1-1-2006

Places of reconciliation: gay, lesbian and transgender place-based belongings in a regional Australian centre

Gordon R. Waitt
University of Wollongong, gwaitt@uow.edu.au

Andrew W. Gorman-Murray
University of Wollongong, andrewgm@uow.edu.au

Recommended Citation

Places of reconciliation: gay, lesbian and transgender place-based belongings in a regional Australian centre

Abstract

Place-based belonging is a key concern of geographical work on sexuality. Marginalised through practices of heterosexism and homophobia, gay men, lesbians and other sexual minorities have a heightened awareness of where they belong – of where they can perform sexual difference. Much research here focuses on place-based belonging in metropolitan centres. There is less consideration of how sexual minorities sustain place-based belonging in regional centres, which are also believed to exhibit higher levels of homophobia. Drawing on in-depth interviews, we examine how sexual minorities generate place-based belonging in Townsville. We argue that place-based belonging be understood as an ongoing relational process where subjects and places are mutually-constituted. Individuals' everyday practices are simultaneously place-making activities, through which subjects actively make places of attachment. We argue that sexuality intertwines with other dimensions of self in these place-making practices, so that belonging is often a function of reconciling different axes of identification. As such, to understand these nuances we must be sensitive to individual life stories, and not force generalisations across differences. To this end, we selectively present, and draw similarities and differences across, three individual narratives of place-based belonging in Townsville. This offers insights into how sexual minorities born in regional centres can 'belong' and 'be themselves'.

Keywords

Disciplines

Life Sciences | Physical Sciences and Mathematics | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Places of reconciliation: gay, lesbian and transgender place-based belongings in a regional Australian centre

Gordon Waitt
School of Earth and Environmental Sciences
University of Wollongong
gwaitt@uow.edu.au

Andrew Gorman-Murray
School of Earth and Environmental Sciences
University of Wollongong
andrewgm@uow.edu.au

Abstract:

Place-based belonging is a key concern of geographical work on sexuality. Marginalised through practices of heterosexism and homophobia, gay men, lesbians and other sexual minorities have a heightened awareness of *where* they belong – of where they *can* perform sexual difference. Much research here focuses on place-based belonging in metropolitan centres. There is less consideration of how sexual minorities sustain place-based belonging in regional centres, which are also believed to exhibit higher levels of homophobia. Drawing on in-depth interviews, we examine how sexual minorities generate place-based belonging in Townsville. We argue that place-based belonging be understood as an ongoing relational process where subjects and places are mutually-constituted. Individuals' everyday practices are simultaneously place-making activities, through which subjects *actively make* places of attachment. We argue that sexuality intertwines with other dimensions of self in these place-making practices, so that belonging is often a function of reconciling different axes of identification. As such, to understand these nuances we must be sensitive to individual life stories, and not force generalisations across differences. To this end, we selectively present, and draw similarities and differences across, three individual narratives of place-based belonging in Townsville. This offers insights into how sexual minorities born in regional centres can 'belong' and 'be themselves'.

Introduction

We begin with Sam's very personal recollection of a gay-bashing in Townsville, a regional Australian centre in Queensland; it's 2003, about 8pm, in a suburban street:

> The guy who was kicking the side of my car was wearing steel caps. He ran around and stood on my chest and started kicking me full power in the face. His mate was holding my hands down [while he] would run up … and kick me full power in the front of the face. … All the neighbours were standing around [saying], 'Yeah. Kill the poofters! Kill the poofters!'

This is an extreme reminder of how Australian suburban and regional spaces are 'heterosexed' – sites where heterosexuality is normalised (Gorman-Murray 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; Waitt 2005; Costello and Hodge 1999; Kirby and Hay 1997). Moreover, it underscores how this heteronormalisation (sometimes brutally) disciplines expressions of sexual difference in regional centres (Flood and Hamilton 2005; Gottschalk and Newton 2003).

