

Excavating desire: queer heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region

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Introduction

How might we define the term ‘queer heritage’? We could choose to define it as encompassing the whole culture of ‘queerness’ that we have in a sense ‘inherited’ from the past. And that would include everything from our politics to our language to our literature. In other words, it would constitute the passing on of a tradition of what it has meant to be queer in this part of the world.

What I am concerned with here, however, is restricted to the physical places and landscapes created or inhabited by homosexuals in the Asia-Pacific region in the past. These would include the buildings or outdoor spaces that we have lived in, danced in, or had sex in. The places where we have created gardens, painted, written novels, or fallen in love. It would include gay beaches and gay beach resorts, the sites of lesbian music camps, famous cruising areas in public parks or shopping malls, saunas and sex clubs, gay hairdressers, drag clubs, gay and lesbian discos. It would also, of course, include sites of discrimination and physical violence against us.

There are also the gay websites like Gaydar and Fridae which contain places like chatrooms and noticeboards where people meet and circulate in a queer virtual landscape. I restrict myself in this paper, however, to ‘real’ topographic space as distinct from virtual space.

What I’m invoking when I talk about queer heritage is a whole queer geography or topography. That is to say, a constellation of sites of homosexuality scattered across the landscape

along with the conceptual and physical linkages ('pathways') between them. Each year new places are added to this landscape and old places grow a little older. Places close down, burn down, fall down; they deteriorate and, like we older queens, they slip quietly into a state of ruin (gracefully, we'd like to think). Inevitably, many 'places' eventually cease to be represented on the ground by any readily observable physical traces, which is not to say that archaeological traces wouldn't still be present. Even so, the places may continue to live in people's memories and have a presence in the books, magazines, and photos that 'capture' and evoke them.

The natural & the unnatural: gay beaches

All over the world these days governments and volunteer groups are busy creating lists of heritage places they want to protect and conserve. Here in Thailand, for instance, the government's Fine Arts Department maintains a heritage database that includes several thousand sites ranging from 19th century shophouses to ancient Buddhist temples, Khmer sanctuaries in the Northeast, and the residences of former kings.

Should we, then, also be recording and listing queer heritage sites and, if we did so, what would these lists look like. I've already mentioned some of the places that might be included, most of which consist of built structures such as clubs, shops, houses that have been associated with gays in the past (and I am narrowing my focus now to gay heritage since that's what I know). These gay/queer heritage sites are predominantly urban, predominantly what we would refer to as 'built heritage'. But what about unbuilt space? Is there such a thing as the queer natural environment?

National Parks organisations in Australia and North America tend to have a significant representation of lesbians on their staff as park rangers and park managers. This might suggest, however obliquely, that the natural environment has a particular resonance for lesbians. In the case of gay men, park rangers seem to have an established place in sexual fantasy (consider, for

instance, how often they pop up in gay porn) but in reality very few gay men seem to be attracted to this line of work (I mean the rangering, not the sex).

Gay men, however, do frequent national parks and I will mention here two ‘gay beaches’ which are on either side of Sydney harbour, both located in Sydney Harbour National Park. Obelisk Beach lies on the north side of the harbour and Lady Jane on the south side. Both beaches are relatively small, extending only a few hundred metres from end to end. Although gays make up only about half (very approximately) of the people who patronise these beaches, the gay community has a long history of using them and quite a strong sense of ownership of them. In a city obsessed with beaches and beach culture, these two places have iconic status among gays. Nudity is permitted at both beaches and at Lady Jane it is almost universal.

