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### Representing the Nation: Australian Masculinity on the Beach at Cronulla

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# Representing the Nation: Australian Masculinity on the Beach at Cronulla

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## Introduction

One of the most noticeable aspects of the violent protests over the bashing of the two Cronulla lifesavers by a small group of Lebanese-Australian men on Sunday 4 December 2005 was the use of Australian national symbols to represent the protests as a defence of the nation. Television and newspaper reports suggested that the Australian flag was everywhere. The protest also featured beers and barbeques, national songs and chants, including "Advance Australia Fair", "Waltzing Matilda", and "Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi, Oi, Oi", and the spectre of the ANZAC. Glen 'Steely' Steele, a local Cronulla man, said "My granddad fought the Japs to see Australia safe... and that's what I'm doing today" (*SMH* 12 Dec. 2005, p. 4). Another "proud Aussie" picked up a handful of sand and massaged it through his fingers. "This is what we're fighting for... Our fathers, our grandfathers, fought for these beaches, and now it's our turn" (*Australian* 14 Dec., p. 4).

Protesters also celebrated the lifesaver as a symbol of the nation. Troy described the lifesaver as a "national icon and hero who legitimately save lives every day" (*SMH* 9 Dec. 2005, p. 6). Heather Rae, in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, argued: "There are a few things Australians hold sacred, one is our lifesavers" (13 Dec. 2005, p. 21). The editor of the *DT* stated:

There's an aspect of the tradition [of the beach] we have all been taught to respect [and] that's the role of the volunteer army of lifesavers who stand guard while we enjoy ourselves. That in this country we have bred a strain of selflessness so ennobling and so constant is something which every decent Australian regards as a stamp of quality on our national character (6 Dec. 2005, p. 16).

This euphoric mood lasted well into January (2006). It was especially prevalent at Cronulla's Australia Day celebrations (26 January). Thousands flocked to the suburb in a show of national unity and pride. The *Daily Telegraph* reported:

It seemed every person was carrying or wearing the Australian flag. The flags hung from the balconies of high-rises, from car aerials, around people's necks and even from dog collars. They were in every form, from temporary tattoos festooned on people's bodies to bikinis, hats, board shorts and even sarongs... But the number of people from ethnic backgrounds was lower than in previous years (27 Jan. 2006, p 4).

The question that emerges from this extraordinary use of nationalist rhetoric is: why? Why did the bashing of the two lifesavers by a small group of Lebanese-Australian men

evoke such a hysterically nationalist response? In this paper I argue that this response must be explained in terms of the historical emphasis on the lifesaver as the embodiment of a three-way relationship between masculinity, whiteness and the nation. In this context the bashing of lifesavers by a group of non-white men was not interpreted in terms of a turf war between competing groups of men, although this was how many newspaper journalists tried to explain it, but as an attack on the nation itself.

In the first part of this paper I examine the shift in the culture of white masculinity that took place in Australia during the first decade of the twentieth century, when the nineteenth century seaside culture of picnicking and promenading evolved into surf-bathing and lifesaving. Whereas picnicking and promenading defined masculinity in terms of an emphasis on the respectability and moral authority of colonialism, surf-bathing and lifesaving defined masculinity in terms of a strong, fit, well muscled and racially pure white male body.

This shift from respectability and moral authority to the body itself can be attributed to the widespread influence of eugenics. In the early 1900s eugenicists claimed that advances in medicine and sanitation had displaced the once purifying role of natural selection in the process of human evolution, thereby increasing the reproduction of unfit racially impure bodies. This situation was compounded by fears that urbanisation and industrialisation Eugenicists idealised the fit, strong, well muscled white male body as a means of preventing this decline. They also argued that “natural selection had to be replaced with rational selection” (the control of hereditary qualities of race and breed) (Cogdell 2003, p. 39). Thus, the emergence of the surf-bather and lifesaver as a symbol of masculinity was the result of an appreciation of the eugenic qualities of their fit, sun-tanned bodies (Rodwell, 1999 p. 56).

