NATURAL HISTORIES: NATURE, HISTORY, AND 'REGIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS' ON THE GOLD COAST

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Introduction

In an essay in a collection titled *Sense of Place*, Polly Stewart makes claims for the importance and specificity of 'regional consciousness' which, she argues, 'crosses all ethnic, class, and economic lines' (74). She advances 'the simple principle that *a region's consciousness of itself defines the region*' and that 'regional consciousness bears no necessary relation to artificial administrative lines imposed by governments, [being] less a matter of geography than it is a state of mind' (74). This interesting claim prompts some of the speculation in this paper. I am beginning from some rather different assumptions, though—assumptions that regional identities are fluid, multiple and contested, and that, in some cases, 'geography' may have a lot to do with 'state of mind'. This paper concerns itself with one specific kind of regional consciousness—a tourist identity. This kind of identity is, by definition, consciously worked upon and promoted, with or without the acceptance or agreement of the local inhabitants, or for that matter, of tourists.

In Australia, the construction and promotion of civic or regional identity for tourist purposes is frequently effected via natural features, with regional naming and promotions often drawing on the incorporation of such features into the sphere of production (e.g. 'wheat country', 'cattle country', 'wine growing regions'). Many of the regions so identified are increasingly working also as tourist sites. The crisis of traditional agriculture and the growth of tourism to Australia's most profitable industry have no doubt played a role in the push to create, promote and reify distinct, recognisable and marketable regional signifiers.

In this paper, I will examine some of the discursive regimes through which Gold Coast history has been constructed and current tourist promotions executed. I am interested here in the processes by which some narratives become naturalised as truth, and—in the case of the Gold Coast—in the monumental tenor of that truth. In particular, I want to consider how figures of the female and the Aboriginal are mobilised within prevalent local mythologies to justify and perpetuate modernist ideologies of progress and development and to efface questions of exploitation, but how, in so doing, they also inevitably show the tensions and fissures in such effacements and justifications. This paper is thus a critique of a particular instance of monumental history-making, but one that does not want to lose sight of the richness and

fascination of these regional mythologies nor of the possibilities for, and possible implications of, ironic or politicised reception of them by locals, tourists and academics.

Aboriginality and Myths of Origin on the Gold Coast

Like any space, the Gold Coast region has undergone a series of historical (re)constitutions, usually recounted as a series of transitions—from the home of the Kombumerri tribe, to a centre of the early timber, cotton and sugar industries, finally to reach its apogee as 'the cradle of Australia's present day tourist industry' (McRobbie 17)—an already loaded chronology, I note. Contemporary white mythologies pinpoint the turn to tourism and the concomitant renamings of region and suburbs as the key moment of the Gold Coast's ontological reconstitution. Thus, the 'modern' Gold Coast is seen to have begun with the tourist industry—which was stirring in the 1920s-1930s (McRobbie 156). Gold Coast celebrity Fred Lang, the Man in the Red Hat, claims to have coined the name 'Gold Coast' in the mid 1950s (*Sydney Morning Herald* 3 October 1978, 3). Myths of origin rely on such namings; the town's transmogrification from simple 'Elston' to the sublime 'Surfers Paradise' was a long battle, brought about largely by the canny manoeuvring of the Gold Coast 'pioneers', especially Jim Cavill (McRobbie 45-66). It was bitterly resisted by many in the town, and equally bitterly resented by the residents of the more prosaically named Southport and Coolangatta. Naming is important mythological work, as such Gold Coast suburbs as Miami, Palm Beach, Rio Vista, Sorrento and the Isle of Capri make clear.

The naturalisation of one particular history is, of course, crucial to the development of the kinds of coherent identities deemed necessary for tourism, but always involves the silencing or side-stepping—deliberate or otherwise—of 'other' histories. In the case of the Gold Coast, promotional material and popular histories commonly sanctify the region's modern status as holiday resort in acts of retrospective history-making that reify the association between the natural world, exploitation and pleasure in such a way as to reduce Aboriginal history to the precursor of the region's 'true' white destiny and to construct the natural world and Aboriginal people as fitting and comparable objects of white (male) desire. To give just one example, local chronicler and self-styled 'pioneer' Alexander McRobbie writes:

> Even thousands of years before the white man, the Gold Coast region was a pleasure resort to the Aborigines. A kind of rest and recreation centre where the tribes from the mountain regions behind the Coast came to have a change of diet and fatten up on the plentiful crayfish, crab and bugs. It made a break from wild chestnuts, bunya nuts and wallaby. (27)

The 'real' Gold Coast thus began with its white history; as an advertising feature in the *Sunday Mail* put it, 'The history of the Gold Coast goes back to 1885' (14 December 1980, 53). Nowadays, most Gold Coast media promotions include some mention of Aboriginality, but usually framed through the safe screen of history.

