

# *McIver's ladies' baths: Politics of recognition and exclusion in gendered spaces*

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Borrowing ideas from both modern and postmodern traditions, this paper aims to contemplate the functionality of the McIver's ladies' baths in Coogee, as a space premised on binary gender. When discussing the politics of a space reserved exclusively for women, one must consider the questions: 'what constitutes womanhood?' and 'how do those who subvert binary gender negotiate their identities within a space premised on it?' By examining and contrasting the various notions of gender identity and politics of recognition related to modern and postmodern thought, namely gender essentialism, performativity and cultural intelligibility, and referring to a recent case study, I suggest a more progressive and inclusive politics of recognition must be set in place to account for the varying sexualities and/or gender identities present within contemporary society. This paper challenges the gender essentialism associated with modern thought, that is, gender as a biologically pre-determined, fixed and 'natural' characteristic of a person, due to its oppressive and exclusionary results, and instead, insists that a postmodern conception of gender is much more constructive when approaching identity within McIver's ladies' baths, and society in general.

"It is nothing extraordinary for a master to bar his slaves from the manor,  
but it is a revolutionary act for slaves to bar their master from their hut." –  
Marilyn Frye

Throughout history public space has been culturally, politically and religiously defined and reinforced as either 'male' or 'female', the former usually taking precedence. Consequently, the cultural and political significance of the existence of women-only spaces cannot be overlooked; the struggle to attain women-only spaces is a struggle for the personal and political autonomy of women – a necessary alternative to the dominant patriarchal discourse which assumes women's spaces to be 'private', associated with child rearing and domestic duties. It is important to acknowledge, however, the concerns a space premised on binary gender may raise for those gender ambiguous peoples whose physical appearance does not conform to the intelligible signifiers associated with 'man' or 'woman'. Drawing on modern and postmodern thought, this paper aims to contemplate the functionality of women-only spaces – specifically, McIver's ladies' baths in Coogee – the gender politics that surround them, and more generally, the present moment we live in. To begin, a brief overview of the core ideas associated with modern and postmodern thought will set the context; following, a history of the baths and their development within a framework of modernity will facilitate a deeper understanding of the space; essentialist notions of gender as a product of the modern era will then provide context from which to problematise gendered spaces; and finally, a recent case study combined with postmodern notions of gender performativity and intelligibility will critique the functionality of the ladies' baths.

In order to contemplate the functionality of women-only spaces in both modern and postmodern frameworks, the core ideas associated with such frameworks, and their relation to one another, must first be considered. In its simplest form, modernity is a historical period following the Middle Ages associated with progression - a rejection of tradition and authority

in favour of reason and rationality - industrialization, and the division of labour (Barker, 2008). Such emphasis on progression is evident in Gillen and Ghosh's (2007, p.33) writing on the philosophy of enlightenment which suggests, albeit somewhat unrealistically, that life is "in transit from a primitive origin to a utopian end." Here, the present is significant only for the opportunities it provides, personally and socially, to create a better future - that is, the present is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. German philosopher, Hegel, proposes a more elaborate philosophy of progress which views life as a struggle for freedom, which can only be achieved through "an enhanced understanding of the self, others, and the world" (Gillen & Ghosh, 2007, p.33). Thus, progress towards freedom is progress towards truth - an arguably futile journey if we consider the postmodern view that there is no objective truth or reality. Postmodernism developed out of, or in reaction to, modernism; consequently there is no clear break between the two, "they are contingent and therefore simply help provide a map of knowledge about particular subjects." (Anderson, 2008, p.89). Scepticism is a central characteristic of postmodernism, which French philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard defines as "incredulity towards metanarratives", that is, "a scepticism towards, and abandonment of, rationality, absolute truth, progress, objectivity, universal principles and dichotomous logic" (Anderson, 2008, p.93; Butler, 2002, p.13). According to Lyotard, the postmodern condition is not a periodising concept, but:

The condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies. I have decided to use the word postmodern to describe that condition...It designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the rules for science, literature, and the arts. (Lyotard, 1984, p.23)

Lyotard questions the validity of metanarratives such as those posed by Gillen and Ghosh (2007) - that history is progressive and knowledge liberatory - as they commonly legitimise and reinforce dominant cultural practices while regarding those 'alternative' or less prominent cultural practices as deviant. Belief in metanarrative, Lyotard argues, is dangerous as it is essentially belief in illusion. Firstly, because the emancipation of humanity towards enlightenment has failed, and secondly, universal consensus is impossible as it relies on language which is ever-changing, and geographically and culturally differing (Anderson, 2008). By arguing against metanarratives, postmodernists attempt to break down hegemonic power relations and create space for those subordinated and marginalised narratives (Butler, 2002). For example, a prominent metanarrative in Western society is that of heteronormativity, an ideological system which naturalises and privileges heterosexuality as the moral, universal form of sexual identification; consequently, it values an alignment of sex, sexuality, gender identity and gender roles, and assumes other non-heterosexual forms of sexual identification and/or acts as unnatural and immoral (Crowley, 2008). Many postmodern and poststructuralist philosophers - Adrienne Rich, Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, to name a few - argue against the metanarrative of heteronormativity, seeking to denaturalise heterosexual hegemony by questioning gender and sex typologies (Crowley, 2008).

