

## Not on the Beach, or Death in Bondi?

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By



Sydney's Bondi Beach in January 2012. Photo: [Alex Proimos](#)

As sometimes happens in Sydney in late March, toward the end of summer, that particular Friday was brilliantly hot and sunny, drawing crowds to the eastern beaches, especially Bondi. An exceptionally large stretch of sand, an outspread stage in a natural amphitheater, popular with backpackers and other foreign visitors, the beach soon contained more than the permitted five hundred revelers. During the previous week, Australian governments had begun to recognize the Covid-19 threat, becoming concerned about “social distancing” in large gatherings. Apparently flouting the new rules, sunbathers and surfers prompted a furious reaction from politicians and the media. And so, the following day, on March 21, 2020, police cleared the iconic beach, inadvertently channeling many beachgoers into adjacent bars and hostels. In the pandemic, the beach had come to signify extreme danger.

Just three months earlier, the beach at Mallacoota, across the border in Victoria, was being celebrated as a refuge for local residents and

holidaymakers from raging bushfires. On New Year's Eve 2019, it became a place offering shelter and safety, a sort of immunity, [for close to 4,000 people forced towards the ocean](#). The beach was no longer a site of pleasure, but rather a place of last resort, a sanctuary. The air was heavy with smoke and haze, the sky blackened, and fires roared. "They were sitting on deckchairs down at the foreshore," [Lou Battel, the local publican, reported](#), "but it got pretty nasty when embers came in so they jumped in the water." A few days later, a naval ship plucked the weary, scared refugees off the strand.

How is it that Australian beaches were transformed so quickly from places of refuge to spaces of contamination? Geoffrey Dutton believed that white Australians regard their beaches as "[sacred sites or temples](#)."<sup>[1]</sup> So why does SARS-CoV-2 seem so conspicuously to defile or pollute such sanctuaries? What might that tell us about our apprehension of the social life of the virus?

The crowds that gathered on Bondi that sultry Friday morning incensed state and federal politicians, even as most public health officers remained quiescent. "What we saw this morning at Bondi beach was the most irresponsible behavior," declared David Elliott, the New South Wales Police and Emergency Services Minister, [notorious for having taken his family on a European vacation](#) during the worst of the recent fire season. "It is with a significant level of disappointment that we have to ... not only remove people from Bondi beach," he continued, "but use this as an opportunity to remind everyone that the Health Act must be complied with. This is not something we're doing because we're the fun police.... This is about saving lives." A former military officer, [Elliott then concluded grimly](#): "We will be closing down the type of iconic activities that unfortunately we've come to know to love and adore about our lifestyle."

[State Health Minister Brad Hazzard similarly was distressed](#). "I was bitterly disappointed when I was told there were large groups down at Bondi, that mecca for so many foreign tourists.... The government has taken the steps needed to make sure people know this is [not acceptable]. Young people may feel this isn't going to hurt me so why worry. It can hurt you and it can hurt your family and friends. Have a look overseas and see what's happening in other countries." Few remembered that Hazzard has form on dangerous beach occupancy, having led the campaign in the early 1990s against the contagion of nude bathing in Sydney.<sup>[2]</sup> Evidently, the city's beaches, especially those favored by young foreign backpackers, can be exceptionally hazardous places.

Before long, [other beaches along Sydney's coastline also were closed](#). No exercise or dog walking or surfing was allowed; venturing onto the sand was strictly forbidden. Council workers erected heavy metal fences to

prevent all access. The vehement fixation on urban beaches is striking, especially since there was no evidence that the virus had been transmitted on a beach. Certainly, a couple of parties in the suburb of Bondi had promoted limited outbreaks, though without further significant community spread. That Friday, a few larger groups of visitors were congregating on the beach, but mostly people distributed themselves widely, leaving plenty of distance between bodies, as they usually do when sunbathing in Australia. The proscribing of surfing was even more perplexing. [As one aged surfer put it to a reporter](#): “When are you ever less than two metres away from someone in the surf?” A moral panic, not epidemiological rationality, seemed to be driving the response in Sydney.