Against this background, we aim to explore how gay men, lesbians, and other sexual minorities resident in the regional centre of Townsville, generate a sense of place-based belonging in this ostensibly homophobic context. This contribution is timely given recent evidence of higher levels of suicide amongst gay/lesbian youth in regional Australia (Gottschalk and Newton 2003). There is limited research investigating processes that operate to exclude and/or include sexual minorities in regional areas. Instead, exploring how sexual minorities negotiate heteronormativity has given precedence to metropolitan centres (Phillips, Watt and Shuttleton 2000). This is understandable given the centrality of major Australian cities in gay/lesbian rights activism, and the public visibility of commercial facilities, community services and celebratory events in such locations (Willett 2000; Faro and Wotherspoon 2000; Wotherspoon 1991). Nevertheless, more must be done to understand the experiences of sexual minorities living in regional centres. In this context, we contribute our case study on how sexual minorities sustain a sense of belonging in and to Townsville.

Conceptual Framing

Our conceptual framework draws on Knopp's (2003) idea of place-based belonging as an *ongoing relational process* where subjects and places are mutually-constituted. Belonging, as a process, emerges through individuals' everyday practices and activities with objects, ideas, technologies and people *in situ*. These practices are, simultaneously, place-making activities, in and through which subjects *actively* and

ongoingly make their places of attachment. Both places and subjectivities are therefore conceptualised as always intertwined, incomplete, and in a process of becoming. Given this, emotional geographies of place-based belonging are thought of as outcomes of ongoing negotiations rather than fixed and causal variables. Moreover, if subjectivity is understood as a relation between different axes of identification – sexuality, age, family connections, and socio-economic means, *inter alia* – then different facets of self are mutually-constituted and expressed in shifting forms through these relational place-making practices. Furthermore, factors contributing to a sense of belonging need not always be positive, but can also be the outcome of traumatic events, and subsequent attempts at reconciliation with meaningful subjects and material contexts, like family and 'hometown'.

Case Study

Townsville is a coastal city of approximately 150 000 in tropical north Queensland, Australia. As Moore (2001) points out, Townsville has always had a lesbian and gay population. In the 1980s, before homosexuality was decriminalised, dance-parties were held in the Townsville Showground, and these are still fondly remembered as integral to establishing individual and collective identities. Equally important are memories of raids on pubs that held unofficial 'gay nights', or the almost weekly street attacks by defence force personnel, dubbed AJs (army jerks). Yet, Townsville's public histories are silent about these past abuses, and no apology is forthcoming.

Today, a clearer understanding of what sexual minorities do to sustain their sense of belonging in Townsville is urgent given the city's wide reputation as *the* homophobic centre of Australia. In 1999, this portrayal was widely circulated by the Australian media following the bombing of the city's branch of the Queensland AIDS Council. Following this homophobic attack, the City Council established the LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex) Anti-Violence Project. Comprised of volunteers, this group set up 'Safe Spaces' in Townsville, introduced same-sex issues into education programs in schools and the defence force, provided pro-active responses to homophobia in the media, and helped institute the LGBTI Police Liaison Officers. The work of the LGBTI Anti-Violence Project is ongoing given continuing gay-bashings, the cinema manager's refusal to screen *Brokeback Mountain*, and

recent negative media coverage regarding, for example, gay men's use of beats, and funding for education on same-sex issues. Indeed, a 2004 survey of 90 local LGBTI residents found that 50% of these respondents live with fear of homophobic assault, and therefore consciously modify their behaviour in public spaces. After sunset, this figure increases to 81% (Wyllie 2004). Yet, despite these problems, many gay men, lesbians and other sexual minorities continue to live in Townsville. Indeed, one visible reminder is *The Sovereign Hotel*, an 'openly' gay pub. This context provokes two related questions: Why is it that some sexual minorities want to stay in Townsville? And how do these people generate a sense of belonging?