In the second part of this paper I argue that a central feature of the idealisation of the lifesaver as a symbol of masculinity was an emphasis on his whiteness. This emphasis on whiteness was apparent in descriptions of lifesavers as Greek Gods and Nordic Vikings. Eugenicists believed that Greek Gods and Nordic Vikings figures shared the same ancestry. Nordics were conquerors who came over from Northern Europe and descended from classical Greek warriors. This imagined race was heralded as the whitest and most superior of the white European “races” (Nies, xiii, 13).

In the third part of this paper I trace the way in which the lifesaver as a symbol of white masculinity was used throughout the first half of the twentieth century to represent the nation. Lifesavers were employed at the opening of the Harbour Bridge in 1932, the Australian Sesquicentenary in 1938, the visit of Queen Elizabeth II in 1954 and the Melbourne Olympics of 1956. The most important aspect of this use of the image of the lifesaver was the way it strategically defined the nation in terms of white masculinity (i.e. as white and male).

In the final part of the paper I argue that recent attempts to create a culturally diverse representation of Australian lifesaving by encouraging members of Australia’s culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities to qualify as lifesavers under the auspices of the ‘On the Same Wave’ scheme represents an important and well-directed

response to the Cronulla protests. The most important aspect of this scheme is that it foregrounds and tries to address the historic emphasis on whiteness and masculinity in lifesaving for the first time in its history. The long-standing emphasis on the lifesaver as a symbol of the nation itself means that this project represents an opportunity to help redefine Australia's national identity along multicultural and gendered lines. The significance of the 'On the Same Wave' project therefore extends far beyond the beach.

### **The History of the Life-Saver as a symbol of White Australian Masculinity**

During the second half of the nineteenth century Sydney's sea-side resorts were important places for picnicking and promenading. At this time these rituals were an important performance of colonial masculinity. Promenading defined a specific code of respectable dress and behaviour as a prerequisite of masculinity. Conversely, bad language and public drunkenness was seen as a lack of manly self-discipline. Picnicking also foregrounded private property, the gendered division of labour and patriarchal authority as central features of colonial masculinity (White 2006, p. 1). In context of this emphasis on respectability, etiquette and moral authority, bathing in the public gaze was defined as unacceptable and transgressive. It was declared illegal from as early as 1833 (Huntsman 2001, p 28). Bathers were defined as larrikins- a designation which carried far more censure than today. Larrikins were working class Irish men who constituted a political as well as social and moral threat (Rickard 1998). In 1894, when the problem of bathing at Sydney's seaside resorts had become so bad that a "Bathing Regulation Bill" was introduced to Parliament, J. Macintosh described bathers as "the larrikin element", W. Pigott described them as a "larrikin class" and Mr. Heydon described them as "the larrikins of Sydney" (Legislative Council, 8 March, 1894, p 1432).

The shift in the culture of masculinity on the beach can be explained in two ways. On one hand it could be understood as a cause-and-effect response to the growing popularity of bathing. According to this view, bathing grew in popularity throughout the 1890s in spite of official sanctions. As a result of this growing popularity, which led to an associated increase in the number of drownings, local men banded together to form lifesaving clubs. Initially these clubs were informal affairs, often only constituted by a rope on the beach, which was just as likely to be used by picnickers to make a swing as anything else (SMH 4 February 1886). At Manly in 1902, for example, when a number of men went out to try to save Mabel Thorpe and her would-be rescuer Frederick Smallpage, the rope had been sitting unused for so long that it had rotted and broke, twice. Both subsequently drowned (Curby 2001, p 133). By 1907, however, lifesaving had eclipsed these humble origins and formal clubs had been established at Bondi, Manly and Bronte.

