

# Queer Sovereignty: the Gay & Lesbian Kingdom of the Coral Sea Islands

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## Abstract

What can the spectacle of gay nationalism tell us about the reality of our cosmopolitan dream? My suggestion in this paper is that it challenges the assumption that simply invoking cosmopolitanism, or indeed embodying it as a style and a politics, is enough to secure the rights and recognition that were previously obtained by means of territorial claims and independent flag waving. It teaches us in order to reach an end – that of cosmopolitanism - it may be necessary to recommence at the beginning. The Gay & Lesbian Kingdom (GLK) seceded from Australia in 2004. Emperor Dale Parker Anderson declared independence upon raising the rainbow pride flag on the Coral Sea Island of Cato. The decision to secede was made as a response to the Australian government's 2004 action in presenting the Amendment of the Marriage Act 1969. In giving my account I draw on a 2007 interview, correspondence with Emperor Dale and other ethnographic material concerning the GLK. Among other articulations, I consider its secessionist move in light of Linda Bishai's critique in *Forgetting Ourselves* (2004). This is that for all its liberationist motivation, secession is essentialist in its conception, and inherently anti-democratic; her prediction is that its preoccupation with state formation is making it irrelevant in the age of "rhizomatic" community networks. In its micronationalist "queering," however, I find secessionist politics more relevant in late modernity, not less, as the pluralising democratic politics of identity and representation are increasingly unable to contest key outcomes of "family values" and "national values" rhetoric in the 21st C. While Bishai calls for an end to secession, my suggestion is that it is precisely in the secessionist moves of contemporary micronationalism that the "new cosmopolitics," a politics aimed at the "renewal of international law" (Derrida 2002 p. 3) might be witnessed.

My presumption in this paper is that the peculiarities of gay nationalism in Australia can teach us something about cosmopolitanism. It is that the ideal of cosmopolitan civil societies, like any internationalism, remains a fantasy - and a questionable one - if it is imagined as something that can be reached without some ongoing engagement in the politics of nationalism. It can give a false sense of inclusion. It can have us believe we have arrived at an end, when it is necessary to go back to the beginning. One of the champions of gay nationalism, Brian Walker, urges us to give its mission the same serious consideration we would give other nationalisms. 'At first sight', he says, 'gay nationalism may seem like nothing more than a parodistic mimicry of "real" nationalism... Queer nation might be seen by some as nationalism's ironic Other, offering a moment of carnivalesque bemusement before we return to the more serious problems involved with weighing the relative merits of real ethnic claims' (Walker 1998, pp. 518-519). Walker's suggestion is a good one, but in my paper I want to do both. That is, take seriously the political project of gay nationalism, *and* keep in mind its ironic Otherness, as an essential part of what it presents to us.

The micronation that I focus on is itself an odd one in relation to others, in Australia and around the world. The Gay & Lesbian Kingdom of the Coral Sea Islands (GLK) is very distinctive in its political platform, in its geographic platform, and in other features. One of the points that I want to make here, however, is that while it is distinctive, and in many ways the odd one out, it should not be considered the exception when it comes to political philosophy, in its current focus on questions of sovereignty in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (see Brown 2006). What I have called ‘queer sovereignty’ is a phenomenon that articulates an increasingly common intuition, I suggest, even in its most uncommon gestures of secessionist refusal and withdrawal.

Micronations are tiny countries declared by ordinary people in an act that repeats the establishment of sovereign nations, at least in some of its protocols. At the same time that it repeats the enactment, it relocates it. It relocates it onto a scene that is not part of its conventional fiction; the contemporary scene of an individual assertion of personal interests or rights within a pluralistic modern democracy. In the conventional fiction, even when it is - as it always is - an individual signing the nation into being in the performative act of declaring independence, such as Jefferson in the case of American independence, it is not the individual as one among many, but as the one within whose representative hand the many may be singularised in a chain of reference and deferral that ultimately goes back to God, the only One not dependent on an Other and able to represent all others in His name, as Derrida reminds us in his essay ‘Declarations of Independence’ (2000a). Micronations carry within them the spectre of multiplication to the point where everyone can sign his or her own declaration of independence, everyone can be the sovereign or prince, everyone’s lounge room can be declared a new country. They push at the limits of our political notion of a right to secede, and our metaphysical notion of the sovereign individual.