Pioneers, Forefathers and the Development of the Natural World

So who did make the Gold Coast? Well, if the chapter headings of McRobbie's multicultural history of the Gold Coast (which begins with captain Cook and mentions Aboriginals only incidentally) can be taken as a guide—'the explorers, surveyors and timber men', 'the tenacious men of the soil', 'the hoteliers and accommodation providers', 'the caterers and entertainers' and 'the civic activists and memorable people'. This narrative progression from primary industry to tourism and development makes use of a prevalent mythological framework: struggle, individual enterprise and the successful making and marking of territory.

Such mythological frameworks can be seen as an example of what Nietzsche called 'monumental history', a kind of history that engages with the past via a belief in individual greatness and via the invocation of past heroes to inspire present strength. For Nietzsche, such a conception of the past relies upon a faith in humanity and on human progress. From monumental history, the 'man of the present' learns 'that the greatness that once existed was

in any event once *possible* and may thus be possible again' (69). I want to contend that even monumental histories—despite their grandiose nature—are created and developed not just in processes of 'official', authored history-making, but also in the more chaotic, less controlled, processes of everyday life. Clusters of everyday phenomena, both 'official' and 'popular'—museums, theme parks, newspaper reports, advertising, public gossip, holiday photos—are part of the panoply of institutional sites and everyday practices through and in which monumental history may be constituted.

In both official civic rhetoric and popular histories, modern Gold Coast history is commonly constructed via a hagiography of contemporary developers—migrants, mostly, who made their fortunes by (re)making themselves and the Gold Coast. The Gold Coast specialises in rags to riches tales, and there is a plentiful list in local mythology of battlers who have made it big, arriving in Australia with 'next to nothing in [their] pocket[s]' (*Gold Coast Bulletin* 4 December 1984, 1). The 'prototype self-made man' (McRobbie 48) was Jim Cavill; born into poverty in England, he ran away from home at the age of nine, came to Australia, joined a circus, ended up owning it, prospected for diamonds, swam the English Channel, and made his name as the founding father of Surfers Paradise (48). On the Gold Coast, the entrepreneurial spirit, despite traditional Australian scepticism, seems to be almost unreservedly celebrated. In the grand way of monumental history, 'official' signifiers—place names, landmarks, statues and business names—serve as testimony to these white, male pioneers and founders and to the fantasy of class (and ethnicity?) exogamy.

The natural environment is the basis of the Gold Coast's tourist image, and Gold Coast histories are commonly constructed in relation to it. The development ethos that constitutes the Gold Coast as both material and signifying space is mobilised within not altogether compatible discursive regimes: on one hand, discourses extolling the originary status of the natural; on the other, discourses of conquest and improvement. The former is suggested by the prevalence of familiar tropes about tropicality, paradise and beauty, while the latter is suggested by a rhetoric of subjugation associated especially, but not only, with the earlier periods of Gold Coast tourist development. In such rhetoric the physical changes wrought in the landscape are the concrete image (literally) of human doggedness and daring.

The foundations of this rather dated trope of the natural as something to be subdued have presumably been unsettled somewhat since the rise of environmental movements. In any case, on the Gold Coast it sits rather uneasily with the touristic evocations of natural beauty, although stories about heroic individuals provide one way in which these two tropes can be made to sit a little more comfortably together. The contradiction between the natural as the original and the true and the natural as something to be conquered may find uneasy reconciliation in discourses of betterment, which work on the Gold Coast on a grand scale, underlying and justifying the ethos of development that has fuelled the region's growth, and working alongside a typical valorisation of individual entrepreneurship. Newspaper reports throughout the Gold Coast's period of expansion resonate with the rhetoric of improvement, with beaches, canal estates, golf courses and so on all justified in terms of an improvement on nature (my favourite being Bruce Small's 1972 assertion that 'the shadows thrown on the beach by tall buildings gave people the option of enjoying the beach with or without ultra violet rays' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 8 November 1972, 11).

The discourses and practices of subjugation are of course deeply gendered. It is easy (perhaps too easy) to gender those phallic pillars that strive to outgrow each other along the coastal strip—monuments to an ideology of progress imaged in both a linear and vertical fashion, marching further and further along the coastline and higher and higher into the sky. In 1971, Gold Coast hero Bruce Small was described hyperbolically as remaking his territory, with all the bravado of a great conqueror and the precision of a highly-skilled surgeon: 'As a good general isn't afraid to lose ground to gain a tactical advantage, so Bruce Small made deep incisions into his land to get the water in. He built canals and changed the course of the river' (*Sydney Morning Herald* 7 June 1971, 15). The epic scope of this Homeric and rather Freudian simile is typical of Gold Coast history-making.

