

MARDI GRAS TOURISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SYDNEY AS AN INTERNATIONAL GAY AND LESBIAN CITY

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The capital of New South Wales is the oldest and largest city in Australia, and probably its best known. It is a vivid, busy, brash semi-tropical city built around the spectacular Sydney Harbour with its famous icons of the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House. It has a large gay and lesbian community which holds international standing particularly through the world-famous Mardi Gras held each year at the end of February. 600,000 people watched the 1993 Parade and 20,000 people partied till dawn (and much later) in the spectacular costume party, the world's largest gay party. A visit to Mardi Gras is an absolute once-in-a-lifetime must for every gay travelling man. . . . Sydney is the gay capital of the South Pacific.

—Bruno Gmunder, *Spartacus: International Gay Guide* (1995)

The recent emergence of Sydney as the “gay capital of the South Pacific” and as an important destination in the itineraries of lesbian and gay tourists has been closely tied to the growth and development of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras and to the concomitant expansion and rapid diversification of the Australian gay and lesbian tourism industry, especially since the early 1990s.¹ Beginning as an evening street parade following a day of political protest in 1978—a local commemoration of the New York Stonewall riots at a time when male homosexual acts

were illegal in New South Wales—and ending that day in a civil riot with at least fifty-three arrests, Mardi Gras has grown into a three-week international cultural festival that was estimated to have generated some AU\$99 million (U.S.\$55 million) in 1998 and that seems to attract more tourists to the nation than any other special event, as well as garnering the support of various corporate and government sponsors.² This essay examines the contribution that Mardi Gras has made to the construction of Sydney as a world-class gay and lesbian city, a city that has changed from an industrial port to a cosmopolitan, global capital increasingly dependent, for the last two to three decades, on an economy driven by consumption and leisure.³ In particular, I will focus on the tensions that result from the competing demands placed on Mardi Gras by the needs and desires of its diverse gay and lesbian constituency and from the demands of global capital exercised through the gay and lesbian tourism industry. I will also show that Sydney's treatment of its gay and lesbian citizens has been and continues to be deeply contradictory. Mardi Gras itself is a site where some of these contradictions are played out.

Although an emerging literature (albeit a limited one) focuses on aspects of gay male tourism, little has been published that specifically concerns lesbians and tourism. Lesbians have been mentioned in journal articles by Briavel Holcomb and Michael Luongo and by Annette Pritchard, Nigel Morgan, and Diane Sedgely, but the social factors that constrain lesbians' participation in tourism and the particular experiences of lesbian tourists are not discussed in any publication examined for the preparation of this essay.⁴ This bias toward gay men reflects in part a trend in tourism studies that privileges the experiences of men over women, as well as the reluctance on the part of many social scientists to examine tourism critically as a social and cultural phenomenon.⁵ Several publications have focused on gay men also because they are concerned with HIV/AIDS and its relationship with tourism practices and experiences. Finally, research into gay tourism may be more male-centered because a more developed, better organized tourism industry caters to men than to women.

While international tourism is a globalizing force par excellence that involves the "international movement of people, international payments, cross-fertilization of culture, and international business investment in tourism infrastructure such as hotels and attractions," it is itself a product of globalization.⁶ Its tremendous growth has been facilitated by the internationalization and transnationalization of corporations associated with "airlines, tour companies, hotels, marketing, finance, insurance and banking."⁷ However, while globalization is characterized by the denationalization of capital, culture, information, lifestyles,

and beliefs, and by a disruption of space-time relations through advances in both transportation and communications and media technology, it does not necessarily eliminate notions of the local. The intersection of the local and the global, and the tensions that flow from this intersection, can clearly be seen in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. The localization-globalization dynamic at work here relates to the way in which a local, community event has challenged and overturned social mores and legislation at the state and national levels partly through its elevation to a national and international event. The connections between the local and the global, facilitated partly by the tourism industry, have bypassed more traditional mechanisms of change associated with the state,⁸ such as government intervention and legislation, and include the ever-increasing power of digital communications and information systems, the Internet, and also, of course, transnational corporations associated with tourism and leisure production and consumption.

Overview of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras

The first Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade, on the evening of 24 June 1978, was the culmination of a day of political protest staged as part of the International Day of Gay Solidarity commemorating the Stonewall riots in New York.⁹ The Mardi Gras (as it was called even then) was to be a public celebration of homosexuality, and participants were encouraged to dress up in costumes; the flamboyance that characterizes the parade today was evident from the first. However, what began as a celebration ended in a riot, with fifty-three people arrested and several alleging vicious assaults by police.¹⁰ The public visibility of this first parade is something that a number of participants identify as socially and politically significant, and much of the discourse associated with Mardi Gras reinforces their position. Nevertheless, it is naive to conflate public visibility with social progress; in fact, the high level of public visibility that Mardi Gras now enjoys may conceal systemic oppression, homophobia, and discrimination.

By 1979 various events were organized to run for a week to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Stonewall. These events included another Mardi Gras parade and a "Gay Alternative Fair," the precursor to the popular "Fair Day," now a major event at the festival.¹¹ Tensions occurred even at this early stage about the purpose of the parade and whether it should be primarily political or emphasize fun and celebration. There were also tensions between gay men and lesbians, many of whom felt that Mardi Gras was dominated by men's interests. This tension continues today, and indeed the word *lesbian* was added to the festival's name only

in 1988, although lately women have substantially increased their presence and their power at Mardi Gras.¹²

In 1983, after much debate in Sydney's gay and lesbian communities, Mardi Gras was shifted from June to the balmy month of February, which allowed for greater freedom of expression of the body and what may or may not cover it and thus permitted the parade to become more overtly corporeal and sexual. The shift also facilitated a greater association with tourism generally.

