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Over the Ditch: Queer mobilities at the nexus of art, geography and history

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Abstract

This paper takes the form of a photo-essay that documents *Over the Ditch*, a site-specific photomedia installation in the *On Islands* exhibition, held in 2014 in Sydney, Australia. *Over the Ditch* is an outcome of collaboration between a geographer and an historian, who are also an artist and a designer, working together at the nexus contemporary art practice, geography and history. The project collates and communicates the historical and contemporary experiences of trans-Tasman mobilities by queer New Zealanders and Australians. ‘Hopping over the ditch’ is an Antipodean colloquialism for trans-Tasman crossing. *Over the Ditch* explores the trans-Tasman experiences of seven gay men from 1931-2014. The work comprises archival, found and donated photographs from these men, together with ethnopoetic verse created from their diaries, stories and blogs. The site-specific installation takes the form of a journey, with 22 route-markers created from recycled timber, which present a sequence of visual and ethnopoetic narratives. This photo-essay documents the journey of *Over the Ditch*, retracing a trek through the *in situ* work. The photomedia installation, together with its reconstruction here, offers a practice-based creative approach to the representation of queer trans-Tasman mobilities over time and space – an approach that uses visual and textual language to reach across disciplines and audiences in order to convey the experiences of queer mobilities across the Tasman.

Keywords Mobilities, trans-Tasman, queer, gay, historical geography, creative geography, experimental geography, practice-based approach

Journeys

This work is not typical academic geography. It is a practice-based experiment emerging at the intersection of art, geography and history. In this cross-disciplinary experiment we take a creative approach that offers an alternative language for expressing the experience of queer mobilities. This expression is both visual and textual, both material and affective, both poetic and historiographic, both spatial and temporal. The present photo-essay documents *Over the Ditch*, an artwork collaboratively created by the authors. *Over the Ditch* was a site-specific photomedia installation included in the *On Islands* exhibition, held 15-30 November 2014, in Sydney, Australia, at Eramboo, an artist environment located on Sydney's northern suburban fringe that abuts heritage-listed Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park (<http://www.eramboo.com.au>).

Over the Ditch is the outcome of collaboration between a geographer and an historian, who are also an artist and a designer, working together at the nexus of contemporary art practice, geography and history. The creative project aimed to collate and communicate some historical and contemporary experiences of trans-Tasman mobilities by queer New Zealanders and Australians. 'Hopping over the ditch' is an Antipodean colloquial term for trans-Tasman crossing between New Zealand and Australia; the Tasman Sea both physically separates and symbolically connects our countries. *Over the Ditch* explores the trans-Tasman experiences of seven gay men over the period 1931-2014. The work comprises archival, found and donated photographs from these men, along with ethno-poetic verse created from their own words, gleaned from diaries, autobiographies, public blogs and interviews.

The site-specific installation took the material form of a trek through these experiences, leading visitors along a meandering bush track. Twenty-two route-markers, created from recycled timber, presented a sequence of visual and poetic narratives through the course of the journey, mediating and communicating the diverse material, affective and social encounters of queer trans-Tasman mobilities. The present photo-essay documents the journey through the installation, but not in a straightforward manner. This creative piece re-presents and augments the visual and textual language introduced in the installation by placing the photo-documentation within a series of detailed ethno-poems (that is, the full ethno-poems, not only the selected verses produced on route-markers) in order to further explore and express these queer mobilities. Ethno-poetry transforms ethnographic information from dense prose into verse form, offering a potentially effective way to convey the affective and emotional experiences of trans-Tasman lives (Aitken 2009, 2014).



Our approach in this photo-essay (and in the photomedia installation) is to juxtapose image and text to reach across disciplines and audiences, and find new ways to convey the experiences of queer mobilities across the Tasman. This practice-based approach responds to the provocations of scholarly and artistic work in experimental and creative geographies (Enigbokan and Patchett 2012; Hawkins 2013a, 2015; Hunt 2014; Last 2012; Lorimer and Wylie 2010; Marston and De Leeuw 2013; Paglen 2008). As Hawkins (2013b: 53) suggests in her discussion of the intersecting and expanding fields of geography and art, geographers may benefit by “taking seriously art as a mode of critical exploration” and embracing “practices normally deemed ‘artistic’, or more broadly ‘creative’, within their own methodological repertoires”. Elsewhere, Hawkins (2011) outlines the shifting approach of geographers to art, from ‘dialogues’ to ‘doings’ – from an approach where geographers interpret artworks and art worlds, to one where they are the creative practitioners and collaborators using practice-based methods to interrogate geographical phenomena.