The slopes behind Obelisk beach are thickly clothed with native shrubs and trees and this bushland is penetrated by a maze of narrow informal foot tracks. In many places the tree-shrub canopy closes over the space above the tracks, turning them into tunnels. For many, many years gay guys have used these secluded tracks for cruising, the vicinity acting as a kind of vegetated ‘back-room’ in relation to the beach. The tracks are also used and for moving between secluded sun-bathing spots on the semi-horizontal ‘platform’ outcrops of sandstone bedrock. It is likely that it is this ‘back-room’ traffic that has actually formed the network of tracks in the first place, so they can be thought as queer in a dedicated or primary, rather than an opportunistic sense. In places the tracks open out onto small clearings on top of the more-or-less sheer orange-brown sandstone cliffs that rise out of the harbour and lend it so much of its character. In this rather spectacular natural setting gays over many years have indulged in the pleasure of open-air sex, often against the glittering background of the harbour waters.

Lady Jane beach is located on the inner side of the south headland at the mouth of the harbour, a headland that is not endowed with bush cover. Gay cruising here takes the alternative form of rambling over the sandstone cliffs and the often massive fallen cliff fragments that pile up from the waterline at the base of the cliffs. These boulder slopes feature small expanses of sloping flat

surfaces that are good for sunbathing and many nooks and crannies that are relatively secluded (except from the distant eyes of those in passing yachts and ferries). Al fresco gay sex is one of the traditional activities of those who frequent these cliffs.

The Plan of Management for that part of Sydney Harbour National Park which includes Obelisk foreshadows that in future the network of cruising tracks will be closed and revegetated. The Plan refers to them as tracks used simply by ‘sunbathers’, which of course is part of the truth but is also a coy avoidance of what the park managers well know is rest of the truth. If the park managers have their way, the slopes behind Obelisk will be returned to their normative natural state, thus reinstating a certain vision of normative outdoor human behaviour. In the process a piece of Sydney’s gay heritage will be destroyed. In the case of Lady Jane, the Plan contains nothing that would actively detract from the gay heritage of the place but, again, it simply ignores this dimension of the place altogether.

I would hesitate to describe this as an attempt to enforce hetero-normative behaviour in national parks. Rather, as far as I can discover, it is a kind of avoidance of the fact that sex occurs in national parks at all. Yet, as we know, people love having sex outdoors and have been busily doing it for millions of years – you only have to think of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But park managers appear to have a strange coyness about sex, a blind spot about it.

There is no question that both Obelisk and Lady Jane beaches are queer heritage sites of significance to a substantial proportion of Sydney’s gay population. The reason the park managers are able to ignore this fact is that Sydney’s gay community has never taken the trouble to formally and publicly identify these beaches as a part of our heritage. To insist, in other words, that history has constructed the beaches and their environs as homo-flirtatious, homo-erotic, homo-sexual spaces. To insist that, like it or not, the gay cruising and sex that occurs there is not only sanctioned by long tradition but is a part of the essence of what these places are. The queer history of these places is not simply an aspect of their meaning, it is formative of their meaning.

Heritage & the gay underground

One of the defining characteristics of queer heritage is its 'underground' nature. Because of the history of the suppression of homosexuality in places like Australia, the 'queer map' in say the 1940s or 50s was a highly secretive and private one. The only people who knew the places where homosexuals met socially or sexually were homosexuals themselves and those who hunted them (the police and homophobes). Because of the latter, the network of meeting places had to be fluid and changeable, which meant that to be actively homosexual one had to tap into a grapevine of underground topographic knowledge.

All this is simply to say that homosexuals were among the many categories of people who were marginalised and in some cases outlawed. These others have at various times and in various places included Communists, ethnic minorities, Indigenous minorities, and members of banned religions. Their imprint on the landscape has often been hard to detect due to their need to 'keep their heads down'. Michel De Certeau (1984) showed how the marginalised are able to live inside the landscapes of empowered majorities partly by their ability to poach on public spaces (e.g., parks and streets). Poaching is thus a tactic used by the disempowered to create space for themselves. A tactic, as Certeau (1984: 36) says,

must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them.

In the field of heritage conservation, there are international charters and protocols (e.g., the Nara Document on Authenticity, 1994) which recognise the value of these normally less-than-spectacular traces that may constitute the heritage of the historically disempowered. So there is no problem, as far as international convention go, with getting recognition for queer heritage places.