Mardi Gras attracts many domestic and international tourists to Sydney during February, and their numbers peak just prior to the parade and party at the end of the festival. The festival, parade, and party are major events on Australia's tourism calendar.¹³ There is strong representation from countries such as the United States, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, and France, as well as increasing numbers of tourists from Southeast Asia, and Mardi Gras packages are advertised in the gay and lesbian press in European and North American countries. While approximately 15 percent of the eighty events at the festival are free, many of the most popular ones require tickets; tickets to the dance party, for example, cost AU\$114.00 in 2001. Full participation in the festival is an expensive undertaking, especially when coupled with the costs of outfits; body treatments such as waxing, tanning, gym training, hairstyling, and party drugs; and, for tourists, accommodation and transportation costs. Many people are willing, however, to spend large sums because Mardi Gras becomes for them the major yearly event that helps define their gay or lesbian identity.

However, the high costs put such events as the party outside the reach of many working-class and lower-middle-class people, many of whom feel marginalized anyway by the middle-class, inner-city images associated with Mardi Gras. The overt "professionalization" of the Mardi Gras Board in the last few years may well have disenfranchised many working-class, suburban gays, as well as gays and lesbians of color. Constructing and maintaining a gay or lesbian identity that fits the white, urban, middle-class model (what the Sydney form of being gay or lesbian essentially is), and that also connects with an ethnicity beyond Anglo-Saxon, is especially difficult. This problem was alluded to at the launch of the 2001 festival by Mardi Gras president Julie Regan, who paid tribute to the gays and lesbians of Asian, Jewish, indigenous, and other ethnic backgrounds who have to "step outside" their own communities to create new identities at both an individual and a community level.¹⁴ Significantly, the Mardi Gras parade is beginning to have considerable importance for gays and lesbians in Southeast Asia (where the opportunity to declare and celebrate their sexuality publicly is not available to them); people from South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea

participated in the 2001 parade. Celebration of sexuality and ethnicity was a conspicuous feature of this parade; a range of ethnic communities was substantially involved, including, for the first time, a small group of gay Lebanese men.

While Mardi Gras may well be a “uniquely Australian version of what elsewhere are ‘gay pride parades,’” it is now inextricably framed within a global gay and lesbian tourism industry that demands spectacle, consumption of experience, and that requires considerable corporate sponsorship.¹⁵ Before addressing the globalizing effects of tourism, I want to extend Dennis Altman’s claim that Mardi Gras is a uniquely Australian event, because, while it is clearly linked to the gay pride marches of North America and some European nations, it is also quite different from them. Its distinctiveness and hence its claims to be uniquely Australian are somewhat stylistic: it is a form of street theater, performed in the evening and comprising a *mélange* of flamboyant theatricality, costume, and parody embodying what might be called a “larrikin spirit” eager to test authority, if not necessarily to overturn it. It is also unique in the extent to which it helps define February as a “gay time” in Sydney and, more broadly, to define Sydney as an international gay and lesbian city. The gay pride marches of many European and North American cities do not seem to have such a defining effect on the character of these cities as Mardi Gras does on Sydney.

It was no surprise, therefore, that some media commentators compared the closing ceremony of the Sydney Olympics to Mardi Gras. In the *Sydney Morning Herald* Anthony Dennis referred to it as the “Son of Mardi Gras” and added, “Songs and thongs, speeches and creatures: the closing ceremony featured Sydney’s gay community represented by the controversial bevy of drag queens aboard the bus from the hit film [*The Adventures of*] *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*.”¹⁶ Many in Sydney’s gay community also interpreted the inclusion of drag queens, gay icons like pop singer Kylie Minogue and her pink-tuxedoed dancing boys, and the army of lifesavers as direct signifiers of the importance of gay male culture within mainstream Australian culture. Mardi Gras has been pivotal in the increasing visibility of gay and lesbian imagery and cultures in Australia, as well as playing a significant role in the social construction of gay and lesbian identities. Mardi Gras today occupies a central position in Australian popular culture.

The parade and festival communicate a form of Australian national identity (in competition with more mainstream ideas) that explicitly embraces certain homosexual subjectivities. The claiming of Australian national identity by lesbians and gays during Mardi Gras is particularly provocative and problematic given that white heterosexual masculinity has pervaded images of Australianness to the exclusion of all marginalized groups in Australia, whether they be women,

Aborigines, non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants, or gays and lesbians. Nowhere have these images been more apparent than in Australian travel brochures, posters, and postcards. The image of Australia sold to the world has been based on rugged masculinity and inspired by the mythic icons of Australianness: the bushman, the ANZAC digger, and the lifesaver—all flag bearers of white Anglo-Saxon and, of course, heterosexual manhood.¹⁷ It is no surprise, then, to find elements of Australian masculine iconography in the Mardi Gras parade—parodied, sent up, and destabilized—including hypermasculine gay men reclaiming muscled bodies, “football players” with desires for each other rather than for the game, and Speedo-clad lifesavers. Other issues that occupy socially significant positions in Australia, such as Aboriginal reconciliation, find a space within Mardi Gras. Although many measures have been taken in Australia to reduce if not eradicate institutionalized racism, the social climate is still powerfully racist, as witnessed by the Commonwealth government’s response to the Stolen Generation Report and the birth and rebirth of the ultraconservative One Nation Party.¹⁸