On the other hand, if we examine the history of the lifesaver in terms of Judith Butler's famous genealogical critique in *Gender Trouble*, then we need to think about the idealisation of the lifesaver as an *effect* of discourses of masculinity rather than as a *cause*. This methodological approach requires a political analysis. Butler writes: "genealogy investigates the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin" (Butler 2006, p xxxi, italics in original). That is, we need to think

about the power relationships inherent in the idealisation of the lifesaver as a symbol of masculinity.

In the following section I argue that the reification of the lifesaver made so apparent at the Cronulla protests needs to be understood in terms of the influence of eugenics in the first half of the twentieth century. Eugenics defined the strong, tanned, fit body as a central feature of masculinity. This manifested itself in the transformation of the cultural significance of the sportsman (Adair et al 1998), the soldier (Jones 1987), the body-builder (Carden-Coyne 1999), and the public school boy (Crotty 2001). It also transformed the meaning of the male body on the beach.

One of the earliest examples of the effect of eugenics on the representation of male bodies on the beach in Sydney occurred in 1902, when the *Sydney Mail* reported that men out on the beaches in the early mornings could be seen "lying on their backs and elevating their limbs in the manner approved by [Eugene Sandow] the master of muscle" (*Sydney Mail*, 29 Oct. 1902, p. 1135). Eugene Sandow had started out his career as a circus-tent strongman in the 1880s but had transformed into a Eugenicist by renaming himself Eugene and declaring his "mission" to preach the "gospel of physical culture" (*Evening News*, 4 October 1902: Daley 2002).

Throughout the next few years there was a growing emphasis on the bodies of the men of the surf, sun and sand as masculine (rather than a sign of larrikinism). In 1907 G. H. Henriques commented that he was "particularly struck by the wonderful improvement in the physique, the health and strength of our city and suburban young men, [who] after a single year's bathing, have developed from mere weaklings into sturdy specimens of manhood" (*Evening News*, 15 Oct. 1907). The *Daily Telegraph* also enthused about the "sturdy young specimens of manhood... who gather regularly on the beaches" (13 Feb. 1908). Particular attention was also paid to the meaning of the sun-browned skin. A man, the *Sydney Mail* reported, "feels he's a man when his skin is a real good brown" (7 March 1906). These sun-tanned young men are proof, the *Australian Star* added, that "surf and sun-bathing was helping to build up a race of fine, young, hard Australians" (14 October 1907).

The most physically spectacular of these men were the lifesavers, who Egbert Russell described as "the very highest class, the Samurais, the oligarchs, the elite." They strut the beaches, he said, with superiority that is insolent, yet, at the same time, tolerant of the shortcomings of lesser breeds- a gladiator caste, envied by all the men, adored by all the women" (Russell 1910, p. 257). They were especially celebrated for their sense of duty and self-discipline, a value which was highly prized by eugenicists. "When Australia needs them, as some day no doubt she will," A. W. Relph told the readers of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, "these men, trained athletes, tanned with the sun on the beaches, strong and brawny with the buffeting of the surf, will be well fitted to take up their trust and do duty for their country" (*SMH* 17 Aug. 1908).

Despite their suntans, these men were unmistakably white. Their whiteness was emphasised in descriptions of them as Neoclassical bronzed Greek Gods and Nordic

Vikings. According to eugenicists, Greek Gods and Nordic Vikings were part of the same imagined race. It was heralded as the whitest of the white European races.

Writing in 1908, George Street reported: "At Manly or Bondi or Coogee, any Sunday morning in the summer you may see the Discobulus and the listening slave and the Antinous, and the rest of the triumphs of Greek sculpture done into live sunburned man by the score" (Street 1908). Jean Curlewis argued that the tourist or journalist who could write a description of the Australian surfer without employing the phrase "young Greek gods" or "statues of bronze" had "not yet been born" (Curlewis 1929). Gerald Dillon called them "Greek sculpture transformed into real life" (Dillon 1936). Photographs and paintings from this period also represented male bodies on the beach in stylised, neo-classical poses. Charles Meere's famous *Australian beach pattern*, for example, which was started in 1938, the year of the sesquicentenary, and finished in 1940, focused on bodies that were so perfect they were more like classical sculpture than flesh and blood (Crombie 2004, p. 189). The emphasis on Greek Gods was an important factor in institutionalising a culture of sun-tanning on Australian beaches.

