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The spectacle of the queer “Other”: Māori gay(zing) at the 41st Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras 2019 ¹

For Baba. Thank you for loving me.

Introduction

This article will explore some of my observations of the 41st Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras 2019. I travelled to Sydney on Thursday 28 February. Rather appropriately, I selected the 2018 biographical film, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, as inflight entertainment, all the while contemplating what sequin-encrusted experiences I might encounter during my stay in Sydney. I had booked accommodation at the Pullman Sydney Hyde Park Hotel months in advance. Like every other surface in and around Oxford Street, the hotel had been queered-up with rainbows and a life-sized bejewelled unicorn in the foyer. While eating breakfast on Friday morning, the shimmering disco balls and background dance music seemed to be inviting me to shimmy my way to the egg station. Staff and guests alike, including entire families, were buzzing about the upcoming climax to a month-long festival of all things gay featuring over 190 floats, 12,500 participants, and thousands upon thousands of spectators from Australia and around the world (Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Limited, 2019a).

¹ The title for this article has been adapted from Stuart Hall’s (1997) chapter title *The Spectacle of the “Other”*.

Image 1: Mardi Gras Unicorn, Pullman Sydney Hyde Park Hotel

(B. Rangiwai, private collection)

Born from a single night of political protest in 1978, the true Mardi Gras spirit lives on 41 years later, bringing the city to a standstill with hundreds and thousands lining the streets in support of equality, pride and a dazzling spectacle of sparkles and self-expression (Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Limited, 2019a, n. p.).

Originating from a political protest in 1978, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras “...is elaborate, visually spectacular and brazenly hedonistic” and has become one of the largest and most well-known gay and lesbian festivals in the world (Mason & Lo, 2009, p. 98). While in the mid to late 1990s the festival, at the height of its popularity, enticed an audience in excess of half a million (Mason & Lo, 2009), one 2006 report claimed that despite financial difficulties and being scaled back, the festival still attracted at least 300,000 people (ABC News, 2006). Consistently, of the 2018 festival, Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Limited (2019b) states that “...an estimated 300,000 spectators filled the streets to watch over 12,000 participants take part in the world’s biggest celebration of the LGBTIQI community, the 40th annual Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade” (n.p.). Certainly “...no other gay and lesbian

cultural festival matches Mardi Gras’ scale” (Marsh & Levy, 1998, p. 4).

Image 2: Rainbow painted pathway at the entrance to the Pullman Sydney Hyde Park Hotel



(B. Rangiwai, personal collection)

The Sydney Mardi Gras is a hallmark event for Sydney and Australia (Marsh & Levy, 1998). It is an essential element of Australian sexual politics (Carbery, 1995; Haire, 2001; Kates, 2003; Mason & Lo, 2009; Tomsen & Markwell, 2009) and is a fundamental part of Sydney’s tourism industry (Best, 2005; Markwell, 2002; Ryan & Hall, 2001; Waitt & Markwell, 2006). Indeed, the Mardi Gras is a highly significant event for Australian culture and society concerning economics, art, performance, and advocacy for social tolerance (Carbery, 1995). The Sydney Mardi Gras has become one of Sydney’s biggest events and contributes an estimated \$40 million to the economy (New Zealand Herald, 2019).

Image 3: Shopfront display, Oxford Street

(B. Rangiwai, personal collection)

The parade "...begins in the heart of the city and travels several kilometres along Oxford Street, Sydney's gay precinct, towards the site of its finale, a massive all-night dance party" (Mason & Lo, 2009, pp. 97-98). The parade is led by motorcycle riding, sometimes bare-breasted (Mason & Lo, 2009), women known as the 'Dykes on Bikes':

In a subculture dominated by masculine working-class identities, the Dykes on Bikes play with femininities and masculinities through motorcycle skills, dress and riding styles. These performances challenge dominant sexual and cultural expectations of what a woman is and what a woman can do (de Jong, 2015, p. 2).

Image 4: St James train station



(B. Rangiwai, personal collection)

To say that the Mardi Gras was an eye-opening experience for me is an understatement. The vibe and pulse of Oxford Street before and during the parade was extraordinary. Many hours before the parade kicked off, individuals, groups, and families claimed their road-side spots ahead of the arrival of 300,000 parade-goers. The air was thick with excitement.

As the parade began, I watched, at first, from the marshalling area on College Street. The music was loud. Extremely loud. Each float had its own music. The discordant beats and keys of hundreds of floats created a sense of extreme exhilaration and anticipation. The sounds of Brazilian drums, and other musical instruments combined to create a carnival-like, super-charged atmosphere.