Approach

Over a two-week period in May 2005, Gordon interviewed 32 LGBTI residents. Interviews were semi-structured, mostly conducted in people's houses, and sought to understand how these people generated place-based belonging in and to Townsville. The interviews were an act of sharing, rather than taking participants' stories. Gordon often revealed his own experiences of homophobia and heteronormativity to help open up dialogue about how place-based belongings are created. In doing so, rather than attempting to work towards common experiences, he was conscious of always allowing respondents to express the ambiguities and differences in senses of belonging wrought by different combinations of identifications, including sexuality, family, age, occupation, *inter alia*. This suggests that within structures of homophobia and heteronormativity, individual experiences of a place-based belonging vary.

Following Moss (1997) and Gorman-Murray (2006a, 2006d), we argue that to capture these nuances it is important to be sensitive to individual stories. Each interview built a narrative of a life story, with a unique combination of experiences. Here, we have chosen to focus on three younger (28-36 years) people's stories to draw out both similarities and differences in how place-making processes create senses of belonging. All three grew up in Townsville, moved away for a period, but have chosen to return to Townsville to live. But while a number of aspects of creating a placed-based sense of belonging are held in common across their experiences, their individual narratives are not conducive to generalisation. As Hughes (2005) argues, the point of being sensitive to individual narratives is to understand what's important

for a *particular* person, rather than trying to establish a unitary experience which could be interpreted as an absolute truth. Instead, what these narratives do is draw attention to the diverse actions undertaken to achieve senses of belonging in and to Townsville. Creating a sense of place-based belonging often requires an individual reconciling how different aspects of self are constituted through place-making processes. We have chosen our three examples to highlight different aspects of these processes and solutions to creating place-based belonging in a homophobic context. Below, we present each narrative discretely, and draw similarities and differences across them.

Mark

> Well, I'm 36. I moved around quite a lot and I've now come back to Townsville about a year-and-a-half ago. I've been trying to fit into this community … and also better myself. I used to have a business in Sydney and in Cairns. I'm over that era and I'm starting to regain my own spirituality and my own lifestyle.

For the past two years Mark has been (re)creating a sense of place-based belonging in and to Townsville. He was born in Townsville but left when he received his hotel industry qualifications – when only a handful of close friends knew he was gay. He relocated to Cairns, where he grew in confidence about his sexuality and became actively involved with the local gay community. Later, he moved to Sydney to maintain a same-sex relationship. Here, while he began to reconcile his relationship with his family, the relationship with his partner became abusive. He endured eighteen months of abuse before ending the relationship. At this time he decided to close his company and return to Townsville. On returning, he began not only new commercial ventures, but efforts to recapture parts of himself lost in the domestic violence.

Mark's place-based sense of belonging is constituted through a very specific set of social relations with friends:

> You can always count your solid friends on your hand. I said, 'Okay, after I'd gone through what I'd gone through, I count on my solid friends.' And, they're here in Townsville … I'm now comfortable in Townsville. Before, when I used to come

> and stay at mum and dad's place over Christmas – I'd stay for
> about two, three weeks – [I] always found it hard cos you'd
> pop into the gay night club and no one wanted to talk to you
> unless you were gonna throw your legs past your head and
> [say], 'Go for it, baby!' But now I'm here, there is a network
> of friends. It's been very hard to find them, very hard to break
> into. But, when you break into it, you feel a bit more homely
> and comfortable in yourself.

Here, Mark indicates that he negotiates his sense of place-based belonging *outside* Townsville's sole gay venue, *The Sovereign*, anticipating that social relationships there are underpinned solely by causal sex. Instead, Mark depends on his supportive network of close friends to sustain his sense of belonging.