These are ever-present reminders that the claiming of identity, space, and time are small gains indeed. Mardi Gras has taken a strong leadership role in relation to Aboriginal reconciliation, with a strong presence within Fair Day and within the parade itself, but this role would not be universally supported by its constituents. That is, while the Mardi Gras organization has taken a strong initiative in highlighting the systemic racism in Australian society, many of the organization’s members, and participants in its events, do not feel as strongly. The evidence for my claim is only anecdotal and comes from conversations with gay men who see no relationship between discrimination based on sexuality and discrimination based on race, and who consequently see no reason for Mardi Gras to involve itself in racial issues. Nevertheless, Mardi Gras plays an increasingly important role in challenging Australian identity and in creating spaces for the expression of marginalized sexualities. It does this discursively and spatially. The following section examines the spatiality of the Mardi Gras festival and parade and the role of international tourism in the construction of Sydney as a gay and lesbian city.

Festivals and Place Making: Gay Spaces and Gay Times

C. Michael Hall describes hallmark events (festivals and special events) as the “image builders of modern tourism” and demonstrates how they can be used to promote places as tourist destinations, to attract capital, and to reimagine or redevelop places no longer considered worthy of the tourist gaze.¹⁹ Festivals and spe-

cial events contribute to the image of the postmodern city as the “site for pleasure, fun and conspicuous consumption.” Dave Whitson and Don Macintosh show how hallmark events such as the Calgary 1988 Winter Olympics and Vancouver’s Expo ’86 were keenly sought after by local government authorities in their “quest to become a ‘big league’ or ‘world-class city.’”²⁰ However, rather than emerging out of a government or business agenda for urban development or renewal, as many other hallmark events have, Mardi Gras has developed from, and continues to be controlled by, the gay and lesbian communities of Sydney. This is not to deny the (relatively recent) involvement of government in the promotion of the festival at both the state and the federal levels and the corporate sponsorship of certain events. Whereas most other large-scale hallmark events require “large outlays of public moneys,” however, Mardi Gras has developed independently of significant public funding.²¹ It must be mentioned here, however, that considerable corporate funding is available to Mardi Gras through sponsorship arrangements with national and international companies such as Qantas, Telstra, and Smirnoff.

Pritchard, Morgan, and Sedgely argue that festivals and events have played a key role in the promotion of “global gay-friendly destinations” through the creation of a “gay identity” for such cities as Amsterdam, New York, Sydney, London, and Manchester.²² The gay identity of these cities derives from a combination of recognizably gay spaces and places—neighborhoods and territories in which material and symbolic expressions of homosexuality are clearly visible—and, increasingly, the status of these cities as destinations in the global gay and lesbian travel marketplace. Hallmark events generally have an enormous capacity to direct greater international and national attention toward host cities, and Hall and Whitson and Macintosh provide examples of hallmark events purposefully staged to further their host cities’ prominence in the international tourism marketplace.²³ While the genesis of Sydney’s Mardi Gras did not occur in the meeting rooms of urban planners or tourism strategists and marketeers, since the late 1980s Mardi Gras has attracted considerable and, it would seem, ever-increasing support from the three major Australian political parties and from corporations eager to enter into sponsorship agreements. Increased involvement from corporations has undoubtedly allowed Mardi Gras to expand its cultural program, to defray some of the costs associated with the parade, and to occupy a stronger position in the gay and lesbian tourism industry, but such involvement has its own costs. Many critics argue that the increasing role of the corporate sector has compromised the independence of Mardi Gras. Some in Sydney’s gay and lesbian communities feel strongly that Mardi Gras has “sold out” to the corporations in its attempts to win sponsorship dollars.

Moreover, Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Ltd., which organizes the festival and parade, launched its own gay and lesbian travel “agency” in 1999, Mardi Gras Travel. To quote the Mardi Gras *Annual Report* of 1999–2000: “As Australia’s biggest event-based tourism earner it makes sense for Mardi Gras to provide travel facilities for the hundreds of lesbians and gay men eager to be part of our celebrations.”²⁴ While the company does not act as a travel agency in the usual sense, for it has appointed an established gay and lesbian travel agency to operate on its behalf, this development strengthens the relationship between Mardi Gras and the tourism industry and, by extension, consolidates the festival and parade as tourist attractions, both mainstream and gay.

