beach in New South Wales became the setting of violent race riots. Supposedly inspired by an attack on two lifesavers, the ensuing riots pitted Anglo-Australians against Lebanese Australians and made international headlines. Slogans such as 'Aussie Pride' and 'We grew here, you flew here' were painted on signs, bodies, and the sand itself. The migrants in this instance were labelled as 'un-Australian', which allowed for an immediate othering of the Lebanese Australians in comparison to the 'real' Anglo-Australians. This horrific situation caused significant upheaval in Australia at the time, especially considering the supposed multicultural environment popularised by the Australian government. Thus the myth of the egalitarian, monolithic beach is an illusion, consistently challenged by representations of culture in fictional texts and real life events. An example of this can be seen in the 1984 film *Coolangatta Gold*, directed by Igor Auzins. The film established the Coolangatta Gold, a now ongoing iron man event established and run by Surf Live Saving Australia, as the climax to the narrative about the competition between two brothers. *Coolangatta Gold* features significant scenes of the beach, with sweeping shots showcasing the golden sands and spectacular water. The iron man event was held as a real race, allowing the filmmaker to capture the intensity of the competition in the sound of the squeaking sand and the lapping waves. And yet, the film did not perform strongly in the box office—either domestically or internationally as intended (the film was released as *The Gold and The Glory* in the United States). The attempts to capture the beach, especially one as iconic as Surfers Paradise on the Gold Coast, was unsuccessful—arguably because of the film's insistence on portraying the beach as a monolithic, beautiful space. The beach is idealised and simplistic and does not reveal the complexities inherent to the space. In comparison, a film like *Romper Stomper* (dir. Geoffrey Wright 1992)—a film unlikely to be considered a beach text as it predominantly features suburban Melbourne—includes a climactic scene in the shallow water of a beach on the Great Ocean Road that reveals tensions between the concepts of safety and danger. The fight,

culminating in protagonist Hando's death, is watched by a group of Japanese tourists from the coastline. This ugly scene more accurately showcases the danger of considering the beach as a monolithic site instead of embracing the complexities of the Other in this space.

It is on some occasions, such as this scene in *Romper Stomper*, that the term *beachspace* becomes a more appropriate one for representing the Australian beach as a place that enables a connection with something higher than the earthly plane. It is an energetic space that combines sensory and emotional experiences, providing a type of haven that is not always found elsewhere. Huntsman (2001) likens the feeling to what can be associated with religion. For some people the beach can provide answers in a spiritual sense. This spirituality represents a connection with the ocean and nature in ways that cannot be achieved in urban landscapes. This natural fear inherent in the space is one of awe and menace rather than menace alone. It is this aspect of the beach that will be explored in the next section.

Transcending the Borders

Spirituality is a broad term that covers many meanings for different people. In its most general sense, it refers to the concept of some form of belief system—one that may or may not fit within institutionalised religions, but instead acknowledges that there is something more or higher than the human race. There is an essentialist element to the physical natural environment of the beach that easily allows it to transcend humanity, creating a space for people to feel connected with something higher than themselves. It is the ultimate example of a search for inner beauty, and it can be found in conjunction with the physical beauty of the beach. Places that are considered mystical are often associated with the natural landscape. An example is Uluru, a place long considered to have a significant spiritual presence (in particular for Indigenous Australians). The beach also allows for a spiritual experience, which is considerably different to a religious experience. Although for some, religion and spirituality are inherently linked, the spirituality that nature inspires is beyond institutionalisation. Sean Redmond suggests that the beach in global cinema is clearly linked with the sense of transcendence: 'the death of one self can lead to the (re)birth of another' (2013, p. 716). He uses examples from a number of films, such as *The 400 Blows* (dir. Francois Truffaut 1959) and *Rumblefish* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola 1984), noting how these films use what he believes is a 'standard cinematic trope', in which the protagonist or central characters stand facing the ocean, 'on the cusp of their own negation [...] The beach and its shoreline is the physical limit of existence, one can literally go no further; it is a final place for melancholic introspection and reevaluation' (2013, p. 717). This can be seen in Australian examples as well, such as *Little Fish* (dir. Rowan Woods 2005), which sees Tracey close the film on the beach, gazing over the ocean in a complex expression of rebirth that sits uncomfortably close to death.