'Civilisation', Guilt and Identity: The Return of the Repressed

Myths of origin like those I have analysed are, of course, narratives about the coming of civilisation. I want to turn, now, to another such narrative—Freud's 'fantastic' (141) hypothesis about totemism and the dawn of civilisation. According to his hypothesis, an originary clan of brothers kill and devour their despotic father, an act that culminates in a moment of ritual identification—the totem meal: 'in the act of devouring [the violent primal father, the brothers] accomplished their identification with him, and each one of them acquired a portion of his strength' (142). With the death of the father, the patriarchal horde becomes the fraternal clan. The mixed feelings of triumph and remorse are reconciled, according to the hypothesis, in the phenomenon of 'defered obedience' (143), whereby the totem animal becomes a father substitute, engaged in a contradictory belief system: the killing of the animal is generally forbidden, yet its killing becomes a festive occasion, both celebrated and mourned (141-43). The sons renounce the fruits of their guilty deed by resigning their claim to the father's females (143). For Freud, these 'two fundamental taboos of totemism' correspond to the 'two repressed wishes of the Oedipus complex' (143).

Freud's narrative participates in as well as explains the paternal/fraternal culture. Carole Pateman reads the narrative as a social contract story, and one that forms part of the larger conflict between patriarchalism and contract theory. Patriarchalism was a political model that used the patriarchal family as a model for social rule; the father/king was held to rule supreme and sons were considered naturally subject to their fathers (*Disorder of Women* 36). Contract theory contested this, arguing for a distinction between the family and the polity; sons were civil equals to their fathers, and 'paternal and political rule were distinct' (*Disorder of Women* 36).

As Pateman points out, the victory of the contract theorists over the patriarchalists is not the triumph of universal freedom. Yet this is the way it is usually painted in political theory, where the dispute is mythologised as the birth of civil society, just as Freud's myth claims to be about the birth of 'civilisation' (*Disorder of Women* 41). The dispute cannot be a universal triumph, since each political model, and the contest between them, is situated within a set of patriarchal assumptions, notably taking for granted the subjection of women. Man's sexual right over woman must logically *precede* the right of fatherhood (*Disorder of Women* 38), and this right remains inviolate in both patriarchalism and social contract theory. Patriarchalism subsumed sexual rule under paternal rule; social contract theorists proclaimed male sexual right as natural (*Disorder of Women* 39). Thus, Freud's 'universal' tale is a narrative of the triumph of fraternity over paternity, not liberty over despotism. As Pateman says, in the Freudian narrative, civilised society begins with 'the deed'—that is, parricide; it remains silent about the rape that logically must precede the murder (*Sexual Contract* 105).

On the Gold Coast, the symbolic residue of this unspoken crime returns via the metaphorics that permeate representations of the region and on which, indeed, the area's tourist reputation is founded. The exploitation of virgin pleasures frequently returns in Gold Coast discourses and politics as a cause of guilt and shame. An unease at what 'they've' done to the Gold Coast can be seen in some media representations of Surfers Paradise, in which Surfers is depicted (unsurprisingly) as a woman—a 'tart' whose virgin beauty has been exploited by the white male founders. A newspaper article entitled 'Surfers—A Bit of a Tart, but We Still Love You' makes this image pattern explicit, beginning: 'Frowsy, blowsy, garish, lairish. Surfers Paradise, I love you', and ending: 'They love her as she is, purple hair, green eye shadow, orange cheeks. A bit of an old tart really....The strumpet called Surfers is looking ever so nice for the summer season' (*Courier-Mail* 24 December 1983, 25). This imagery is by no means exceptional, as these headlines show:

'Brassy Tart with an Unspoilt Heart' (*Australian* 1 November 1975, Weekend 4, 24)
'Surfers—Still the Same High-Kicking Showgirl as Usual' (*Courier-Mail* 28 March 1984, 3)

Surfers as the cheap actress with a heart of gold ('the leading lady of the Gold Coast', 'a shabby, fading showgirl' [*Courier-Mail* 28 March 1984, 3]) is an appealing trope. Surfers

becomes a kind of nineteenth century 'fallen woman' figure, with words like 'tainted', 'tarnished', 'shabby', and 'spoilt' frequently being used by the media to describe and judge her. In some reports, her 'cleanliness' is discussed,[1] amid worries that once her charms begin to fade, she will soon be 'dumped' (*Courier-Mail* 30 December 1988, 12). The open and shameless tart, 'the front window of the Gold Coast' (*Courier-Mail* 28 March 1984, 3), serves as a metaphor through which guilt or uncertainty over the development or exploitation of natural bounty can be explored. (These images are also clearly related to the gendering of mass culture, famously suggested by Andreas Huyssen.)