The role of gay tourism (incorporating the interconnected processes of “commodification, consumer capitalism and citizenship”) in the construction of an international gay male community has been examined by David T. Evans, who argues that this community has emerged out of a common acceptance of the centrality of the pursuit of pleasure (chiefly through sexual practices) for gay men, which in turn has led to the collective commodification of gay sex.²⁵ Holcomb and Luongo chart the development and rapid expansion of gay tourism in the United States, while Stephen Clift and Simon Forrest discuss the sexualized nature of gay men’s holiday experiences, although their own empirical study shows that a range of factors, not just the pursuit of sexual adventure, motivates gay men’s choices of holiday destinations and activities. Howard Hughes argues that holidays offer gay men opportunities to experience gay cultures and lifestyles difficult to participate in and adopt at home.²⁶ Evans contends that “the gay [male] tourist is rather more single-mindedly in pursuit of pleasurable sex, encoded in terms of generalised physical and performance principles. . . . the gay [male] tourist pursues gay commodities to the most esoteric of places, where the commodity sought is significantly different from that to be found in developed tourist resorts.”²⁷ In other words, qualitatively and quantitatively different forms of sexual pleasure can be found at different places on the gay male tourist’s map of the world. A nation where recognizable homosexual cultures do not exist (and where homosexual acts may be illegal) offers quite different sexual opportunities from (but not necessarily inferior to) those available at an international “gay resort” city, whether it be New York, Amsterdam, or Sydney. As Stephen Hodge points out: “Places are more than locations on maps. . . . they are cultural creations with varying meanings to the different people who experience them.”²⁸

While homosexual men and women have been actively (if sometimes covertly) engaged in “place making” in Sydney since the late nineteenth century,²⁹ the Mardi Gras festival has played an important role in its designation as an

international gay city. Gay festivals and other special events focus attention on particular cities at specific times of the year and, in effect, link these cities together in a yearlong calendar of activities. For instance, the Sydney-based gay and lesbian travel agency Jornada, in its "calendar of world events," lists thirty-seven special events or festivals in ten nations, ranging from Montreal's Black and Blue Festival and Tokyo's International Lesbian and Gay Film and Video Festival to Stockholm's Europride and Orlando, Florida's, Gay and Lesbian Day at Walt Disney World.³⁰ These globalized gay and lesbian events are constructed and maintained largely by international tourism, itself facilitated by a sophisticated gay and lesbian tourism industry, and by the informal contacts and information sharing that have long occurred in and between gay and lesbian communities. Internet chatrooms and video conferencing programs such as Netmeeting and ICUii have created a potent means of making new friends and fuckbuddies just about anywhere, with important ramifications for international (and domestic) tourism.

Special events and festivals—with their emphasis on fun and celebration, their short duration, and the license they provide for temporary (and limited) transgressions of authority—give marginalized groups such as gays and lesbians vehicles for simultaneously expressing politics, art, and community. It is not surprising, then, that the international gay and lesbian tourism calendar is so full. While a number of authors have made the point that space is generally accepted as "naturally or authentically heterosexual," which can exclude or severely compromise the needs of other sexualities, the same argument does not seem to have been proposed for time.³¹ Yet when we examine the events that mark time over an individual's life, such as birth, marriage, anniversaries, and religiously based celebrations such as Christmas, we see that they too generally assume a heterosexual condition, rather than explicitly acknowledging more inclusive notions of sexual diversity. Pritchard, Morgan, and Sedgely discuss the importance of gay places and spaces, but they neglect to discuss what might be called "gay times," that is, time-spaces during which gay and lesbian themes and issues become prominent in a broad social context.³²

In Sydney, Mardi Gras acts as a gay time, one month out of twelve when mainstream media (and the community generally) focus on gay and lesbian events, issues, and activities. While this increased exposure has considerable social and political value for gays and lesbians, there is a danger of "temporal containment," whereby gay and lesbian issues are given inadequate coverage outside, and when they are not linked to, Mardi Gras. In addition, squeezing so many events and exhibitions into a short period of time creates an asymmetrical year for Sydney gays and lesbians. This may lead to "festival fatigue," as well as drain the emo-

tional and material resources of many participants. However, maintaining and expanding the festival are imperative for sustaining international gay and lesbian (and mainstream) tourism's interest in it, and scaling the festival down or splitting it up over a year would diminish the number of tourists visiting Sydney to participate in it. Furthermore, the parade in particular now seems firmly "locked in" on the Mardi Gras calendar, given that it is the one event in the festival with significant appeal for tourists generally. There is little chance that the parade's potential as a political tool, for example, would be mobilized because of the powerful financial interests of the tourism industry and the various corporate sponsors. In a sense, the Mardi Gras parade is a hostage of its own success.

Since Mardi Gras is a gay time, some measure the passing of time by Mardi Gras festivals. Gary Cross makes a similar point about fairs and festivals in premodern times, when people "lived in remembrance of one festival and in expectation of the next."³³ Just as gay spaces and places provide a spatial context in which open signs of same-sex love and passion can be demonstrated, gay times provide a temporal context in which spaces and places that might otherwise be out of bounds to gays and lesbians can be appropriated by them.

"Placing" the Mardi Gras Festival

Until recently the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Ltd. has resisted the embrace of the mainstream tourism industry, given the association's origins in a community-based political struggle, although it did enter and win the 1998 New South Wales Tourism Awards "Major Festivals and Special Events" category.³⁴ The parade, often equated with Mardi Gras itself, especially by straight people, is only one happening (albeit an extraordinarily popular one with the broader community) among many events, performances, and exhibitions during the festival. Indeed, the 2001 festival comprised nearly eighty events, including fourteen special events (such as Fair Day, the Pool Party, a film festival, a literary festival, and the Mardi Gras Parade and Party), eighteen performing arts or music events, and sixteen visual arts exhibitions.³⁵