This concept of the land as a place of departure from the physical world is a recognisable trope in cinema. For instance, Graeme Turner (1993) discusses how the landscape can act beyond a narrative function in Australian cinema to introduce a sense of the spiritual. Using *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (dir. Peter Weir 1975), he claims, 'the land operates as a source of meaning, offering a kind of spirituality or significance that is explicitly absent from society' (1993, p. 29). Another example is Peter Weir's *The Last Wave* (1977), which Jonathan Rayner (2000, pp. 44-45) suggests is an urban Gothic film. *The Last Wave* features an apocalyptic wave, one predicted by Aboriginal mythology. The film hinges on a juxtaposition between the lawyer protagonist David and a group of Aboriginal men charged with murder, as well as the juxtaposition of the natural and the urban. The natural, most obviously represented by the enormous wave, is intrinsically linked with the spiritual as well—albeit an Indigenous spirituality. Specifically, the final scene sees David emerge on the beach, overwhelmed by the harsh sunlight after his experience through the sewers. The beach is a space for him to wash and renew himself—yet in the final moments, it also becomes the bringer of the apocalypse (it is unclear whether this is real or imagined) through the appearance of the enormous titular wave. Rayner also aligns *The Last Wave* with science fiction, 'an unfathomable menace emanating from the natural world ... and the spiritual vacuity of modern life' (2000, p. 45). In this example, as in Turner's discussion of *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, the landscape is the victor of the film and this is indicative of the 'innate and obdurate strength and hostility of this world' (Turner 1993, p. 29). It is important to note, in this example, the separation of the landscape from society; the spiritual experience is most easily identified in natural settings, distinct from the urban cityscape. The beach then can also become a type of spiritual setting for Australians thanks to its inescapably natural environment. Most beaches (with perhaps the exception of the few man-made ones in existence, and the glorified urban beachscapes such as Surfers Paradise) do have some element of naturalness that remains, and it is this that is of importance here.

Spiritual connections with the beach are not a new phenomenon. In the Romantic era, 'capacity on a wild day to arouse sensations of power and awe of God' allowed for the focus to be centred on the 'self' (Ford 2009, p. 21). This Romantic appeal of the beach 'played a significant role in the shaping of twentieth century Australian beach cultures' (Ford 2009, p. 21). The natural beach then creates an experience for the self to transcend the immediate and move into a higher space. This modernist concept of the self is an understandable extension of the accepted ideas of the medicinal benefits of the ocean. The miracle of health that the seaside could provide also generated spiritual experiences in the face of such natural beauty. In Europe the Romantics were more focused on mountainscapes as evidence of power and awe but in Australia, the ocean provides a more accessible and similarly natural geography. The gaze onto the ocean is a crucial element, and Ford believes that the 'spectator's response to the sea' was the important part of the appeal to the Romantics (2009, p. 22). Although the Romantic era has passed, the concepts behind their

engagement with the ocean still linger, and can be seen in more contemporary representations.

Huntsman explores the ritual of an ocean baptism. She is not necessarily referring to a religious occasion, but rather the first time that a baby is exposed to the ocean:

Gently and gradually the baby is introduced to the water, the parent watching the baby's face and body in order to monitor and enjoy the baby's response; and if it is positive, if the baby squeals with delight rather than shock or fear, the parent walks further into the water, the baby becoming accustomed to the movement and depth (2001, p. 185).

Huntsman finds that an integral part of childhood in Australia takes place on the beach. She highlights the importance of nature and human existence being at each end of the spectrum in order to create this spiritual meaning. However, she adds that it is perhaps not possible to find 'spiritual nourishment in solitary wilderness' (2001, p. 188). Instead, she wonders if the constant division between the natural and the urban (or spiritualism and materialism) is actually detrimental. Huntsman here is suggesting that it is crucial to accept the beach as not something separate to ourselves, which evokes the concept again of the *beachspace*. This space becomes entwined with memory, imagination, ritual and everyday lived realities.

Tim Winton suggests that absorption in nature becomes a type of conduit for spiritual connection. He discusses 'freediving' in *Land's Edge*, which is the act of diving as deep as possible underwater and staying there, immersed, for as long as possible: 'You wilfully forget to breathe; you sidestep the impulse and your thinking thins out to the moment at hand [...] It is a religious feeling' (1993, p. 59). Throughout the text Winton is open about his almost fanatical relationship with the ocean. For him, it is not merely a place he lived or visited and it is more than a setting in which to learn to surf. Instead, it is what 'got me through adolescence, pure and simple' (1993, p. 59). He describes surfing and freediving as an escape from reality and a better alternative than alcohol or drugs. In particular, he mentions the feeling that being underwater and pushing the body's limits brings:

On the seabed, or gliding midwater with everything sharp and in focus and my body aching with pleasant, urgent hunger, I understand the Christian mystics for moments at a time. I too feel swallowed, miniscule, ready. The diver, like the monk, however, contemplates on borrowed time. Sooner or later you have the surface to return to. (1993, p. 59)

This notion of returning to the surface, or normal life, is significant and such an integral part of the *beachspace* for a local or a visitor: there is always a finite end to the beach trip. The spiritual connection with nature cannot be constant and more contact must be made.