Descriptions of bathers and lifesavers as Nordic Vikings also emphasised a white Aryan heritage. Fred Williams described these pioneering bathers as "hardy Vikings" (1907). The *Sydney Mail* described them as "hardy Vikings... wild white men, rehearsing their primitive instincts" (7 March 1906). The Mayor of Randwick, Alderman D. Maxwell Cooper, suggested that the emergence of surf-bathing constituted an awakening of "the Viking spirit inherent in the British race [which] has, as far as the Australian states are concerned, been dormant for generations" (*Sun* 15 August 1911). In 1929 the *Sydney Mail* stated: "In their bodily make-up the young men of our beaches are today less markedly differentiated from the general run of the Nordic type than were their fathers and elder brothers... There is no need to use the ugly word degeneration here. Our youth is strong, active, and certainly not over fat" (MacKenzie 1929).

During the interwar period, right up to the 1950s and beyond, the white masculinity of the lifesaver was used to represent the nation. In this way the lifesaver emerged as the symbol of a three-way relationship between masculinity, whiteness and the nation. The idealisation of the lifesaver as a symbol of the nation suggested that each of these attributes were interlinked, that you couldn't have one without the other. This trifecta was invoked on a number of occasions. Following the carnage of the Great War the lifesaver was used to endow the broken body of the digger with new life and new masculine virility. He was also present at the opening of the Harbour Bridge in 1932, the Australian Sesquicentenary in 1938, the visit of Queen Elizabeth II in 1954 and the Melbourne Olympics of 1956. Throughout this period the lifesaver foregrounded white masculinity as a central feature of the Australian national identity.

Following the carnage of the Great War, the white masculine body of the lifesaver endowed the broken soldier's body of WWI with new life and new masculine virility. In 1923, for example, Charles Paterson, president of the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia for twenty one years stated: "We shall rear a race of men finer than the Anzacs, whom the whole world admired" (*Daily Guardian*, 29/11/1923). The emphasis on a militaristic tradition was most apparent in the march-past, as lifesavers wore

uniforms, carried club flags and marched in formation. A newsreel item shot at a Bondi carnival called 'Surf Thrills', for example, dissolved between a parade of lifesavers and servicemen marching in the same formation. Its commentator intoned: "Mighty deeds spawn men of might. This is the crucible from which fighting material emerges, volunteer life savers, volunteer fighters. The amateur surf clubs have an enlistment record second to none (*Cinesound Review* 490 1941)." The emphasis on the lifesaver as ANZAC reached a high point after the mass rescue at Bondi on Black Sunday, 6 February 1938, when lifesavers rescued 200 bathers who had been swept out to sea after a sandbank collapsed.

Lifesavers were also invoked as a symbol of the nation at the opening of the Harbour Bridge on 19 March 1932. The had a float in the parade and they also featured, most famously, in a poster by Douglas Annand and Arthur Whitmore entitled *Australia is calling: sunshine, happiness, opportunity*, in which a strongly muscled lifesaver is shown proudly holding an Australian flag while introducing the bridge to the world, his "muscles of steel forming a human equivalent to the similarly robust steel bridge" (Crombie 93). A massive Surf Lifesaving Association of Australia (SLSAA) carnival at Bondi also commemorated the opening of the Bridge.