For & against the conservation of queer heritage

But whether or not we should actively conserve the somewhat intangible heritage landscape of homosexuality in the Asian-Pacific region remains an open question. Perhaps the strongest argument that can be made for recording and conservation is that this can assist in fighting disempowerment.

Heritage is a field that is highly contested and the social groups which have most power in society have most chance of having their story/experience commemorated as history. Dolores Hayden (1995) has shown, for instance, how heritage inventories in the US have in the past not only routinely excluded African-Americans and their historical experience, but have also excluded the white working class and its historical experience, just as they have tended to exclude women and their historical experience. If you are a minority group, heritage visibility is often an issue of struggle. Not to struggle is to remain invisible in the heritage landscape.

So if we fail to record the heritage of homosexuality then it is that much easier for governments and empowered majorities to pretend or assert that homosexuality has not existed in the past and this makes it that much easier to deny its legitimacy in the present. Equal rights thus implies equal visibility, including visibility in the past. Such, in a very rough form, is the argument for conserving queer heritage.

The argument against conserving queer heritage, however, is equally compelling. Recording of queer heritage sites and entering them on government heritage registers to some extent means integrating them into mainstream culture. The whole heritage industry can be held accountable for turning culture into a commodity, of marketing it as a spectacle, a situation in which it might be said that people do not “live” art and culture any more, they consume its performance’ (Hodder 1986: 165).

The mainstreaming of queer culture would seem to involve a contradiction in terms: if it is mainstream it is no longer queer. You might say that in an age of increasingly ‘homogenised’

culture it might not necessarily be a bad thing to be marginalised, or at least to insist on a degree of difference that makes it difficult for the mainstream to assimilate you.

Queer archaeology in everyday life

Though I am myself a heritage professional, I have to say that the idea of conserving queer heritage leaves me somewhat cold. This is because the heritage process tends to materialise the past at the expense of its social value and meaning. In the case of queer heritage conservation, one of the dangers is that what you would end up with would be the physical sites of the queer past somehow de-eroticised.

What makes the queer landscape of the present so interesting for us is that it has living, breathing sexual beings in it. It is a landscape infused with the quality of desire. It is a space that is eroticised and this eroticism is what energises it, what animates it, what switches it on and lights it up.

On the face of it, it might seem that the heritage landscape cannot be animated with desire because the queer figures in the landscape are only a memory. They are dead and gone to queer Heaven (a famous London nightclub) or to the dungeon bars of queer hell. What would be the point, one might ask, of trying to preserve places that are hollowed out of the very quality that gave them meaning?

I would like to argue against this, though, and suggest that it is possible to experience queer heritage sites sensually in the present precisely because traces of the erotic/queer past are sedimented within them. While a professionalised queer archaeology might concern itself with physically excavating traces of past queer life that are deposited in the ground, an everyday queer archaeology might simply consist of 'ordinary' homosexuals and others visiting queer sites from the past and experiencing the after-images of desire and eroticism that linger there. By 'ordinary' I mean people who are not professional archaeologists but who are able, by their openness and

sensitivity to the past and to place, to practice archaeology in their everyday lives. In many cases this would be a text-aided archaeology: they would visit these sites armed with photos taken at that time, biographies, drawings etc that help evoke. It would also be aided by the imagination, the genius we humans have for imagining how things were or might have been; the ability to rehearse in our imagination how people looked, how they felt, how they loved.

In common with other modernist disciplines, however, the discipline of archaeology might be said to be imbued with a ‘suspicion of experience’ as a way of understanding artefacts or places from the past (Thomas 2004: 57). The sensuous queer archaeology of the everyday that I describe and advocate here is thus not a modernist/Cartesian one; it celebrates experience (e.g., intimations of the erotic perceived in the heritage landscape) rather than suspects it. It is an archaeology that operates on the understanding that when we encounter a queer heritage site in the landscape what occurs is not simple that, through our imagination and desires, we inscribe meaning onto ‘a Cartesian world of inert substance’ (Thomas 2004: 214). Rather, that the landscape we encounter in the present is already meaningfully constituted and that, in a sense, it speaks to us. In our case, the lived experience of homosexuals who existed in these places in the past – their activities, their loves etc – has sedimented itself into physical being of the places. The places are thus not inert. Their presence interacts with our presence (e.g., as visitors) and in this sense they can be thought of as having agency. The past they embody can excite our imaginations and our emotions.

