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## **The truth about love: memoir as ethical decomposition**

### Abstract:

Seachange migration and regional demographic change within Australia generates costs to human security that social policy research has only just begun to explore. This paper argues the need for more insistent cultural exploration of this phenomenon and asks what creative research might contribute to this vital area. Xenophobic expressions are not uncommon in seachange communities, and this paper is focused on one particular example of micro-territorial nationalism in the seachange community of Lennox Head in Northern New South Wales which witnessed a riot on Australia Day 2009.

How does the writer locate and represent the 'I' when writing about such events and communities, and what are the ethical implications of revealing and concealing story? When that writer is also 'local', the act of questioning the Arcadian imaginary which funds seachange society creates ethical dilemmas, and the writing and producing of material which argues for 'Arcadian Hells' rather than subscribing to the discourse of 'Paradise' might be regarded as an act of betrayal with significant costs to 'I'. Might such 'unethical acts' nevertheless be felt as true love for place and people?

Creative writing on this subject inevitably decomposes ethical pastures and perforce produces new methodological approaches to story, confession, revelation, and ethics. This paper suggests that the space between the imaginary and the real is best traversed by lifewriting with its fidelities to both the 'ampleness of fiction' and the 'literality of autobiography' (Holden 2011, 82) and offers 'memoir as impersonation' as a development in the genre.

### Biographical note:

Susan Bradley Smith's latest poetry collection *supermodernprayerbook* was shortlisted for the 2011 NSW Premier's Kenneth Slessor Poetry Award and the Age Book of the Year Award, with her next collection *Girl on Fire* forthcoming with Salt. *Friday Forever: Memoirs of Madness* was published in 2011 (Radcliffe, Oxford). She lives in Melbourne and teaches at La Trobe University.

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## **The truth about love: memoir as ethical decomposition**

Faking happiness: could Australia be guilty of this crime? If so, how does one begin to test the notion that Australian life might not be so paradisiacal? While writers are busy documenting, affirming and/or contesting national identity what is the better medium for such explorations, History or Literature? Taking an Australian seaside village as a site of inquiry this essay explores the complexities of the Arcadian imaginary and its compromises including the extraordinarily high rate of youth suicide that also defines regional Australia today (Pollard 2010). Whilst seachange aspirations continue to characterize the Australian imaginary, that ‘imaginary’ is failing to deliver. What can story—particularly lifewriting—offer to this exploration of the collapsing Australian psyche? Concentrating on one particular example of youth-related problems experienced in Lennox Head I consider not so much a riot and its response, but the society of that place and the stories that reveal lived life in postcode 2478. The real purpose of this exploration is to configure the place of creative writing as a site of cultural intervention and to contemplate its value to national debates.

In Greek mythology, Arcadia was a sanctuary on the Acropolis and the home of Pan, god of nature. However, it is also an actual district in the central region of the Peloponnese peninsula of Greece. Literature has long embraced both the real and mythological Arcadias as places evoking ideal (usually pastoral) life. Modern Western Literature presents us with the Arcadian imaginary’s generalized dream of tranquillity and happiness as found in rural life rather than in urban society. Conceptualizations of idealized childhoods are also informed by the Arcadian imaginary, Australian version: life at the beach. Australian novelist and critic James Bradley in a recent essay on surfing and writing suggests that it is the beach which supremely symbolises Australia: ‘So deeply ingrained is it in our psyche it is almost impossible to imagine ourselves without it. It suffuses our literature, art and iconography...The beach is more than a place, it is an idea. Bradley goes on to say that ‘like so many of the ideas that sustain our sense of who we are, the notion of the beach and its classlessness conceals a more complex truth’ noting that ‘the riots in Cronulla in 2005, and the scenes of youths draped with Australian flags and chanting slogans like "We grew here, you flew here" demonstrate that our relationship with the beach is not as egalitarian as we believe (Bradley 2009).