Established in 1886, McIvers ladies' baths is the last remaining women-only sea pool in Australia (Randwick City Council, 2011). Carved into the cliff face and sheltered from the remainder of Coogee beach, the baths offer a private space for women and children to safely bathe and relax without the company of men. The space has been managed since 1922 by the Randwick and Coogee Ladies Amateur Swimming, which asks guests to donate 20 cents at the entrance to help with maintenance costs (Heritage Branch, 2011). The ladies' baths can essentially be understood as a product of modernity, in regard to both their existence as a

women-only space, which can be associated with the modern era's focus on progression and reason, and the industrialisation associated with modernity - the baths as human appropriation of the natural coastline. First-wave feminism developed alongside and as a product of modernity and its traditions during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Code, 2000). The campaigning for women's social, economical and political rights that ensued fought to destabilise the hierarchy between a male-dominated public sphere and a female-dominated private sphere; consequently, the development of McIver's ladies' baths can be understood as a result of women challenging their exclusion from the public sphere during this period (Code, 2000). Although the traditions of progression and reason associated with modernity facilitated first-wave feminism, during the twentieth century feminists began to critique modernity for its reliance on binary logic, for example: 'man/woman', 'white/black', 'public/private', and 'active/passive'. Here the latter is conceptualised and defined in terms of what it is not, positing a hierarchical relationship where one is always inferior to the other; that is: man is not woman and man is privileged over woman (Elder, 2007). Through the exclusion of men, McIver's ladies' baths play an important role in subverting the hierarchical dichotomies of 'man/woman' and 'public/private', and thus can be understood in relation to the modern era's first-wave feminism movement. With modernity came urbanization and industrialisation; economic growth during the nineteenth century meant that people migrated to cities in search of employment opportunities. Consequently, the land was in a constant state of appropriation as cities grew rapidly, becoming centres for trade and capital (Finkelstein & Goodwin, 2005). Such appropriation is evident in the McIvers ladies baths; as human appropriation of the natural environment - a transformation from coastline to sea pool. Thus, the space can be understood as a product of modernity in terms of both first-wave feminism's contribution to the reclamation of public space, and the human appropriation of the natural environment associated with industrialisation and urbanisation.

The modern era, with its focus on grand narratives and dichotomous logic, gave rise to essentialist notions of sex and gender identity - context from which to problematise McIver's ladies' baths as a gendered space. In this context, sex and gender "are taken as transhistorical features of culture, just as the modernist viewpoint within psychoanalysis conceives of sex and gender as universal psychic phenomena." (Goldner, 2003, p.114). Thus, an essentialist viewpoint conceives sex and gender identity as something fixed, stable, coherent and biologically or psychologically pre-determined, ultimately excluding those who do not conform to binary gender or whose gender presentation and biological sex do not align. Gender essentialism is problematic; it pigeonholes gender identity (and sexuality), ignoring entire communities of people who do not experience cis-gender. As Goldner (2003, p.115) points out, "gender is obviously not an identity or essence at the core of a person, it is just as obviously a core *experience* that comes to *constitute* identity." Thus, "we can neither essentialize gender, nor dematerialize it." (Goldner, 2003, p.115). Regardless, essentialist notions of gender identity are still largely prevalent in contemporary Western society - they are a metanarrative that, although continuously questioned by postmodern theorists, is so deeply embedded as to be practically inescapable. Premised on binary gender, the ladies' baths are exemplary of the binaristic logic that emerged during the modern era. Although I do not wish to undermine the cultural and political significance of the women-only space - women's reclamation of a male-dominated public sphere is paramount to gender equality - it is inevitable that any space premised on binary gender, masculine or feminine, call issues surrounding identity politics and gender representation into question. This is exceptionally true of the ladies' baths given their popularity among the queer community, and the sex and/or gender diversity within that community. In his article *Justifying exclusion: The politics of public space and the dispute over access to McIvers ladies' baths*, Sydney, Iveson (2010,