It has been well documented that the natural beauty of the beach setting represents a type of spirituality for surfers. Booth (2001) suggests that the 1960s began a new, modern era of surfing. It was influenced by international events of the time, such as the Cuban missile crisis in 1963. The increase in civil rights protests and a shift away from consumer cultures was embraced by the surf culture. The concept of 'soul-surfing' came into existence and 'rejected high consumption, materialism and competition' (Booth 2001, p. 113). As a result, surfing became less contained by sporting paradigms and instead became a form of self-expression. Although since the 1960s this has shifted somewhat (surfing competitions are alive and well in today's society, highly publicised and well attended nationally and internationally), there remains an element of this in contemporary surfing representations. The surfing scene is frequently portrayed as a community that appreciates nature at its base level. Fiske, Hodge, and Turner illustrate two points of particular relevance about surfing: the first is the heavily gendered behaviour many surfers engage in, and the other is the almost primitive connotations associated with surfing when they discuss the associated language, in particular, the use of 'hunting'. 'Hunting is where man first denotes his mastery over nature [...] it is seen as a natural activity; man hunting for food, hunting for females, hunting for waves' (1987, p. 69). However, this idea of dominance over nature is interesting, especially in contrast to Huntsman's ideas of sensory immersion. Fiske, Hodge, and Turner do suggest that the meaning of surfing 'is to be found in the body, in physical sensation, and in the pleasure that it produces' (1987, p. 69). Thus, surfing is a spiritual type of experience because of its direct link to a natural environment that is untamed and free of the symbols of colonisation found more commonly on the beach. It is the surfers themselves who are the conduit for the transcendental experience. They provide a means of interacting with nature at a base level when they wander the waves, letting nature guide them. It is an example of a connection with something beyond themselves. There does appear to be a complexity, however, in the concept that the surfer is both exerting dominance over nature and yet also allowing nature to work through the surfer as a type of conduit.

The surfer tends to be an unobtrusive figure on the beach, frequently spending hours without coming out of the water, and often blends in with the natural elements. It is easy to see the significance of the ocean to surfers. This spiritual element becomes apparent in surf funerals (dramatised in Nick Enright's play, *A Property of the Clan*, for instance). Yet the beach itself, the strip of sand and the shallow water just off the coast, is primarily used as a gateway to the ocean. It is not bound by the same spiritualistic rituals of the ocean. Rather, it is a place that must be travelled through in order for the surfers to reach their goal. Those in the ocean usually ignore the beach—a distant horizon that is of no consequence until the surfing is completed. The beach section becomes of less importance to the surfers the more experienced they are, representing a tie to the land that cannot ever be completely severed. Yet, as a gateway to the ocean, the beach retains a high level of significance for the surfer as it is the path that must be crossed to

reach their destination. When they come out of the ocean they must again walk across this border and their experience is finished and cannot again occur until they go through the entire ritual once more.

Conclusion: Blurring the Boundaries

The physical beauty of the Australian beach landscape is one that cannot be ignored: it is idealised and mythologised in representations and advertisements both domestically and internationally. Yet it is not merely the physical beauty that makes the Australian beach a place of significance. The term *beachspace*, as inspired by Soja's Thirdspace and Massey's spatial propositions, is a more useful term in capturing the inherent complexities, dynamics, changeability and plurality of the Australian beach. Rather than considering the space as a monolithic site of mythic beauty, or a monstrous, dangerous landscape, the *beachspace* is rather a space wandered by many. It has the ability to transform, reveal, and transcend beyond the worldly level. It is something beyond the limited binary of mythic and the ordinary: it is something more natural, physical, and emotional. It is a transcendental *beachspace* that is a combination of the everyday, lived experience of the beach and the mythic, conceived representations of the beach. The beach as a space is taken for granted by many researchers and is not afforded enough serious consideration. However, it appears that the complexities and tensions of this space are being enacted in daily life by many different people. As representations of this space continue to increase, so too do the pluralities and multiplicities of meaning, furthering the need for ongoing investigation of the Australian *beachspace*.

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