Conversely, in another journalistic piece about summer Bradley poetically notes the depressiveness of the season ‘the way it bears within itself the promise of its own ending’ and carries this metaphor to a smart place arguing that summer and beach holidays also remind us of the changing nature of Australian society, ‘its new-found wealth and growing materialism’ which he claims is changing what is to be Australian: ‘it is difficult not to suspect the tension between our increasingly uncritical celebration of wealth and luxury and our deep-seated belief in democracy will become more acute’. There are deep pleasures to be had on Australia day, as Bradley says: the ‘shared experience of the heat and the pleasures it entails, is wound into our cultural DNA, and of the ways those pleasures—and the communality they

involve—continue to define so much of who we are and how we imagine ourselves’ (Bradley 2010).

### **Lennox Head as Arcadia: the good, the bad, and the ugly (lack of story)**

The village of Lennox Head is approximately 700 kilometres north of Sydney, and just over 200 kilometres south of Brisbane. Lennox Head these days can be safely described as an up-market location with a professional community, challenging Byron Bay as the most fashionable address on the North Coast. Fashionable address though it may well be, the charming old beach shacks are all but gone. Property is no longer confined to the beach front, now spreading out over an area of 186 square kilometres, have encroached on local farmland to develop new housing estates. The population of Lennox Head in 1996 was 3251, and in 2001 it had grown to 4942, a growth of 52% over the five years. In 2010 the population was heading towards 7000.

Despite this, Lennox Head retains a coastal village atmosphere. Named in 1882 by after the Duke of Richmond and Lennox, the village was established for the timber and farming communities soon afterwards established themselves. The coastal road was sealed in the 1970s and since then the population has continually expanded. The international surfing community knows Lennox Head for its famous right hand point break. Lennox Head is now a national surfing reserve. Under the Crown Lands Act a Board of Management representative of the local surfing community and reporting directly to the Minister for Lands form a proactive group of stakeholders and custodians, maintaining the cultural significance of the reserve area. Lennox Head is Bundjalung country, and within the village there is an Aboriginal ceremonial Bora ring indicating that the area’s significance. Bundjalung dreaming tells us this history of this area, with three brothers having settled on what is now known as Seven Mile Beach. One brother, Yarbirri, thrust his spear into the sand creating what is now known as Lake Ainsworth (Anon. n.d.). Lake Ainsworth was the site of the 2009 Australia Day riot.

While many visual artists have engaged with Lennox Head, in terms of cultural appraisal little has been written about the place aside from what one can predictably expect in glossy real estate brochures and local public histories. Nearby Byron Bay on the other hand has often been the subject of writerly exploration, most recently in a book by first-time novelist Daniel Ducrou. *The Byron Journals* has been hailed as ‘a dazzling portrayal of gen Y sex, drugs and rock’n’roll’ and offers a strong counterpoint to Arcadian configurations of youth culture. Ducrou paints Byron Bay as hedonistic, drug-addicted and law-ignoring place. In a recent author interview, Ducrou makes some interesting points about both the Arcadian imaginary contrasting with the lived life of ‘paradise’:

Byron plays a unique part in Australia's cultural landscape...When people are at a time of crisis in their lives, they don't say, 'F— this, I'm going to the western suburbs of Sydney to live the life I've always wanted to live!' They say, 'I'm

over this. I'm off to Byron!'...people go to Byron believing it is paradise. That feeds into the energy of the place; those hopes and expectations and the search for other people on the same sort of vibe.

Ducrou himself lived in Byron Bay for some years:

For the first year or two, I was just enthralled. I was in love with Byron and its lifestyle, where everyone is working part time, enjoying the big party scene...But, over the course of living there, I became interested in the stories of why people had moved there...A common theme was that they were escaping a difficult life somewhere else. Byron is a pretty good remedy for whatever ails you...The town is full of a lot of emotional refugees. But to what extent had they achieved their escape? (Meacham, 2011)

Lennox Head is not Byron Bay, but it is worth noting that although these towns have different postcodes and are in different shires, they are less than twenty minutes drive apart. The youth scene does not observe local divisions when it does not suit, and the ethics of localism often insist on a performative space in which to assert difference.