p.216) considers how particular forms of behaviour and interaction become normalized in and through public space, and how this may have “exclusionary consequences for those whose very presence, behaviour or identities are characterised as ‘abnormal’ and/or problematised as ‘deviant.’” Given the majority of public space is inherently heteronormative, how does a genderqueer<sup>1</sup> person, for example, negotiate their identity within the context of the ladies’ baths? Arguably, due to their gender ambiguity and the varying, subjective notions of womanhood, it would be difficult for an outsider to appropriately police their gender; given there is no ethical procedure in place for doing so, the consequences have the potential to be extremely damaging. Considering this, the bath’s functionality as a women-only space must be questioned. In order to develop a more thoughtful understanding of the space and its gender politics, the application of a less regressive politics of recognition would be of great value; postmodern notions of gender performativity and identity as multiple and fragmented provide this, and will be considered shortly.

Under a year ago, the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) published a news story titled “Martha or Arthur? Cossies in a twist at ladies-only baths”, detailing the conflict that arose between McIver’s ladies’ bath’s clientele when a person “in the process of becoming a woman”, yet masculine in appearance, was using the space (SMH, 2010). Although undergoing hormone therapy, and presumably identifying (at least in part) as a woman, their presence in the space was unaccepted by fellow bathers, resulting in calls to the police and reports made to Randwick Council (SMH, 2010). Both the title (“Martha or Arthur?”) and the proceeding story, which opens with the question “At what point does a man undergoing a sex change become a woman?”, take a biological essentialist view of gender, one that normalises dominant ideologies of gender and reinforces the gender binary (SMH, 2010). Given a portion of the bath’s clientele are queer, as reflected in the above SMH news story, it is futile to conceptualise gender within the space from an essentialist viewpoint - it simply cannot account for the varying gender identities that occupy the space (and society in general), resulting in the unjustified exclusion of certain queer identities.

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity is useful in questioning the functionality of the women-only space. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1999) argues that all gender can be understood as a publicly regulated performance – an enactment of gender norms – where one cannot distinguish between the original and the imitation. Thus, gender and sex cannot be understood as a fixed, essential quality of a person, but rather, a fluid, fragmented and at times contradictory performance of socially constructed gender norms (Butler, 1999). Performances of gender are emphasised in spaces such as the ladies’ baths; due to its exclusionary nature the space relies heavily on the policing of physical appearance. However, as Butler argues, physical appearance is always a performance and hence, not conducive to uncovering an underlying ‘true’ gender identity, especially if we consider transgender, androgynous, and genderqueer people. If gender is indeed in a continuous state of flux it is difficult to determine who is and is not entitled to use the space, rendering its women-only status ambiguous and open to interpretation. However, this is not the case; the politics of recognition and exclusion within the ladies’ baths require that visitors conform to the

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<sup>1</sup> Genderqueer describes a person who does not conform to binary gender. They may identify as either man or woman, as both, neither, or something entirely separate from the dichotomy. Often gender is viewed as a spectrum, with man and woman at either end; ones gender is able to fluctuate within this spectrum, blending femininity and masculinity (UOW Queer Collective, 2011).

gendered laws of cultural intelligibility, that is, to either 'man' or 'woman'. As Butler recognizes, this is extremely problematic for those whose gender is "incoherent" or "discontinuous"; "because certain kinds of 'gender identities' fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain." (Butler, 1999, p.23-24). The categories 'man' and 'woman', which are intended to be grounds for claiming particular rights and recognition - at McIvers ladies' baths, and elsewhere - are not universal, nor are they capable of encompassing the diversity of sexual and/or gender expression. I do not mean to suggest that any cis-gendered male who performs femininity should have access to the space, but rather, those peoples who have a history of womanhood, have experienced oppression due to their sex as female (whether it previous or current), and/or genuinely identify (at least in part) as a woman, should not be excluded on the grounds that their gender presentation does not conform to the traditional, culturally intelligible notions of femininity.

This paper has aimed to contemplate the functionality of the women-only space McIver's ladies' baths as a space premised on binary gender. It has done so with particular regard to modern and postmodern thought. The normative dominance of heterosexuality and the essentialist division of gender into 'natural' and 'stable' binaries ('man/woman' and 'masculinity/femininity') as modern ideas have facilitated an understanding of the heteronormativity still so deeply embedded in society and played out in the ladies' baths. Postmodern thought, in particular Judith Butler's writing on gender performativity and intelligibility, provided a framework from which to break down the metanarrative of heteronormativity and raised questions of who has the right to access the space. Although there is no clear answer as to how the baths can both function as a women-only space and be inclusive of queer identities, a postmodern discussion of gender as fluid and continuous offers a more informed, inclusive and conscientious means of policing gender within the space, with particular regard for gender ambiguity.

### Notes on contributor

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