I have engaged in an ethnography of micronationalism over the last few years, through my ongoing contact with local protagonists. In this work I have come to consider the secessionist move as a technique – and I mean this in the broader sense of a technique of the self, as well as a simple paralegal technique - of *remaining in dispute* with the authorities of government. There is an insistence on presenting oneself before these authorities that belies the etymological meaning of the term

‘secession’. Linda Bishai informs us that ‘The original root of the word is Latin – *secedere*: to withdraw...the origins of the root presuppose that the action is done unilaterally by the self – *se-ceder* or “self-cession”’ (2004, p. 18). In my account, the act of secession in its micronationalist production is not an act of withdrawing the self, but of presenting and re-presenting the self, in courts of law, in administrative tribunals, in bureaucratic offices and all the theatres within which may be played out a contesting of the authority to manage. The gesture of secession is one of refusing to withdraw oneself, refusing to cease, pushing oneself forward, getting ‘in your face’. Micronationalists feature strongly among those ‘vexatious litigants’ whose obdurate presence in the courtroom and the corridor threatens to jam up the system, making it unmanageable.

There is a curious kind of sovereignty betrayed in this phenomenon of seeking to remain in dispute. It is both a curious idea and a curious practice of sovereignty. It betrays a structural need and a furious insistence upon recognition by the other, a locking into the structure of mutuality even as it announces its secessionist break with that relationship. It is like those bitter and obsessive divorce cases where the couple remain locked into the very bond with one another that they had come into the public theatre of a courtroom to cut. What is witnessed is not any declaration of independence, but the suspended moment of confrontation and demand within a dyadic relation of co-constitution and co-dependency. Of the court cases and bureaucratic campaigns of micronationalists, whatever they begin as, they end up taking the form of a shouting match with the state-appointed authorities, who become frustrated at their inability to close things down. *Recognise me and my legitimacy!* No! *Recognise me and my legitimacy!* No!

Don Cameron, for example, self-proclaimed Supreme Court Justice and Archbishop of the Independent Sovereign State of Australia, jailed as a vexatious litigant in 1996 after filing 13 actions against Westpac, has been pursuing this kind of argument in recent years in the Downing Centre Local Court in Sydney, against the Commissioner of Taxation, on behalf of Istvan Nagy, a citizen of his micronation. Cameron is the consummate Australian bush lawyer who is determined to remain in dispute with those who would see their power and dignity reflected in his clear lack of proper training and credentials. His challenge to their position is only partly brought by the

stack of quasi-legal proofs and claims that he presents as evidence to the courts, and that they dismiss as nonsense. The greater part of his challenge to their power and dignity lies in the obstinate way that he wants to mimic their routines, to act out their roles and be a player in their game.

This is of course what all micronationalists do, to greater or lesser effect; the ones who present themselves as game players, and the ones who do not. Their activity articulates the rules, the rituals and the symbols of the nationalist claim, making it recreatable, and by extension recreational. They foreground the technical exercise of national sovereignty, reducing the legacy of its idea to a set of steps and scripts that can be reproduced and acted out in a new setting. Always a performance, the declaration of independence is made subject here to a reproduction that can have the effect of ‘queering’ it; and by this I mean, putting it at odds with itself. A tacticalised sovereignty is staged – or *put on*, before a real or imagined audience - in a way that opens it to something other.

To illustrate this effect I turn now to the GLK. It has taken the Queer Nation idea to the point now where we might speak of something like queer sovereignty in practical as well as theoretical terms. ‘Queer’, of course, is an expression from radical gender theory. It takes its first point of reference from the everyday meaning of queer as homosexual, picking up on the long standing challenge that effeminate men or mannish women make to our naturalised clear distinction between the sexes. But it goes beyond this first meaning, just as the thought of ‘queer sovereignty’ goes beyond the thought that we have here, on a first apprehension: that the king is a queen. It goes beyond the novelty of this turnaround, to a turnaround in the categories of a broader conceptual domain, of interest to the political philosopher. These are the categories of nationalism and internationalism, the two mutually regarding terms that I want to track as they come under the queering effect of this micronationalism. What I want to suggest, from my study, is that a third term is indicated in the wake of this queering: that of the new cosmopolitanism being talked up in contemporary European philosophy. I am talking here about the conversations between Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida in recent years (Borradori 2003; Derrida 2000b, 2000c), for example, and to a limited extent - within secession theory - the post-nationalist cosmopolitan vision of writers like Linda Bishai.