In *Over the Ditch*, we are ‘doing’ creative geography, and we use this approach to explore new visual and textual ways to examine and communicate the history and the experience of trans-Tasman queer lives. In doing so, we expand the cross-disciplinary field further, tracing a nexus between art, geography *and history* through the creative re-presentation of archival photographs, historical evidence and (auto)biographical accounts. Creative and experimental methods enable new connections across disciplines and diverse fields of knowledge. Moreover, as Paglen (2008) argues, such approaches are (and indeed, should be) self-reflexive in and of the work of geographers (and we would add, historians). That is, for Paglen, creative and experimental methods in geography and history are not just means to interrogate space, place, mobility and their generative processes, but are practices that allow and prompt geographers and historians to reflect on and actively engage



in the production of space. *Over the Ditch* makes historical and contemporary space through the site of the installation itself and, moreover, through catalysing visual and textual media that *produce* the experience of queer trans-Tasman mobilities. As the material and discursive outcome of our *doings*, *Over the Ditch* enlivens a trans-Tasman queer geography, past and present.



Eric



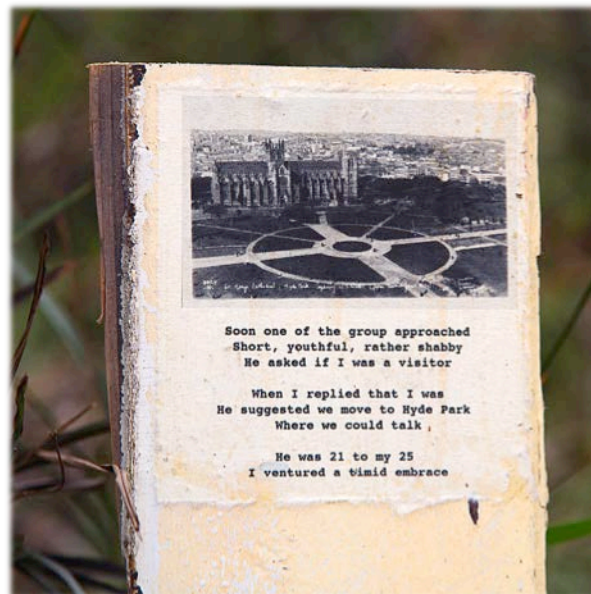
An uneventful crossing of the Tasman
I was met at Sydney
By mother's relations, who entertained me and showed me round the city
My uncle thought I should see the countryside
And motored me one day to the Blue Mountains
In ecstatic letters home I reported family news
And described the sights
The harbour, the recently completed bridge, the Domain, the art gallery,
the university, the magnificent mountain vistas¹

One incident had no place in my letters
It was recorded in a rough journal I was keeping
Sauntering up Elizabeth Street, I came on a most tantalising spectacle
Outside a closed department store stood a small crowd of young men
Singly or in chattering groups
For a minute or two I stood at the edge of the pavement
Looking at my watch as if I had an appointment
And then crossed to a shop window where I pretended to examine the display

¹ Eric McCormick (1906-1995, b. New Zealand) was a biographer, critic and historian. In 1931 he travelled to Sydney, Australia, breaking his journey to England, where he was to undertake a Master of Letters at Clare College, the University of Cambridge.



Soon one of the group approached
Short, youthful, rather shabby
He asked if I was a visitor
When I replied that I was
He suggested we should move on to Hyde Park
Where we could talk



He was 21 to my 25
He proposed taking a tram to a place he knew
We rode through unknown suburbs
Alighting at a large concrete bridge
Where we had a magnificent view of the harbour
Climbing over a low fence, he led the way
To a grassy mound under one of the arches where we sat down

I ventured a timid embrace
His approach was more vigorous
Not confined to kissing
For a few minutes we struggled
Until he gave up
And strode off
Chastened but strangely elated
I got up, straightened my clothes, and caught the first tram back to the city



When I sailed out through Sydney Heads
I thought of my nameless companion
From that night²

² Ethno-poem created from an excerpt from Eric H. McCormick's autobiography: Eric H. McCormick (1996) *An Absurd Ambition*, edited by Dennis McEldowney, Auckland, Auckland University Press, pp. 104-105.