Moreover, these everyday practices of affirmation and belonging have definite spatial outcomes, attaching to particular, perhaps unexpected, places: this friendship group actively contests heteronormativity by regularly meeting in 'straight space', including a 'straight' pub in rapidly-gentrifying South Townsville, and a coffee shop in a suburban shopping mall. Indeed, Mark comments that public space in Townsville is heterosexed, with affects on his behaviour and identity:

> In Townsville you keep up your guard when you're walking
> down the street. You don't mince down the street like you're
> chewing a packet of Minties. You try to blend in, so much
> that you lose your own personal identity, you're a little bit
> 'butcher'.

But, *in situ* of each meeting place, this network of gay men has reclaimed specific 'straight' spaces to meet and share experiences over dinner or coffee – and this has positively adjusted Mark's feelings towards Townsville:

> The *Victoria Hotel* is full of straights, but the manageress
> knows there're gays and we're there every Sunday. You can
> feel confident talking about gay issues, not necessarily
> political, [but] you can say, 'I've seen this cute guy down the
> road,' and chat about it. We feel comfortable giving each other
> a hug or a kiss on the cheek when we're leaving, but there's
> not many places in Townsville where you could feel
> comfortable doing that. I don't feel comfortable doing that in
> *The Sovereign* and, a lot other people don't, given the history
> of Townsville.

The ostensibly straight meeting places of his friendship network provide Mark with respite from self-monitoring his bodily movements, offering possibilities of openly displaying same-sex affection. As such, despite ongoing homophobia, Mark has created a sense of place-based belonging through the unexpected spatial outcomes of key social relationships and activities.

Jill

Jill's narrative evokes a similar context to Mark's experiences, with both behaviour modification in public and a sense of discomfort with Townsville's designated 'gay space', *The Sovereign*. But her story also provides different means of creating place-based networks of belonging in this homophobic context.

Jill, 28, says that she 'felt very uncomfortable' growing up in her father's house in Townsville. Her father was a sole-parent, and she had to negotiate the spaces of her father's house with his various partners. Jill describes her childhood as 'different' and 'difficult'; she thought of herself as 'different to most young girls', but did not confide in anybody about her sexuality until high school. Despite these unpleasant memories, both times she left Townsville to live elsewhere, she subsequently returned. In this context, Jill indicates that different aspects of her 'self', particularly as 'daughter' and 'lesbian', are mutually constituted through Townsville; for her, it is the only place where she can reconcile the different dimensions of her life:

> I've moved away from Townsville to live somewhere else and I've always felt like I've needed to come back because I feel some sort of affiliation with this place. I did grow up here and I identify with being from Townsville, mainly because my family's still here. … At this stage in my life I don't feel like I can just pack up my bags and leave … I feel like my father needs me, I feel like my family needs me even though I don't sometimes feel comfortable with my family and sometimes I feel I could just leave.

Jill values her family and her connection to Townsville by birth. In her willingness to retain a sense of place-based belonging through her birthright, she is prepared to negotiate the discomfort, isolation, fear, and verbal abuse she experienced as a young lesbian growing-up in Townsville.

At the same time, Jill consciously monitors her behaviour in public, and fears what might happen if old school-mates or her father's friends learn about her sexuality:

> I think Townsville is difficult because I grew up here. A lot of people in the community know me and I feel uncomfortable being myself. Even now I feel like someone's going to find out who I really am and they've known me from growing-up here. I've always been worried about what people think of me in that respect. So, I would never go walking down the street holding my partner's hand or kissing them in public or anything like that because I would be too scared that someone who knows me would see.

Indeed, for Jill, as for Mark, Townsville's gay venue offers little comfort or respite from self-monitoring. But in Jill's case, this anxiety is gender-based:

> Most women would identify *The Sovereign* as mainly for men. And I think a lot of women find that a bit intimidating, cos they go there, there're mainly men, there are not many women, and they just don't feel comfortable sometimes.

Instead, there are monthly women's dances at a space called *Girl's Own* where she feels comfortable. However, since these are held only monthly, Jill notes there are few physical spaces in Townsville where she can relax and 'be herself'.