### **A riot and its response**

On Australia Day, 26 January 2010, there was a riot in Lennox Head: why? In a nation that has recently experienced the highest rates of male youth suicide in the world, what constitutes happiness for young Australians? And why would a brawl ostensibly over access to public barbeques result in a riot on a summer public holiday? Does the geography of place possess a cultural memory that determines its contemporary life, one that is compromised by a history of violence? Or can the insistence of idealised worlds preside? There is much at stake if the beach as a national Australian symbol of freedom, equality, and the good life is rendered bankrupt. If our firmest ideas of paradise might instead be some kind of Arcadian Hell, to what degree does this represent a transmutation of national identity? There is a certain kind of boldness associated with the phenomena of seachange—leaving the city and its certainties behind in search of a better but unknown life is a risky business. Not everyone has the courage to pursue such a dream—as the rock band Panic Year sing in their 2008 song ‘Sea Change’, ‘I’m afraid of the sea change/I’m afraid of losing it all’. Instead of Australia Day being an opportunity for celebration, or mourning associated with the sentiments of ‘Invasion Day’, this national holiday has become a risk to human security often witnessed in the places that Australians consider most sacred as sites symbolic of Australianess: ‘I’m afraid of losing it all’ indeed.

### **In the meantime, there is only story, and its dirty telling**

Seachange at its most classical and perhaps very best can be understood as a willing, determined transmutation. One of the risks of such monumental change might be the performance of place and identity politics that are not Arcadian in essence. However, it is not impossible that some order might emerge from this chaos: some 'rich and strange' pearls may very well result from all this aggravation. Lennox Head did not have its own published creative stories until recently (Bradley Smith 2011). For this author, engaged in writing a short story collection based on creative research concerning the topic of failures of the Arcadian Australian imaginary, I was failing all over the place. That is, until I was prepared to go beyond ethical spaces in the manner of guerrilla warfare: it is not a fair fight for the writer who is also local to 'own' the story after all as the act of telling is already fatally compromised. Owning this fatal position is liberating as insists upon moving to a post ethical space. It is a space perhaps best explored by Malcolm Knox in his novel of an (real but not real) Australian surfing anti-hero in *The Life*. His protagonist DK is not happy about his biography being written, and refers to his biographer as the BFO (bifrickenographer): 'I feel the BFO probing, how hungry she wants it, do anything for it...Material. That's what she calls it'. DK is not keen on being a commodity, yet he knows his story is important. He objects, too, to the ruses of storytellers: 'Another ruse. She pretends she's my Psy Fricken Chologist or something. My PFC not my BFO. That type of thing' (Knox 2011, 130).

*Shark Sonnets* is a collection of fourteen short stories set largely in the postcode of 2478 Lennox Head in the subtropical far north of New South Wales, exploring contemporary seachange Australia. As a collection the themed exploration is 'what constitutes happiness?' with individual stories revealing a disturbing, fully functioning Arcadian Hell within the ranks of 'paradise'. *Shark Sonnets* therefore is based on real events and real people in the real place. It is hungry for 'material', and it is guilty of me as writer being both 'BFO' and 'PFC'—so instead of defending these acts, I changed the drama. The stage of play is not the memoiristic one with its demands of literality, as it pays little respect to those ethical boundaries. I largely do not invent characters, I take them, and pretend to be them. I do this without permission, and I do it shamelessly, for the greater good of the story, because I believe as Frank Moorhouse recently argued that 'No one owns their own life: we all own each other's life in so far as it has touched us...They are our life; we are their life', quoting in his defence the Roman playwright Publius Terentius who insisted that 'I am a human being and all things which concern human beings concern me' (Moorhouse 2011, 107).

'How to Kill a Labrador' from *Shark Sonnets* for example, therefore represents a new development in the genre of lifewriting, with the experiment of 'memoir as impersonation' whereby the writer anthropologically inhabits true story and lived life in an assumed manner. In theatre worlds, this writerly act might be best understood as method acting: in the genre of memoir the jury is still out concerning the ethics of such impersonation. As a writer, I prefer this unethical space of pretending to be a real

person in a real place to the unseemly hungers of the BFO, or the PFC whilst also admitting that we are cousined in the act of pursuit of material and the story thus revealed. So, I argue for a post-ethical space that is more ecological than philosophical one for narrative, one that is akin to osmosis. In this story, for example, I am worried about my cousin whose father suicided after Vietnam, and the statistics that reveal how at-risk this cohort of Australians are (children of such suicides that is) and the virtues of hiding out in paradise and surfing your life away in an eroding community. Here, the daughter (my cousin in real life) is writing to her dead father (my uncle, whose sad circumstances are as per the story) following her failure to go through with her marriage ceremony, having left her surfing-solicitor standing at the altar (fictional action). She spends time discussing the surf ('There is a storm somewhere between here and New Zealand and the entire east coast from south of Sydney to north of Noosa is PUMPING. Decent.') but the stage for the story is firmly on land, in that place which consumes much life, the shopping mall.