Trevor

Trevor was an only child
Born in 1926 to a farming family
In 1944 he enlisted for naval service
In 1945 he had a brush with the law
Indecency
He was 18



Released on probation
He left for Sydney soon after



He crossed the Tasman several times
In the 40s and 50s
And captured images of people and places



In 2012 his nephew contacted Chris:
I have a box full of photos of Trevor and his friends
Would you like them?³



³ Ethno-poem created from an excerpt from Chris Brickell (2014) *Southern Men: Gay Lives in Pictures*, Dunedin, Genre Books.

John



We ran for two years in Melbourne
48, 49
At the Comedy Theatre in Melbourne
Beautiful little theatre
We came to Sydney in January 1950, to the Empire, now Her Majesty's⁴

We were family fare
Unique
A very clean show
There was never a blue line, Terry would never allow a blue line
There was Red Moore, brilliant male impersonator
Screen characters, Bing Crosby, Snozza Durant, Eddie Canta
Famous big names of film
Wally Pricor was pure soprano, had what the Italians call a 'white voice'
Sang *Ave Maria* with a choir of boys
Bill Bain was a comedienne, very funny
Me and Terry
And Stan Wineera, droll-faced comic, Māori, very talented
We travelled all over Australia and New Zealand

⁴ The Kiwis Revue originated during WWII, in the Middle East, guided by Captain Terry Vaughan. The Revue's female impersonators were feted for their quality and realism. John Hunter was the glamour puss, with natural stage charm, expansive dance repertoires, and sylphlike proportions.



It was an all men show
With female impersonators
Yes, there were the three girls
In italics, in inverted commas, I should say
Wally Pricor, Bill Bain and me
I played the ingenue
I could dance on my toes
I had a soprano voice
I did a lot of dramatic work



We played for over a year at the Empire
In Sydney
I remember dancing the can-can with Bill Bain
I used to wear those slingback patent leather shoes
You know, with the cut out heel
Whoops!
I was doing the big high kick, and off went the shoe into the stalls
I heard a man call
Howzat!
He'd caught it, and he returned it dutifully



They loved it. They loved it
The queues at the stage door for autographs, and goodies, and chocolates
Oh dear, they were so nice
I used to get some wonderfully funny letters
Loving ones, funny ones
There was a man who'd write to me⁵

⁵ Ethno-poem created from an archived interview with John Hunter (interviewer unknown).

David

Mardi Gras is a milestone in the development of my identity
Of me as a whole person
It complements my past work and journeys
Marriage equality, working in politics and campaigning
Coming out to my Dad



After the Auckland Pride Festival
Flying into Sydney I feel that sense of anticipation
I don't know what to expect from the Parade or associated parties
I just hope it doesn't rain

Oxford Street is one of the first places I visit
The place I heard as the main concentration of gay and queer activity in Sydney
I felt glad but overwhelmed when I was in the middle of Oxford Street
I wasn't used to such a queer-affirming environment in the middle of the city



I felt anticipation and giddiness
Oxford Street feels special
Those intangible feelings one attaches to a place
Based on what one reads, hears and hopes
It seems silly to ascribe feelings to a material place
Still I can't help but feel the history or sense of place
I feel happy and excited to walk up Oxford Street
I slow down
Deliberately
To relax
To feel more of its atmosphere

I end up on Oxford Street almost every day of the week
I think it is quite delightful they've dressed up the ATMs as GayTMs
The Darlinghurst Bookshop is wonderful
A treasure trove of stories, histories, textures
And a bit of titillation too
I also think it's funny how many places on Oxford Street have rainbows on them

I glimpse a rainbow flag on an apartment building
I smile
I'm glad someone is proudly flying the flag
Proclaiming to the world that they are proud of who they are
A lovely 'shout out' to crowds in the street



Every time I walk past Coco Cubano on the corner of Oxford Street
I find plenty of attractive men looking out onto the street
At other men?
I go inside and have something to eat and drink

I walk past the Green Park memorial to gay people and the Holocaust
And feel profoundly sad
I linger for a little while

I worry about whether such horrors are possible today in a modern society
In the 1920s and 1930s Germany was an advanced economy and sophisticated
society

I feel that we often focus on the now and forget history
I also wonder about how many people even know that this memorial exists