The beach has long occupied a special place in Australian imagination. Cultural critic John Fiske regarded it as an “anomalous category” between land and sea, or culture and nature—an unstable, ambiguous space likely to be designated “sacred” or “taboo” if only to make it appear more knowable and secure.<sup>[3]</sup> Although often experienced as a site for pleasure and relaxation, it equally could evoke anxiety and discomfort, a sense of threat and vulnerability. Australian beaches therefore are littered with prohibition notices and warning flags; lifesavers (or lifeguards) stringently patrol and discipline swimmers and errant surfers. The perceived potential for subversion or transgression of this controlled space is boundless: from not only the rare shark, but also feckless surfers, perverted unclothed bodies, Aboriginal people, backpackers, Asian tourists, those of ‘Middle-Eastern appearance’. They are all possibly contaminating or endangering the idealized, well-regulated, white space of the Australian beach—the “scene of white, male Ordinariness,” as Meaghan Morris described it.<sup>[4]</sup> At times, it seems the beach might sink and disappear under the weight of all this symbolism.

The implicit whiteness of the Australian beach was revealed perhaps most visibly south of Bondi, on Cronulla beach in December 2005. In the middle of the month, at the start of summer, nearly 5,000 young white men, many of them drunk, draped in Australian flags, and shouting racist slogans, gathered on the beach to repel Lebanese-Australians arriving from the western suburbs of Sydney. Rumors had circulated that youths of Middle-Eastern appearance were taunting and threatening to molest white Australian girls, as well as assaulting Anglo-Australian lifesavers.<sup>[5]</sup> The white hooligans had come to reclaim and purify “their” beach, to take it back from dangerous strangers, to render it homogeneous and safe again, emptied of threat.<sup>[6]</sup> They wanted to return the beach to a place of white refuge, not a possible contact zone, perceived as laden with risks of contamination. A similar logic of reading difference as transgression—reframed more precisely in terms of infection control—seems to be at work on Bondi beach this summer.

In the Covid-19 pandemic, Australian beaches have been imagined simply as anomalous spaces of contamination, shorn of their ecological and sociological complexity, their actual life worlds. The understanding of viral transmission has been reduced to a mechanical model of contact and contamination, with some alien and stigmatized groups recognized as having special proclivity for carrying and communicating the pathogen—stranger super-spreaders—on safeguarded and sacralized sites, such as the beach. The environmental, social, and cultural complexity of disease transmission, the varied and contingent configurations of spread, are erased, replaced by fear of proximity to others. Disease prevention dwindles into a purification ritual.

In 2020, we have seen on Australian beaches a fantastic restaging, a distorted Antipodean magnification, of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912). Dispirited and worn out, German writer Gustav von Aschenbach sought refuge on the Lido, the beach in Venice, a site of pleasure and fancy. But "Asiatic cholera," like the "China virus" today, was secretly stalking beachgoers. The menacing microbe, according to Mann, originated in "the sultry morasses of the Ganges delta, rising from the mephitic exhalations of that wilderness of rank useless luxuriance, that primitive island jungle shunned by man"—by the vulnerable white man, at least.<sup>[1]</sup> Aschenbach died from cholera on the beach, as he struggled to get out of his deckchair. So goes the story, and our fevered imagination—only no one, in fact, was ever likely to die on Bondi beach.

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[1] Geoffrey Dutton, *Sun, Sea, Surf and Sand: The Myth of the Beach* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 6.

[2] Anon., 'Perverts the problem, say residents', *Northern Herald* (5 December 1991).

[3] John Fiske, 'Surfalism and sandiotics: the beach in Oz culture', *Australian J. of Cultural Studies* 1 (1983): 120-49, p. 120.

[4] Meaghan Morris, 'On the beach', in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 450-78, p. 452.

[5] Greg Noble, ed., *Lines in the Sand: The Cronulla Riots, Multiculturalism*

and *National Belonging* (Sydney: Institute of Criminology, 2009).

<sup>[6]</sup> Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Fiona Nicoll, 'We shall fight them on the beaches: protecting cultures of white possession', *J. of Australian Studies* 30 (2006): 149-60.

<sup>[7]</sup> Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice and Other Stories*, trans. David Luke (New York: Bantam, 1988), pp. 252-53.

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