In this context, she explains how the virtual spaces of the Internet have been crucial to maintaining her sexual identity; she has a range of profiles on the Internet, including those on websites she designed herself:

> The computer has been very important for me. I've created a home for myself on the Internet. Because I have created websites for *myself*, with my photos and things, so I feel like whenever I want to look at some photos of my friends that don't live with me, I can just get on the Internet and look at them. It's just like an online photo album and it sort of creates a sense of self as well … I used to use *Gaydar Girls* a fair bit, and I have profiles on a number of different sites.

For Jill, the Internet has become a virtual place of belonging that she terms 'home', and visiting certain websites helps maintain her sense of self. Jill, then, sustains a sense of place-based belonging to Townsville not only through ongoing familial relationships, but through virtual places. These different networks enable her different

senses of self as 'lesbian' and 'daughter', and help work towards reconciling the familial and the sexual that can only occur by her being in Townsville.

Claire

Claire's narrative both contrasts with and extends Jill's and Mark's experiences. Unlike Mark's friendship group and Jill's Internet, but like Jill's ongoing affiliation with family and 'hometown', Claire's story evokes the role of familial reconciliation in generating belonging. Moreover, this reconciliation is palpably place-based, evocatively tied to renewing a sense of comfort and affiliation with the family home.

Claire, 33, has lived as a transgender for 15 years, and describes her childhood memories of Townsville as 'bad'. When she was 10, her mother and father divorced. She spoke about her father's physical violence and relationship with alcohol in the family house, and describes living with her father as 'torture'. She recalled how in the 1980s, as a young effeminate male, she was bashed repeatedly by the AJs. Consequently, when she turned 18, leaving for Brisbane to live as a transgender was straightforward:

> For me Townsville was a really horrible place, actually, there's a lot of bad memories here. Back then … I could not possibly put myself up in front of my family and friends and people I went to school with … Back then, at that age, there was no question I had to leave. … I seriously would have to say I hated the place. … As far as I'm concerned my father tortured me … I don't want to drag the violin out. There are so many people much worse off than me. But as a young apparently gay male or effeminate male, to mow the lawn knowing that my school 'friends' were passing by. Just everything about that was just horrible for me. And I always loved my father, even though at different times in my life I detested him immensely, I always want his love.

In 2001 Claire returned to Townsville to reconcile her relationship with her father, who had since been diagnosed with cancer. Finding herself again living in the house she fled as a teenager brought anguished memories flooding back. Claire describes how she was able to reconcile her contradictory emotions towards her father through painting the house, inside and out. But it was this process that generated a strong

sense of belonging in Townsville, underpinning a holistic sense of self, and reconciling the familial and the (trans)sexual:

> As it turns out, the process of life put me back in that house again, living on my own, dealing with this huge monster of memory. And so I went and got all this paint. Dad wanted to paint the place, and I said, 'I'm going to paint it.' … And for me it was the most cathartic and wonderful experience … It occurred to me halfway through painting the place, 'Oh my God, this is what I'm doing.' I was able then to really make peace with it and go with it and it was such a wonderful thing. The place metamorphosised right before my eyes, with my own hand, into a place that didn't hold those horrible things for me anymore. I felt proud of it. I painted the walls and literally painted away the past and there was all this fresh paint and the fresh vibes coming out of it. … There were still marks on the wall from where my sister and I used to 'fight like cats and dogs', and it was obviously frustration that we were acting out, because of dad … And I would sit there at times, and look over these signs as I was about to paint them over, and think, 'Oh god.' So that was sort a precursor, and that's why this place now has become home again for me.

For Claire, reconciliation of the traumatic experiences she endured at the hands of her father whilst growing up as an effeminate male was only achieved through her sense of accomplishment at painting the house she had lived in as a teenager. Painting this house became a process of recalling the past, forgiving and providing a new a future with her father. This is a provocatively spatial and material reconciliation of the sexual and familial aspects of self. In doing so, possibilities now exist for Claire to achieve a sense of place-based belonging that enable her to call anywhere in Townsville home.