It is with Bishai that I first take issue, in this paper. Her contention is that there is no place, in our post-modern world, for the movements of nationalist secession, and she predicts their passing with a clear approval. 'Secessionist politics would become increasingly irrelevant', she writes, 'as states become less dominant as the sole validative fora and the politics of pluralizing democracy expanded through the growing organic ties of the rhizomatic structures' (2004, p. 158). By rhizomatic structures, Bishai is referring to something like the diasporic bonds forged by the community of gay people who have nothing in common, or nothing that could be called essential or pre-given, like blood, or a native soil. For allied writers like Judith Halberstam, the queer subcultures in which gay people live in the big cities of the West exemplify the cosmopolitan ideal that she invokes with reference to Jean-Luc Nancy in his 1991 book, *The Inoperative Community*. Halberstam writes (2005, pp. 153-154) that

queer subcultures develop as alternatives to kinship-based notions of community...[they] provide a vital critique of the seemingly organic nature of "community," and they make visible the forms of un-belonging and disconnection that are necessary to the creation of community....Community, generally speaking, is the term used to describe seemingly natural forms of congregation ...[Nancy's] reminder that quests for community are always nostalgic attempts to return to some fantasized moment of union and unity reveals the conservative stakes in community for all kinds of political projects and makes the reconsideration of subcultures all the more urgent.

The key question that I want to pose to Bishai, in her call for an end to secession, and to Halberstam, in her celebration of the spatial politics of gay and lesbian subcultures, is the question of *why*. Specifically, in regard to the Gay and Lesbian Kingdom of the Coral Sea: *why* should the most cosmopolitan of social groups get into the game of nationhood? When that pursuit is so 'ontological,' as Bishai puts it, citing Derrida; so theological, so reliant on the idea of an essential bond and essential unity, so doomed to failure as the spectre of difference imposes itself on the fantasy of internal harmony and natural affiliation. This is the question that I set myself to answer, in my study. Sydney's Mardi Gras, for example, appears to confirm the happy place of Australia's gays and lesbians in the cosmopolitan city. Here they have visibility, they

have acceptance; and more than acceptance, they have celebration, within and by the mainstream. In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the success and magnitude of 2007's parade was reported in a contrast back to the small political protest with which Mardi Gras began: "The whole event is about seeing the city of Sydney, for one night at least, united in a way the people who first marched down Oxford Street could only ever dream about" said one man (Keith Donaldson cited by Cuming 2007).

Why then secede? Or, to formulate my question in deconstructivist terms: what, if anything, is the *supplement of subculture* required in today's Australia?

In the interview I conducted in January 2007 with Dale Parker Anderson, Emperor King of the Gay and Lesbian Kingdom of the Coral Sea, the answer he gave to this question was the clear need that he and others felt to take some kind of action not possible within the current accommodation of gay and lesbian people. This was action against the tide of new legislation and anti-homosexual moralising, like the formal ban on same sex marriage, being carried in the 'family values' rhetoric of the increasingly conservative Howard government (in office at the time). The intuition of Anderson and his friends was that in order to do this, and also to respond to the oppression of gays in other parts of the world, access had to be gained to the international forums and courts. As Dale explains,

... that was the whole idea of the project from way back...like, the gay community has got so far and Australia has wound back the laws... it's the first time in Australian history that legislation was introduced in Australian parliament that actually physically discriminated against a certain section of society. ... we felt, how can we take on Australia? ...and do something that would look at changing and making the world...a lot better for gay people? And the reason that a lot of...harsh countries that have death penalties against gay people...the reason that it's allowed, is because the international court - only sovereign states and territories can access an international court. So ...we can't as a community take on Iran and say, look, why did you, you know, kill those two teenage boys last month because they were gay ...we thought, if we have a sovereign, if we have some type of sovereignty that could access the courts and give gay people a voice on the international stage, whether it be through the UN or [whatever]...then why not look at doing that? (Anderson 2007)

The intuition of Anderson and his friends was that what was required was a ‘new cosmopolitics’, to use a phrase from Derrida (2002 ); a politics aimed at the ‘*renewal* of international law’ through appeals that could be heard above the present constraints. This new cosmopolitics is not lost on observers of the project, as shown this newspaper report:

Ever heard of gay government? There soon could be a new nation on the planet. It's called the Gay & Lesbian Kingdom of the Coral Sea Islands. This potential new country is noteworthy not for its supposed advancement in gay rights, but for how it came about: globalization.

We are entering a stage in the 21st century where Internet users and connected people can not only express their opinions freely, but also easily find others like them. Get enough people together, and a community is born. The Internet obviously offers a number of communities for gays, but now the Internet is doing more. It is offering people a chance to turn interest into action.

Using the Internet to raise awareness, Australian gays (with support from all over the world) could raise enough money to begin formalizing the process toward independence.... They are connected, part of the wired world that makes them able to do anything from chat about politics, art, or even find what it takes to create a Gay Kingdom (Fagaly 2005).

The intuition was also that in order to get to this higher plane of an international stage, it would be necessary to pass once more through the Westphalian idea of a declaration of independence, on behalf of a nation. There had to be some kind of replay of the nationalist moment, that is; a doing of it *again* that would be a doing of it *differently*. It is this staging and this doubling of the nationalist challenge that I am trying draw out of the micronationalist paradigm.