The pressure to conform to dominant cultural expectations of sexuality in public spaces is symbolically challenged by events such as the parade and Fair Day, during which public roads and a suburban park, respectively, are appropriated by gay and lesbian communities. Both of these events become sites of "authorized transgression," whereby the hegemonic discourses and practices of heterosexuality are provocatively (and often humorously) subverted. The considerable license given by the authorities who usually regulate and control overt expressions

of homosexuality enables gay and lesbian participants to wear outrageous (or, in many cases, very little) dress and openly to show affection and passion. This license to make use of public space for the open expression of homosexuality has to be granted, however, and is available as part of a "one-off" event, which itself has become a significant foreign exchange earner. For Kenneth Seebohm, "Public rituals such as Mardi Gras remind us of the rule, and they take place in a controlled and authorized environment."³⁶

This contestation frames other cultural expectations about white, male, middle-class forms of homosexual expression. So while the parade and Fair Day challenge normative conventions about who gets to use public space and for what purposes, the problem of gay and lesbian access to safe leisure space remains. "Unsafe space," of course, is constructed not just through the playing out of hegemonic forms of heterosexuality but through the interests of social class, ethnicity, and gender. Interestingly, one performance act of the 2000 Mardi Gras, "Lesbian National Parks and Services," parodied the park ranger role: two Canadian lesbian rangers wandered inside and outside recognizable gay and lesbian spaces, eager to provide information and assistance to tourists and locals alike. By not restricting themselves to gay and lesbian spaces, they extended the physical boundaries of Mardi Gras, as well as ensuring a certain lesbian visibility at an international level.

The recent geography of Mardi Gras has incorporated such culturally significant places as the Opera House, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Centrepoint Tower, and the State Theatre. These places, all located outside the inner-city gay territory of Darlinghurst, reflect Mardi Gras's spatial relationship with the city. The involvement of the Opera House is particularly significant, given its status as a symbol not only of Sydney but of Australia.³⁷ The current Mardi Gras logo, a stylized image of the Opera House incorporating the pink triangle, was adopted in 1986, and for the last few years the Mardi Gras launch has taken place in the forecourt of the Opera House. Holding the launch there explicitly links Mardi Gras with Australianness and, since the Opera House is a site of international spectacle, with an international audience. The Opera House is also interesting because it both echoes the stereotype of "opera queens" and subverts its own elitism by democratizing its forecourt, where the launch takes place. For example, an estimated twenty thousand gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, and people from Sydney, the surrounding regions, and overseas assembled there in the late afternoon heat and humidity to witness the 2001 launch. The strategy of incorporating such a renowned symbol of Australian identity in Mardi Gras has its limits, however, and certain gay and lesbian constituencies, such as those who reject the

Opera House because of its links to high culture and cultural hegemony, or immigrant gays and lesbians for whom it has no real cultural meaning, may prefer not to attend the launch. Thus Mardi Gras runs the risk of disenfranchising participants who do not identify with the version of Australianness that the Opera House symbolizes.

Nonetheless, the Opera House was the venue of the concert that launched the Sydney Lesbian Space Project in December 1991. As Africa Taylor remarks, "It was the taking over of this national icon and its re-signification as a lesbian space for that one night that launched both the magnitude of vision and a substantial sum of seed-funding for the Lesbian Space Project."³⁸ Opera House imagery has also been present at several Mardi Gras parades and has found its way into the dress and sunglass designs of Dame Edna Everage, into the drag show performed at the outback resort in the film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, and into the logo of the Sydney gay leather group Leather Pride. Moreover, the nine competitors in the 1998 Mr. Gay Sydney Quest were photographed in nothing but white underpants on the front steps of the Opera House to promote that competition. The Opera House has therefore been appropriated by camp, if it is not necessarily an icon of camp itself. Indeed, the Mardi Gras Board has requested (but so far been denied) permission from the Sydney Opera House Trust to illuminate the Opera House in pink at night during the festival. It was lit blue for the duration of the 1998 Festival of Sydney, in keeping with the festival's theme.

A notable example of the contested nature of space occurred during the 1998 Mardi Gras when a gay retailer in the Strand Arcade, a prestigious retail mall, was told, without legal justification, that he was violating the conditions of his tenancy by displaying a rainbow flag, the pink triangle, and a Mardi Gras poster in his shop window, along with a greeting to overseas visitors in Sydney for Mardi Gras. The issue received considerable coverage in the gay media, and the retailer was "overwhelmed" with support from both fellow leaseholders and the general public.³⁹ This example suggests that even during a gay time such as Mardi Gras, in spaces outside the gay zones of Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, and King Street, Newtown (like Darlinghurst, a suburb of Sydney), overt representation of homosexuality is restricted. Yet the outlet of the fabric retailer Spotlight in Liverpool, an outer western suburb of Sydney, staged an "eight window display . . . featuring headdresses, sequined fabrics, china and rainbow flags and colourful lighting, all dedicated to this year's [1998] Mardi Gras."⁴⁰ By doing so, Spotlight extended the spatial presence of Mardi Gras into suburbs where homosexual men and women live and work away from the gay territory provided by Oxford Street.

Every aspect of Mardi Gras has been vigorously debated since the festival's inception in 1978; many arguments have focused on the tension between its political and the celebratory dimensions. The Sydney-based gay newspapers have published letters to the editor over a broad canvas of concerns: the difficulties associated with representing homosexualities in the parade, the dulling of the festival's political "edge," the attendance of heterosexuals at the Mardi Gras party, and the increased commercialism brought on, in part, by the festival's relationship with tourism.