Conclusions

These case studies of three younger sexual minorities living in Townsville demonstrate the complex ways which place-based belongings are generated. When belonging is conceptualised through place this permits new interpretations of feelings of being relaxed, comfortable and being oneself. Places can be simultaneously alienating and liberating. Amidst ongoing concealment and homophobia, places of belonging can be carved out and sustained through everyday, ongoing place-making practices. Our three narratives provide a range of possibilities: friendship networks

reclaiming 'straight' space, virtual places, and family homes. Moreover, given the ambiguous qualities of place-based belonging for sexual minorities, we have shown that the process of creating a sense of belonging often involves reconciling different dimensions of their multiple identities, notably the familial and the sexual. Although generalisations cannot be drawn from these case studies, nonetheless our investigation of placed-based belonging allows a fuller socio-spatial explanation of how sexual minorities born in regional centres find ways to 'be themselves' despite fears of homophobia. While our three narratives point towards the importance of leaving their place of birth to establish a sexual identity, they also point towards specific ways place-based belongings are sustained across multiple subjectivities that require reconciling social networks of family and friends *in situ* of their 'hometown'.

References

Costello, L. and S. Hodge (1999) 'Queer/clear/here: destabilising sexualities and space', pp. 131-152 in E. Straford (ed) *Australian Cultural Geographies*. South Melbourne: Oxford.

Faro, C. with G. Wotherspoon (2000) *Street Seen: A History of Oxford Street*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

Flood, M. and C. Hamilton (2005) *Mapping Homophobia in Australia*. Australia Institute Webpaper, at: www.tai.org.au.

Gorman-Murray, A. (2006a) 'Homeboys: uses of home by gay Australian men', *Social and Cultural Geography* 7: 53-69.

Gorman-Murray, A. (2006b) 'Queering home or domesticating deviance? Interrogating gay domesticity through lifestyle television', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9: 227-247.

Gorman-Murray, A. (2006c) 'Gay and lesbian couples at home: identity work in domestic space', *Home Cultures* 3: 145-168.

Gorman-Murray, A. (2006d, in press) 'Domestic space as contested terrain: queering the Australian home', in J. Stephens, T. McMinn and S. Basson (eds) *Contested Terrains: Proceedings of the XXIII Annual Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*. SAHANZ.

Gottschalk, L. and J. Newton (2003) *Not So Gay in the Bush: 'Coming Out' in Rural and Regional Victoria*. Ballarat: University of Ballarat.

Hughes, M. (2005) *Sexual identity in health and aged care*. UNSW: School of Social Work.

Kirby, S. and I. Hay (1997) '(Hetero)sexing space: gay men and 'straight' space in Adelaide, South Australia', *Professional Geographer* 49: 295-305.

Knopp, L. (2004) 'Ontologies of place, placelessness, and movement: queer quests for identity and their impacts on contemporary geographic thought', *Gender, Place, and Culture* 11: 121-134.

Moore, C. (2001) *Sunshine and Rainbows: The Development of Gay and Lesbian Culture in Queensland*. St.Lucia: University of Queensland Press.

Moss, P. (1997) 'Negotiating space in home environments: older women living with arthritis', *Social Science and Medicine* 45: 23-33.

Phillips, R., D. Watt and D. Shuttleton (eds) (2000) *De-Centring Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis.* London: Routledge.

Waitt, G. (2005) 'The Sydney 2002 Gay Games and querying Australian national space', Environment *and Planning D: Society and Space* 23: 435-452.

Willett, G. (2000) *Living Out Loud: A History of Gay and Lesbian Activism in Australia*. St.Leonards: Allen and Unwin.

Wotherspoon, G. (1991) *City of the Plain: History of a Gay Sub-culture.* Sydney: Hale and Iremonger.

Wyllie, M. (2004) *Anti-Violence Committee Safety Audit*. Townsville: LGBTI Anti-Violence Committee.