So it is very interesting for me, for example, to know that this Emperor King, Dale Parker Anderson, is an identical twin. He is a double of his brother; alike in all ways, except that Dale is gay, while his brother is straight. And there are other uncanny doublings and displacements, woven into this story. Dale and his brother are of royal descent. He is distantly related not only to the gay king of England (King Edward II), but to one of the principal players of the Mutiny of the Bounty (Warrant Officer William Purcell is his great grandfather). He has adopted the iconography of these

family connections into his micronationalist Kingdom. But the iconography is also, as seen in the Gay & Lesbian Kingdom website, that of an ordinary Aussie bloke in his boardshorts and thongs.

This is the kind of queer sovereignty that I have in mind, and that one can see in footage taken by the Gay & Lesbian Kingdom of its landing on Cato Island. The footage consists of still photographs which give way to a live recording of the 2004 visit to Cato by seaplane (accompanied by the fantastic music of Handl's Zadok the Priest: God save the king/Long live the king/May the king live forever/Amen, amen, alleluia, alleluia, amen, amen). Some of the images on its website are reproduced below. (A new GLK website is under construction; the archived one can be accessed at <http://web.archive.org/web/20070627181837/http://www.gayandlesbiankingdom.com/>.) One might notice, for example, the sense of playing for an audience, or for history, that is part of this chronicle, in its faithful recording of the formalities and ceremonial drama of a nationalist claim. These include the journey over sea, the stepping upon consecrated soil, the flag raising, the reading of the plaque inscription, and so on.



View of Cato Island from the seaplane upon landing



A member of the landing party on the beach



Emperor Dale raises the flag of the Gay and Lesbian Kingdom....



The Gay and Lesbian Kingdom plaque is laid to commemorate the declaration



A letter is formally posted from the Kingdom



Stamps issued by the Gay and Lesbian Kingdom.

At one point in the video footage the approach switches from a home movie style of recording - complete with family commentary - to a news reporter voiceover ('This is so-and-so, on location at Cato Island'). The narration is self-conscious and staged, imagining and so claiming its place in the nationalist archive. It is in the assumption of the protocols of nationalist assertion that its sovereign gesture is 'queered'.

Emperor Dale enacts or performs the inauguration of sovereignty, that is, but he does it in a way that doubles and displaces it, opening it a reproduction, or to a recreation, that is at odds with its conventional operation.

The video recording keeps the focus for some time on the spectacular shipwreck that stands out starkly against the uninhabited, untreed landscape of Cato Island. It evokes an abandoned project of European imperialism. The empire-building played out here in its contemporary version is a repetition that revises, signalling an empowerment of the non-elite (a chartered sea-plane for the landing; digital cameras for the recording; the formalities conducted informally, in dress and speech) and a 'crossing out' of the will-to-power of the earlier nationalist projects. The queerness of its enterprise is also drawn out in naturalist terms, in the sexual references of the Gay and Lesbian Kingdom project's narration and iconography. The vagina shape of Cato Island features centrally in the photographic record; it invokes the sexual and maternal origin that is forgotten in patriarchal accounts of the birth of nations. Gender inversions are drawn to attention throughout. The narrator exclaims of the booby, 'he's happy, he's sitting on his eggs'. Under the title 'Welcome to Heaven [declared capital of Cato],' the website points out the affinity of Coral Sea wildlife for its queer nation guests, 'A highlight for most Gay and Lesbian visitors would be swimming with the graceful green and loggerhead turtles which can be seen all year round and learning that most of the marine life in the reef are transsexual, the clown fish, made famous by the Disney movie Finding Nemo is typical of many of the reef fish who change sex, when the dominate [sic] female dies a male clown fish changers [sic] his sex and takes her place.'

The playful distance of humour and parody is kept in play in the GLK text, while the faithful operation of its gay nationalism is made to apply to the cause of homosexual marriage in Australia. It is here that a new 'cosmopolitics' might be witnessed, I propose; one which has none of the complacency of assumptions that the gay and lesbian subcultures, in their non-essentialist logic of formation, already dwell at the cosmopolitan 'end' of claims to sovereignty. Recognition is not a game that is won once, and for all; there are losses and gains for each new set of players.

Micronationalism is a technique of engaging the many authorities of today's 'pluralising democracies' in an ongoing theatre of recognition, a way of calling on the law, in its national and international operation, to attend to the human rights claims that have yet to be secured, or founded properly. We are returned to the beginning, to the unmarked virgin soil or sand upon which the steps of sovereign gay nationhood may be impressed. A particularly Australian trope has come to feature in the

representation of the Gay and Lesbian Kingdom of the Coral Sea Islands; I will leave my invocation of its project with the buoyant lightness of this image.



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