Image 5: University of Sydney float screen display

(B. Rangiwai, personal collection)

Oxford Street was heaving with hundreds and thousands of revellers cheering, singing along to float music, screaming, hugging, jumping, and dancing their way along the parade path. I was somewhat surprised to see so many children, including babies, with their parents. People of all ethnicities, genders, and sexualities merged to enjoy the festivities. Businesses took advantage of the masses by bringing food and drink (non-alcoholic) to the streets, alongside street vendors, which increased the festival feeling of the parade. Māori whom I encountered on the streets, said “kia ora”, and one enthusiastic Māori bouncer, at the peak of the parade, fist bumped me and exclaimed “Chur, my Māori!”

Image 6: Shopfront display, Oxford Street



(B. Rangiwai, personal collection)

Words such as “crazy” and “intense” inadequately describe the parade experience, but they point to a celebration of the hedonistic and excessive. Indeed, the Mardi Gras is characterised by outrageous and satirical performances:

...featuring lavishly dressed drag queens, synchronized marching boys wearing nothing but glitter and tiny shorts, bare-bottomed leather men whipping each other, sequined women kissing, dancing and gyrating to thumping music, men dressed as nuns and so on (Mason & Lo, 2009, p. 98).

Image 7: "Proud" sequence, University of Sydney float screen display

(B. Rangiwai, personal collection)

While the Mardi Gras is a month-long event attended mainly by gay men and lesbians: “The parade is the only event that attracts a predominantly heterosexual audience: a feature that also distinguishes it from many other gay and lesbian parades around the world” (Mason & Lo, 2009, p. 98). In Mason and Lo’s (2009) *Sexual tourism and the excitement of the strange: Heterosexuality and the Sydney Mardi Gras Parade*, they argue that the primarily straight crowds that attend the parade – whose attitudes to homosexuality range from gay-friendly to intolerant – do so as sexual tourists. As sexual tourists, their desire it is to witness a “...spectacle of homosexual carnality” and “...immerse themselves in a ‘strange’ experience but only on the condition that it ‘can be shaken off whenever they wish” (p. 99). While I cannot state with any authority that the 2019 parade was attended by a mostly heterosexual crowd, I did notice huge numbers of heterosexual couples, including those with children, getting involved in the festivities.

Gay pride parades, like the Sydney Mardi Gras, as sexual tourism events (Mason & Lo, 2009), include corporeal performances that, paradoxically, both conform to and disturb heterosexual culture (Johnston, 2005a, 2005b). The parading

of the usually excluded “outrageous and mocking” queer spectacle (Kates, 2003, p. 5), temporarily interrupts and inverts the socially accepted hierarchies, exposing the power structures beneath, and challenging the very nature of societal norms (Abrahams & Bauman, 1978; Babcock, 1978; Belk, 1994; Kates & Belk, 2001). Certainly:

Carnavalesque celebrations such as Lesbian and Gay Pride festivals observed all over the world are opportunities for revellers to invoke and reaffirm cultural meanings that appear to transcend the everyday. By doing so, these festivals create “liminal spaces” that transform relationships among individuals, gay communities, and the heterosexual mainstream – if only for a day (Kates, 2003, p. 5).

Image 8: Shopfront display, Oxford Street



(B. Rangiwai, personal communication)

The Sydney Mardi Gras may be described as the commodification and commercialisation of homonormativity in ways that are branded, controlled, and regulated (Bell & Binnie, 2000). The commercial and corporate interests in the parade was blindingly obvious. Every conceivable brand seemed to have donned glittering playsuits for the occasion. The power and pull of the so-called “pink dollar” – a contribution to the economy of tens of millions of dollars – was flagrant. In this sense, the

parade was a carnival of consumption and consumerism. Consumption rituals may be experienced as “liberating and emancipating” (Kates, 2003, p 5; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995): “...the Mardi Gras, a postmodern spectacle – a signifier seemingly divorced from any stabilizing, anchoring signified – is communicated, diffused, and consumed by both gays and heterosexuals alike” (Kates, 2003, p. 5).

The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras was unequivocally one of the most intense festival/parade experiences that I have had in my life to date. It was colourful. It was “in your face”. It was confronting. It was confusing. It was sexuality on acid. Hierarchies were inverted. Lines were blurred. Genders were mingled and/or dissolved. Boundaries were “pleasurably” crossed. But most of all, people celebrated life. The queer spectacle was front and centre, tap dancing her/his/their way into the hearts of the masses. Perhaps this “admiration” is temporary, as some have claimed, or maybe with each passing parade, the LGBTQI goal of true acceptance by society gets closer to realisation. Hopefully, acceptance, tolerance, and love, exist on both sides of the rainbow.

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