Over the last few years there has been rising concern about the philosophical and managerial directions in which various boards of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Ltd. have taken the festival; the association's perceived movement away from its "grassroots" constituency is particularly worrisome to some. Indeed, one group of candidates that stood for election to the 1998 board had as its campaign slogan "Bringing Mardi Gras back to the Community." Concerns about the future of Mardi Gras were even discussed in the *Sun-Herald* in an article that claimed that the "battle to control the multi-million dollar Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras has caused bitter division in Sydney's homosexual community."⁴¹ The reference to the economic importance of Mardi Gras in this quotation is significant: considerable debate has emerged out of concern that Mardi Gras is "big business" and so has lost its political and social spirit. Many gay and lesbian citizens of Sydney have passionate feelings, positive and negative, about Mardi Gras.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that Sydney is an internationally recognized gay city and an increasingly important destination in the rapidly expanding gay and lesbian tourism industry in Australia and the South Pacific. The equally rapid expansion and diversification of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras have played a key role in Sydney's construction as a "world-class gay and lesbian city," which will be reinforced when it hosts the International Gay Games in 2002, just two years after hosting the Olympic Games. Just as the "homomonument" in Amsterdam "represents a powerful symbolic affirmation of gay rights and sexual citizenship [and] as such has become a site of pilgrimage for lesbian and gay visitors from across the world,"⁴² so Mardi Gras "symbolically affirm[s]" both the legitimacy of gay and lesbian cultures and identities and Sydney's place in the global gay and lesbian landscape. But a permanent monument must, to an extent, remain fixed in the time of its creation (although the subsequent meanings attached to it may change), whereas a festival such as Mardi Gras can evolve and adapt itself to the social and

cultural contexts in which it is located and to the internal politics of the gay and lesbian community.

The changes in the nature of the Mardi Gras parade and in its social and political milieu are evident in the relations between the state and Mardi Gras. Whereas in 1978 some sections of the New South Wales Police Service were openly antagonistic to Mardi Gras and encouraged the violent confrontation with which it ended,⁴³ in recent years members of the Police Service have marched in the parade along with the boys' and girls' marching bands, the leather queens and drag queens, and a multitude of other individuals and groups. This change in relations can also be detected in the promotion of Mardi Gras by tourism marketing bodies at both the federal and the state levels of government. Tourism New South Wales recently referred to Mardi Gras as a "tourism icon," whereas its predecessor, the New South Wales Tourism Commission, had been instructed in 1989 not to provide information about the festival to tourists by then minister for tourism Gary West.⁴⁴ The Australian Tourist Commission and Tourism New South Wales, the federal and state bodies responsible for marketing the Australian tourism "product," both give information about Mardi Gras on their Web sites and use images of the Mardi Gras parade in their general promotions of New South Wales and Australia as destinations. Clearly, significant changes have occurred in public perceptions of homosexuality in Australia and in homosexuality's associations with Sydney's image.

Mardi Gras and the tourism associated with it have played a crucial role in the creation of Sydney's image as an international gay and lesbian capital, as a place that not only is tolerant of homosexuality but appears openly to embrace and, to some extent, promote gay and lesbian cultures. Nevertheless, one need not look too deeply to uncover systemic and institutionalized homophobic oppression, inequality, and aggression. Indeed, gay and lesbian newspapers regularly report on violent attacks on gays and lesbians in Darlinghurst, sometimes immediately following the Mardi Gras parade itself. These incidents challenge the assumption that public visibility equals social progress.

While the Australian Tourist Commission claims that "the nation's general acceptance and easy-going attitude to the gay and lesbian community has made Australia an increasingly popular holiday destination for homosexuals of both sexes," the reality for many is different.⁴⁵ The Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, in particular, has pointed out the discrepancy between the general political goodwill directed toward Mardi Gras and the International Gay Games, on the one hand, and, on the other, the lack of political commitment to providing legal recognition of gay and lesbian relationships, equalizing the age of consent between straight

and gay sex, preventing gay youth suicide, and addressing gay immigration issues. Thus there appears to be a contradiction between Sydney's image as a world-class gay and lesbian city, offering the tourist a multitude of experiences and pleasures, and everyday life for many gays and lesbians, especially in the outer suburbs and in regional and rural areas.

Gay activist and commentator Rodney Croome makes a similar point: "Lying just beneath the dazzle of the Mardi Gras and white, inner-city, middle-class gay and lesbian life there is [*sic*] injustice, poverty, powerlessness, alienation and a mountain of resentment."⁴⁶ The arguments concerning the balance among politics and flamboyant celebration, commercialization, and the representation and involvement of women and gays and lesbians of color continue to this day. Nevertheless, the 2001 Mardi Gras comprised a three-week cultural festival concluding with a street parade watched by five hundred thousand and an all-night dance party to which almost twenty-five thousand tickets were sold.