Yesterday I went shopping for treats and outside the supermarket in 'shiver/River' Street in Ballina. There was a busker singing 'I was only nineteen'. *Frankie kicked a mine the day that mankind kicked the moon/God help me, he was going home in June.* He belted it out, to a dedicated audience of four: me, this guy (your age) in a wheelchair, and two ratbag kids who knew the words and were sucking orange ice lollies and jerking around in the sunshine. They threw golden coins at him, and at the end of the song. The wheelchair man opened a tinnie and cried a bit. The busker had a Ramones Tshirt on old enough to convince anyone that he'd actually seen them, he was a nice bloke and said thanks and promised the kids he'd save the coins to pay the ferryman. Like I said, money is what really matters. Anyway, we can talk about all this soon. See you in the big library in the sky, Daddy. I imagine there that you have stopped your night screaming, and have forgotten all about eggs that only came in tin cans. No loud mouths allowed in Heaven. Everything we say is just a sin (Bradley Smith 2011).

This act of literary cannibalism/colonialism/recycling interrogates the role of truth and authenticity in narrative prose which adopts confessional modes. In this instance the writer performs an act of identity theft (of real people and their circumstances) and fictionalises futures in order to be associated with story and its imaginary realm in a rarer manner than was able to be achieved as either historian/biographer, fiction writer, or writing and therapy practitioner. The schizophrenic splintering of characters in this ficto-memoir insists that the genre can only ever offer misunderstood and appropriated narratives, which are inevitably buried by writing and its many commodifications.

A stylistic innovation of the story—which might also act as ethical justification—is its embracement of the idea of the African Griot and their role as conveyors of collective wisdom. The knowledge in 'How to kill a Labrador' is the real statistics of first, second and third generation suicides associated with the Vietnam War, and the

particular impact on regional Australian communities. In ‘How to kill a Labrador’ the story itself rather than the narrator adopts Griot methodologies, delivering history as a poetic intervention, offering political and social commentary (in this instance about micro-territorial nationalism and social warfare in seachange communities) as a cautionary tale. Like the Griot singing both your praise and doom in their formidable circulation of local history, this story is based on extemporized truth, and proffers memory as being historically vital for cultures in crisis, grafting deep time onto the present. The graft, like the storytelling, inevitably wounds with its promise to heal and strengthen.

Ben Yagoda reminds us in his history of memoir as a genre that ‘The twenty-first century memoir, of course, is 180 degrees different’ from what it once was. His history offers pride of place to books and writers that ‘did a significant thing first, and thus changed the way the genre was conceived’ (Yagoda 2009, 2-3). Whilst I claim ‘memoir as impersonation’ as an innovation, it is only to make the (higher, perhaps) assertion that it is the story that most matters, and it is to this that our true, ethical fidelity belongs. But just as Sylvia Plath once put it in her famously autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, ‘I took a deep breath and listened to the brag of my heart. I am. I am I am’ (Plath 1963, 233)—so too should story adhere to the ethical finality of the memoiristic impulse that privileges the ‘I’ as the original site of honest concern. Story as an act of love, by whatever means. In Dava Sobel’s book on Galileo’s daughter’s letters, we are reminded about the veiled nature of all confessions: ‘Maria Celeste chose her words very cautiously and judiciously, especially when danger waxed.’ Impersonation is an incautious act, but just as Galileo’s daughter Maria understood in her epistolary writing that the social community had its strict conventions of expression and feeling, she also knew that the devotional range of love was huge and she therefore took risks in her expression of that love: ‘The charm of the letters, for us, if we are canny, should lie not in their directness but in their artful blend of clarity, allusion, and evasion’ (Cohen 2004). If text is only ever story and love remains not only one of its biggest tales but also its *raison d’être*, then ethics concerning the sharing of story should not constrict. Like story, ethics should only be ranging, evolving and devotional.

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