Australia's sesquicentenary, held only a month after the mass rescue at Bondi, represented a high point of interest in the lifesaver as an archetypal symbol of Australia. In 'The March to Nationhood' parade through Sydney on 26 January (Anniversary Day) the lifesavers, marching in bare feet, took pride of place. *The Home* reported: "One of the most popular sections of the procession through the streets of Sydney was the representation of the surf clubs." (March 1938, p. 30). As part of its advertising campaign to encourage Britons to visit Australia during the sesquicentenary, the Australian National Travel Association (ANTA) also used a representation of lifesavers. The advertisement placed a lifesaver manning his rescue reel on the beach side by side with a spectral line drawing of Captain Cook gazing from the deck of the *Endeavour* suggesting that the lifesaver had played as important a role in defining the nation as the great man himself. (*The Home*, March 1938, p 33; Crombie 2004, 93-4).

Lifesavers were also employed to represent the nation whenever any member of the British Royal family paid a visit. When a carnival was staged at Manly to honour the visit of the Duke of Gloucester in 1934 *Movietone News* celebrated the occasion with a report entitled 'Australia's Manhood Goes Down to the Sea' (*Movietone News* 5/49, 1934). Another carnival was staged in 1954 to honour Queen Elizabeth II's first visit to Australia, the year after her coronation. 100,000 people were reported to have attended the event, and newspapers commented proudly on the fact that the Royal visit lasted seventy one minutes, forty minutes beyond the appointed time (*SMH*, 7 Feb. 1954, p 1).

Lifesavers were again employed to represent the nation two years later, at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. Fifty thousand people turned up to watch a carnival organised in honor of the Olympics at Torquay, in Victoria, which was attended by teams from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Great Britain, Hawaii, New Zealand, South Africa and mainland USA.

## Conclusion: Cronulla

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century there have been only two attempts to critique the representation of the lifesaver as the symbol of a symbiotic three-way relationship between masculinity, whiteness and the nation. The most important event in the history of lifesaving took place in 1980, when the 1912 rule prohibiting women from becoming members was officially revoked. In 2000 a cursory attempt to address the implicit whiteness of the culture of lifesaving was made when a report entitled *Sound the siren: exploring the changing face of surf life saving in Australia* was commissioned. The report confirmed that 86 per cent of surf club members surveyed had at least one parent born in Australia and most lived close to the beach (*Sun Herald* 12 Nov 2006, p. 71).

Despite these efforts to refashion the lifesaver, this three way relationship between race, gender and the nation has remained the dominant significance of the lifesaver in contemporary Australian culture. This was made startlingly clear at Cronulla in December 2005, when a confrontation between lifesavers and a small group of Lebanese men was not treated as an engagement between competing groups of men, which it might have been if the assailants had been white, but as an attack on the very nation itself, requiring an appropriately dramatic response.

In the aftermath of the protest a number of responses were formulated. Most time and effort was invested in treating the assault and its spiralling repercussions as a criminal affair, and money poured into the New South Wales Police Force. The most important response, however, came in the form of a Federally funded program called "On the Same Wave", which is designed to attract culturally and linguistically diverse Australians (CALD) to lifesaving. The program is designed to especially target Muslim, Chinese, Lebanese Christian and African communities and schools in Sydney's south and south-west, including Bankstown, Auburn, Oatley and Granville. In one of the first initiatives 22 members of Lakemba Sports Club held their inaugural pool training session for their bronze medallion (necessary to become a lifesaver) on 11 November 2006 (*Sun Herald*, 12 Nov. 2006, p. 71). Other initiatives included women only CPR courses for Muslim women, cultural awareness training at the four Cronulla surf lifesaving clubs and surf awareness courses for school students. Surf Lifesaving also placed a bulk order for red and yellow "burqinis", a two-piece lightweight swimsuit that meets Islamic requirements for modesty designed by Aheda Zanetti (*DT*, 27 Jan. 2006, p. 4; *Sunday telegraph*, 3 Dec. 2006).

The importance of this project is threefold. In the first instance it helps CALD Australians appreciate the risks and pleasures of the surf. Secondly, it helps develop a higher level of cultural sensitivity in the ethnically homogenous Australian lifesaving clubs. The most important aspect of this project, however, is its potential to redefine the significance of the lifesaver and create a powerful new multicultural and transgendered (rather than white male) symbol of the nation.

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