The archaeology I am describing and advocating is not an objective one of scientific detachment. It is a pleasurable, sensuous spatial practice which helps us to expand our potential as sensuous, sexed, queer beings. So I would say that over and above the question of whether or not we should conserve gay heritage, an awareness of it is something we can all cultivate as a pleasurable end in itself.

Two queer heritage sites in Bali

I want to conclude my paper by looking very quickly at a couple of gay heritage sites, both of them on the island of Bali, where I lived for a few years in the early 1990s. The first is the house of the German artist, Walter Spies, who in 1927, at the age of 32, went to live at Campuan near Ubud in the hills on the south side of the island between volcanic peaks and the sea. He built a modest house there amid the tropical vegetation overlooking a deep jungle-filled ravine. Walter Spies was entranced by the natural and cultural environment of Bali and was enchanted by the young Balinese men living around him who became subjects of his art, and the focus of his sexual desire and his friendships. Spies in many ways is the quintessential Orientalist romantic. He played a major role in the mythic production of Bali as an island paradise. The downside of his story is that in the late 1930s, as part of a moral rectitude campaign, he was prosecuted by a colonial Dutch court for his homosexual relationships with young Balinese men. He was jailed and then, in 1942, deported back to Europe on a ship that was torpedoed by the Japanese. He drowned to death, trapped in the hold of the ship along with the other prisoners.

His house was subsequently incorporated into the grounds of the Campuan Hotel. When I tracked it down in the early 1990s by matching it against a 1930s photograph, the house was undergoing a fairly sympathetic restoration and is now being used as hotel accommodation. It occurs to me that the more dedicated queer heritage followers might want to stay in Spies' former bungalow at the Campuan Hotel, which they could do for about US\$100 a night. They could even hope to re-enact, in his former bedroom, the homosexual acts that ultimately proved fatal to him (there are arguments in favours and against the current fad for historical re-enactment which I will not engage with here).

In addition to the house, Walter Spies' surviving archaeological footprint at Campuan includes the swimming pool that he built on a terrace above the ravine and some garden walls constructed out of river pebbles.

A very different site of homosexuality is located on the coast of Bali to the northwest of the tourist enclaves of Kuta and Seminyak. Here a beach shack made of wood, corrugated iron sheets and bamboo has for the last 20 years or so served as a kiosk for what could be vaguely defined as a gay beach, a drop-in centre for gossip and cold drinks for local gays and gay expatriates and tourists. The place is ‘owned’, or at least presided over by Ketut, a Balinese man in his late middle age.

There is no question that thousands if not tens of thousands of gay guys have visited and patronised this place and many of them would have an attachment to it. In heritage terms, the place has ‘social significance’. But it also typifies the problematic of queer heritage conservation.

The beach shack is a fragile and ephemeral structure. It has burnt down at least twice in the 1990s and could be removed altogether if Ketut decided to retire or if the local authorities decided to remove all ‘irregular’ structures from the beaches. Any attempt to list the place on a government heritage register would, I imagine, simply hasten its demise, attracting the sort of official attention that would destroy its value to those who patronise it. It would even seem rather pointless to record or document it photographically since this has already been done, informally, over the years by many gay guys. Any attempt to turn such a place into a ‘self-conscious’ heritage item would either destroy its significance or freeze it as a kind of museum piece.

So here are two different queer heritage sites. One of them is visitable and could even become a focus for gay heritage tourism. The other will almost certainly vanish as a physical entity and will survive only as a memory.

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