I discover the Lamp for Mary by surprise
Drawn by the bright pink lantern
When I get closer and read the text I realise it's a site of a horrific attack
Like with Green Park, I linger to reflect
On what happened, what it meant, what it spurred
The opportunity to make something better
I feel glad it is here
I worry whether we remember our own history
Or the histories of the places around us
Often forgotten, except for an annual commemoration or event

I glare at the King's Cross Coca-Cola mural from across the road
Mildly raging
I didn't expect a large rainbow on the billboard
I see a blatant misuse of what Pride and being queer is all about
I don't think people fought so hard over the decades for their rights
Just so big companies cherry pick the rainbow flag for their own commercial
purposes

I am of two minds
It's nice to see the company making the gesture
Yet I know that the company is not doing this out of charity or generosity
But to shore up and bolster its brand image by using others' imagery
I take several photos, wanting to document this monstrosity

I am annoyed when the rainbow flag or logo is used to make a buck
That's not what our identity is about, nor should it ever be
For me, the rainbow flag and Mardi Gras is about community, identity, diversity
It's about collective strength and unity in the face of adversity
The collective spirit of celebration and solidarity
When so many people who are different in so many ways get together
United by their sexuality being outside the heterosexual mainstream
Hence my wariness of the encroachment of the profit motive

I feel emotional walking to the Parade
Listening to the broadcast
As they explain the history and context of Mardi Gras
Mardi Gras should not be 'just a bit of fun' for those living comfortable lives
They mention how Mardi Gras, even hearing about it
Acts as a lifeline for those who are isolated
A message to be proud of who you are and will be
I really support that

The Parade
Flinders Street
7:25pm

I admire the creativity and work that goes into the floats
Pleased to see the huge diversity of people, teams and floats
Lots of different ethnicities, interests and sexual identities



I'm glad I've come
It helps maintain a sense of pride in who I am
The Parade is cool, big and interesting
But it is the things that happen around the parade that make it worthwhile⁶

⁶ Ethno-poem created from David Do's visual diary, compiled with guidance from Anna De Jong. Research conducted by Anna De Jong.

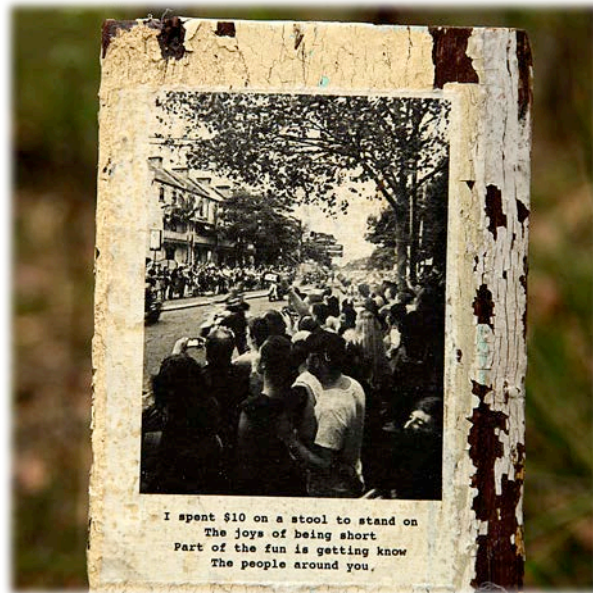
Jason

Morning start, gym workout
One last weights session could come in handy
No matter how hard I try not to buy in
There are expectations about how one should look
At Sydney Mardi Gras
Are they imposed from others or ourselves?



Parade and party day!
A lazy wake up
And those stomach butterflies that only Sydney Mardi Gras can bring!
What will the day and night bring?
It is always a celebration

For me, Sydney Mardi Gras is political



Set off for the parade after the obligatory afternoon nap
 I spent \$10 on a stool to stand on
 The joys of being short
 Part of the fun is getting to know the people around you
 My favourite were a couple of lesbians at my height
 It was also great to run into lots of Auckland people
 Who I don't see at home⁷

⁷ Ethno-poem created from Jason Myers's visual diary, compiled with guidance from Anna De Jong. Research conducted by Anna De Jong.