Given the difficulties that Western society (including Australia) has in dealing with sexuality generally, it is not surprising to find ambiguities, contradictions, and internal tensions associated with Mardi Gras. The twenty-three years since the first Mardi Gras, however, have witnessed considerable social and political change in how Australian homosexualities are constructed, represented, regulated, and lived. As Richard Waterhouse observes:

During the 1950s homosexuals were condemned and treated as "deviants," as threats to society and the heterosexual family that underpinned it. The promotion of Mardi Gras in the 90s is a sign both of a more tolerant society and of widespread acceptance that the "traditional" family is not a prerequisite for a stable and "healthy" community.⁴⁷

One of Mardi Gras's challenges will be to negotiate an environment in which its economic significance, with its connections to the international gay and lesbian tourism industry, is increasingly privileged over its social, cultural, and political dimensions by politicians, businesspeople, and the mainstream community. It is equally important to ensure that the spectacle of and the stylized public depictions of gay and lesbian sexualities by the Mardi Gras parade do not overshadow the discrimination, disadvantage, and violence that still affect gays and lesbians in Sydney and elsewhere in Australia. Mardi Gras is still strongly, but not immutably, connected to the community that has created it; it has not yet been reduced to just another spectacle for the consumption of tourists. The debates and disputation concerning the festival point toward the sense of ownership passionately felt by

many local people. There is no unified or collective vision of Mardi Gras's future in the gay and lesbian communities of Sydney and beyond. But meanings shift. Given the enormity of the social and cultural transformations in Australian society in relation to sexuality generally, and the increasing fluidity with which sexuality is now associated, Mardi Gras must negotiate an ever more complex sexual (and political) landscape. Just as places and their meanings and interpretations are constructed out of processes that reflect the dynamic, often contested power relations between the social and cultural groups occupying those places,⁴⁸ so Mardi Gras continues to emerge from a dynamic mix of contested views and philosophical positions.

Notes

I wish to thank my colleague, Georgia Paton, and the guest editor of this issue, Jasbir Kaur Puar, for their insightful comments and criticisms, which have helped me clarify and strengthen my arguments here.

1. I use the terms *gay* and *lesbian* rather than *queer* in this essay in keeping with the terminology employed by the gay and lesbian tourism industry and by the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. While the queer project attempts to destabilize and transcend binary notions of straight/gay, masculine/feminine, and so on, I do not believe that gay and lesbian tourism currently does this. Similarly, up until the writing of this piece, there have been few "queer moments" in the Mardi Gras parade—many, many gay and lesbian moments, and a few bisexual moments, but even fewer that could be regarded as queer. In other words, the parade has consistently privileged the presentation of sexualities in terms of "gay" and "lesbian," as opposed to "bisexual" and "queer," identities.
2. A. Hornery, "How \$99 Million Was Spent with Gay Abandon," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 August 1998, 1.
3. See John Connell, ed., *Sydney: The Emergence of a World City* (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000).
4. Briavel Holcomb and Michael Luongo, "Gay Tourism in the United States," *Annals of Tourism Research* 23 (1996): 711–13; Annette Pritchard, Nigel Morgan, and Diane Sedgely, "Reaching Out to the Gay Tourist: Opportunities and Threats in an Emerging Market Segment," *Tourism Management* 19 (1998): 273–82.
5. Vivian Kinnaird and Derek Hall, "Theorizing Gender in Tourism Research," *Tourism Recreation Research* 25 (2000): 71–84.
6. Trevor Mules, "Globalization and the Economic Impacts of Tourism," in *Tourism in the Twenty-first Century: Lessons from Experience*, ed. Bill Faulkner, Gianna Moscardo, and Eric Laws (London: Continuum, 2000), 312–27.

7. Ning Wang, *Tourism and Modernity: A Sociological Analysis* (Amsterdam: Pergamon, 2000), 134.
8. See Scott Lash and John Urry, *Economies of Signs and Space* (London: Sage, 1994).
9. See Ian Marsh and Larry Galbraith, "The Political Impact of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 30 (1995): 300–320.
10. See Graham Carbery, *A History of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras* (Parkville, Vic.: Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives, 1995).
11. Ibid.
12. In the last ten years there have been four female presidents of Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Ltd., which manages the festival, including the current president, Julie Regan.
13. Ian Marsh and Sam Levy, *Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Economic Impact Statement*, 1998.
14. Julie Regan, president's speech at the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, 9 February 2001.
15. Dennis Altman, "Global Gaze/Global Gays," *GLQ* 3 (1997): 420.
16. Anthony Dennis, "All That Really Matters Is It Was Great, Mate," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 October 2000.
17. See Georgia Young and Peter Brown, "From Bushmen to Bondi Beach: The Social Construction of 'Malestream' Images of Australia in Tourism Advertising," in *Leisure, Tourism, and Environment: Participation, Perceptions, and Preferences*, ed. Malcolm Foley, Matt Frew, and Gayle McPherson (Eastbourne: Leisure Studies Association, 1999), 143–51.
18. The One Nation Party, formed in the mid-1990s, has consistently advanced socially regressive policies widely labeled as racist and xenophobic by other politicians, media commentators, and the broader community. However, One Nation's success in a number of state elections indicates its appeal to some disaffected sectors of the community.
19. C. Michael Hall, *Hallmark Tourist Events: Impacts, Management, and Planning* (London: Belhaven, 1992).
20. P. Bramham and J. Spink, "Leisure and the Postmodern City," in *Leisure: Modernity, Postmodernity, and Lifestyles*, ed. Ian Henry (Brighton: Leisure Studies Association, 1994), 83–104; Dave Whitson and Don Macintosh, "Becoming a World-Class City: Hallmark Events and Sport Franchises in the Growth Strategies of Western Canadian Cities," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 10 (1993): 221–40.
21. Hall, *Hallmark Tourist Events*, 3.
22. Pritchard, Morgan, and Sedgely, "Reaching Out to the Gay Tourist."
23. Hall, *Hallmark Tourist Events*; Whitson and Macintosh, "Becoming a World-Class City."
24. Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Ltd., *Annual Report, 1999–2000*, 7.
25. David T. Evans, *Sexual Citizenship: The Material Construction of Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1993), 108.