This imagery is redolent with sentimentalised regret, which sometimes turns to a fear that the subjugated natural might return to destroy the region. This fear is often expressed in hyperbolic castration imagery; the Gold Coast, it seems, with its phallic towers built on the swamp at the edge of the sea, has never fully rid itself of the terror of being reabsorbed. Newspaper items record beaches being 'sucked away' (Headline, *Courier-Mail* 10 April 1984, 6) or 'killer quicksand' that swallows up holiday makers and even horses (*Daily Sun* 2 June 1984, 4). 'High-rise crumble a "grave concern"', warns the headline (*Sunday Mail* 3 June 1984, 9).

Quasi-biblical undertones sweep like cross currents through the psycho-discursive landscape of the Gold Coast. The sin city, built on sand, must surely one day destroy itself. Punishment is nigh: 'The Gold Coast would be one of the first places in the world to be affected by rising sea levels caused by the greenhouse effect', predicted the *Courier-Mail* 26 May 1989, 39), while 'Expert warns on Gold Coast "destruction"'.[2] Similarly, the 1989 Newcastle earthquake sent psychological shock waves north of the border:

> The Gold Coast will crumble into a pit of devastation if struck with the same force which hit Newcastle in the earthquake tragedy of 1989, say scientists....[Geologist Ted Brennan] said the Gold Coast was built on the 'lowest strength of materials', which has resulted in unconsolidated foundations....'Be prepared, what else can I say?' [says Dr Jack Rynn of the University of Queensland]. (*Gold Coast Bulletin* 25 March 1991, 7)

The symbolic force of this narrative (monuments to greed, constructed shoddily on sand) is not to be underestimated.

Such fears surface along with moralistic narratives about the corrupting power of money. Wealth occasionally attracts its merited punishment—again, often via the trope of the natural as threatening Other. Occasional shark attacks within the waters of the canal estates—'rogue sharks' breaking free of their 'natural' place to terrify quiet residential 'streets'—disturb the normally tranquil relation between nature and the suburbs. Similarly, the notorious 'Death Alley', the site of many drownings on the Coast, is 'no spot to take a dip', according to the *Sunday Sun*: 'Death Alley is a treacherous stretch of water lurking in the shade of millionaire row at Surfers Paradise. A doctor drowned there last weekend....Death Alley stretches along Surfers Paradise esplanade fronting some of the Gold Coast's most exclusive motels and units' (2 March 1980, 4).

It seems to me that such narratives are consonant with the threat implicitly contained within metaphors associating the natural with an irrational feminine. For underneath the modernist ideology of progress that characterises the region lies a fear that the region lacks an identity, or that its 'true' identity, its natural heart, has been vandalised. This is evinced in a persistent public worrying about the Gold Coast's identity, especially in relation to the often more potent semiotic pull of other places, especially the US. Such debates have surfaced on and off for more than 30 years, triggered by 'very serious calamities' such as being left out of the 1991 Reader's Digest *Atlas of the World* (*Gold Coast Bulletin* 27 March 1991, 10).

Conclusion

So, these gendered, class-bound myths circulate in ways that help build regional and national histories and have helped to effect the Gold Coast's transition from family holiday destination to international tourist resort. In white history-making and promotions, they

provide a framework that allows for the exploration of the guilt associated with the displacement of Aboriginal people, and the ambiguities associated with the notion of 'using' the land. 'Use' figures both as a positivity and as a cause for guilt—as creation and destruction, the making of territory and the spoiling of essence. I sense in some of these metaphors and mythologies an unease, a destabilisation of the coding of development as the desirable supplement to the abundant but inchoate potentiality of a 'feminine' natural state.

Following on from theorisations of the destabilisation of the category of nation in postmodernity, I wonder whether it might be true to say that such varied factors as Aboriginal land rights politics, environmental activism and the crisis in the rural sector are rendering the idea of a monolithic regional identity less and less plausible in contemporary Australia. Perhaps the ambiguities in the kinds of shifting mythologies analysed above are open to mobilisation by interests other than those of an old-fashioned development ethos. Certainly, on the Gold Coast, the work of the Kombumerri Aboriginal Corporation for Culture in identifying, marking and publicising sites of importance to Aboriginal culture and history is an important contestation of the singularity of the touristic identity.

To conclude, then, it seems to me that analyses of the discursive regimes through which regions understand themselves—or through which different regional interests articulate and contest such meanings—is crucial to any regional politics. I am interested in the importance of landscape and region to the development of subjectivities. What 'region' might mean in an increasingly diverse, mobile and mass mediated society, and what the politics of regional consciousnesses might be, are, for me, interesting and important questions.

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Notes

1   See, for example, *Gold Coast Bulletin*, 26 December 1984, 7; 29 June 1991, 22; and *Courier-Mail*, 3 January 1986, 4.

2   A rather misleading headline in the *Australian*, 2 May 1980, 16.