Gregory and Michael

The stage was set
Michael and I were at a restaurant in Ubud
The conversation turns towards marriage
I don't need to marry Michael
I want to
I no longer have enough words to express how much I value him in my life
What it is that we have
I need a way to express that to him
And to those I love
Here is a man who is important to me



A man who I want to spend my life with
That I want to love and be loved by in return
A man I want to share everything with
A man who makes my heart sing

I ask him
Putting aside the reality of not being able to marry in Australia
Will he marry me?
With tears in our eyes he says yes



But we can't marry in Australia

In my world, I have love
I have acceptance
I have a great sense of family
I see my children, Tomas and Caitlin, grown and developing their own lives
I feel my partner at my side
Partners in life



I say to the Australian Government
Fuck you!
If you won't let me get married
I will just nick off somewhere else and do it

I love Michael
He loves me
We are engaged
The next step is to be married
It's what we do as a society
Marriage brings with it a public commitment and recognition of the relationship
We have to each other
It carries more weight to say, 'Please meet Michael, my husband'
Not 'Please meet Michael, my partner'
It's not for everyone, but I now know that it's for me



I stand before everyone here to say to you that I love you
I love your passion for others
I love your sense of justice
I love your thoroughness
I love your humour
I love your integrity
I want you to be my husband
I want to share all of my life with you

I want to explore the world with you at my side
I want to discover the universe with you
I choose you to be my husband⁸

⁸ Ethno-poem created from entries in *The Personal Blog of Gregory Storer*.

Michael and Gregory

This time there was a different tone to the conversation
Gregory was serious: would I marry him?
That sort of question demanded an answer
Wiping away the odd tear or two
I said yes
And wrestled with the emotions that beset me



Of course the question was asked
In which country will you marry?
Not a question most engaged couples are asked
But for we two Australians
There is no legal option to marry at home
There wouldn't be a beautiful Australian Coat of Arms
On the marriage certificate

But we are determined
We are going to be married in Australia
Under Australian law
On Australian soil
In our lifetimes

Gregory
In one word, what you mean to me
Everything
Life is unpredictable
And forever is hard to comprehend
But I want to do it with you
As your friend
Your companion
Your adventurer
Your activist
Your lover
Your man
Your Mikey Bear
Your husband⁹



⁹ Ethno-poem created from entries in *The Personal Blog of Michael Barnett*.

Arrivals

The purpose of self-reflexive, practice-based, creative approaches is, or should be, political. Indeed, Marston and De Leeuw (2013) urge for an increasingly politicised intervention of creative geographies, in which practice-led methods should do more self-conscious political work. We argue this is an important consideration in light of Paglen's (2008) thesis about the spatially productive capacity of practice-based creative and experimental methods. The production of space through creative approaches should arguably be guided by a purpose. Our purpose was political, in terms of constructing and communicating historical geographies of gay men's trans-Tasman lives, eliciting their material, affective and social reasons and experiences for crossing the Tasman. The queerness, openness and also prejudice of different places in Australia and New Zealand are threaded through the men's journeys – fleeing potential trouble, visiting 'known' queer sites and events, stumbling across queer encounters in unexpected places, or accessing jurisdictions where same-sex marriage is legal. The men's journeys are informed – sometimes impelled – by political imperatives.

We suggest that the creative approach of *Over the Ditch* offers a reading of critical politics that conventional geographical scholarship cannot readily render. Creative approaches allow us to nuance the politics of (non-)belonging by scaling down and humanising structural effects (Aitken 2009, 2014). Photo-essays, ethnopoetry and other creative visual and textual methods, for us, offer a way to explore and express the impact of political, legal and social marginalisation and/or acceptance at an individual scale. This visual and textual language gives insight into how gay men's mobile lives have been shaped, in personal and affective ways, by political, legal and social constraints and/or entitlements. Here, what is *un*-said is as important as what is revealed in the creative work. The fractured narratives of photographs and poetry leave room for the audience to imagine further possibilities for the lives and the journeys of these men. Juxtaposed with what we can glean from the images and poetic text, the 'breathing room' in these biographies encourages the audience (and here, the reader) to speculate on how these men's lives have unfolded and intersected with ongoing political and social transformations across the Tasman.

Acknowledgments

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photographs and their blog entries in the creation of this work. We hope that our work will go some way to raising the profile of Australian-New Zealand relations in queer communities, and the legal discrepancies between the two countries regarding same-sex rights. Finally, thanks to the referees and editor Kath Browne for astute critiques and suggestions that have improved our work.

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