26. Holcomb and Luongo, "Gay Tourism in the United States"; Stephen Clift and Simon Forrest, "Gay Men and Tourism: Destinations and Holiday Motivations," *Tourism Management* 20 (1999): 615–25; Howard Hughes, "Holidays and Homosexual Identity," *Tourism Management* 18 (1997): 3–7. It is interesting to speculate on the role that gay male pornography, particularly videos, plays in the "marketing" of certain places as gay holiday destinations. For instance, the Kristen Bjorn-produced video *Manly Beach*, set in Sydney, includes icons such as the Opera House, the harbor, and, of course, Manly Beach, where "the hunkiest, sexiest men in the world live only for the surf and pleasures of the flesh."
27. Evans, *Sexual Citizenship*, 112.
28. Stephen Hodge, "'No Fags Out There': Gay Men, Identity, and Suburbia," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies* 1 (1995): 41–48.
29. See Garry Wotherspoon, *City of the Plain: History of a Gay Sub-culture* (Sydney: Hale and Ironmonger, 1991).
30. Unique Journeys 1996 for Gay Travellers, Forest Travel Pty Ltd. trading as Jornada, Product catalog.
31. See Michael Lauria and Lawrence Knopp, "Toward an Analysis of the Role of Gay Communities in the Urban Renaissance," *Urban Geography* 6 (1985): 152–69; John Binnie, "Trading Places: Consumption, Sexuality, and the Production of Queer Space," in *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, ed. David Bell and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 1995), 182–99; Hodge, "'No Fags Out There'"; Lawrence Knopp, "Sexuality and Urban Space: A Framework for Analysis," in Bell and Valentine, *Mapping Desire*, 149–64; Gill Valentine, "(Re)negotiating the Heterosexual Street," in *Bodyspace: Destabilising Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Nancy Duncan (London: Routledge, 1996), 146–55; and Pritchard, Morgan, and Sedgely, "Reaching Out to the Gay Tourist." The quotation appears in Valentine, "(Re)negotiating the Heterosexual Street," 146.
32. Pritchard, Morgan, and Sedgely, "Reaching Out to the Gay Tourist."
33. Gary Cross, *A Social History of Leisure since 1600* (State College, Pa.: Venture, 1990), 22.
34. V. McQuarrie, "Mardi Gras Snaffles Top Tourism Award," *Sydney Star Observer*, no. 411, 1998, 4.
35. These data derive from the 2001 *Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival Guide*, a publication of 109 pages, including over 60 pages of advertising. With its high production values and ability to attract advertising from major corporations, it is indicative of the commercial success of Mardi Gras.
36. Kenneth Seebom, "The Nature and Meaning of the Sydney Mardi Gras in a Landscape of Inscribed Social Relations," in *Gay Perspectives II: More Essays in Australian Gay Culture*, ed. Robert Aldrich (Sydney: Department of Economic History with the Australian Centre for Gay and Lesbian Research, University of Sydney, 1994), 193–222.

37. See Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity, 1688–1980* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1981); S. Kay, “Sydney Opera House: Site within a Site,” *Australian Mythological Sights, Sites, Cites*, ed. Cathie Payne, Peter McCarthy, and Kurt Brereton (Sydney: Third Degree, 1986), 148–55; John Fiske, Bob Hodge, and Graeme Turner, *Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987); and Hodge, “‘No Fags Out There.’”
38. Africa Taylor, “Lesbian Space: More than One Imagined Territory,” in *New Frontiers of Space, Bodies, and Gender*, ed. Rosa Ainley (London: Routledge, 1998), 129–41.
39. Ruth Pollard, “Unspoken Rule: Strand Bans Rainbow Flag,” *Sydney Star Observer*, no. 338, 1998, 1; Pollard, “Strand Rainbow Flag Stays Put,” *Sydney Star Observer*, no. 389, 1998, 7.
40. Ruth Pollard, “Liverpool Gets Mardi Fever,” *Sydney Star Observer*, no. 390, 1998, 4.
41. H. Gilmore, “Gays in Board Games,” *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 23 August 1998, 19.
42. Binnie, “Trading Places,” 192.
43. Carbery, *History of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras*.
44. Tourism New South Wales, “After Twenty Years, Mardi Gras Has Become a Tourism Icon,” *News*, Summer 1997, 3; Carbery, *History of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras*.
45. Australian Tourist Commission, “Special Interests: Gay and Lesbian Travel in Australia,” 1997, www.aussie.net.au/pl/atc?206317:27:70.
46. Rodney Croome, “The Curse of Gay Triumphalism,” *Sydney Star Observer*, no. 420, 1998, 10.
47. Richard Waterhouse, *Private Pleasures, Public Leisure: A History of Australian Popular Culture since 1788* (South Melbourne: Longman, 1995), 247.
48. See Kay Anderson and Fay Gale, introduction to *Inventing Places: Studies in Cultural Geography*, ed. Kay Anderson and Fay Gale (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1992), 1–11.