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Bodies That Matter: Performing White Possession on the Beach

Aileen Moreton-Robinson

Voices from the beach can be hard to hear. They can be snatched from the lips by the wind or drowned in the white noise of the waves. But there are beaches, too, on which voices are hard to hear because of the silence.

—Greg Denning, *Beach Crossings*

Beaches remain important places within indigenous coastal peoples' territories, although the silence about our ownership is deafening.¹ The coastline of the Australian continent was frequented for centuries by mariners and traders from Asia with whom some indigenous groups established trade and familial relations.² The first verified contact by Dutch explorer Willem Janszoon was in March 1606; he chartered the west coast of the Cape York Peninsula in northern Queensland. Throughout the next two centuries, British explorers primarily undertook the charting of the Australian coastline. Since 1788, British colonists and their descendants have colonized the coastline of this continent and are responsible for building the majority of Australia's capital cities near the sea. In 2010, it is where the largest proportion of the Australian population resided on the most prized real estate in the country. Living near the sea ensures that the beach continues to be a place of multiple encounters for residents and visitors. The beach marks the border between land and sea, between one nation and another, a place that stands as the common ground upon which collective national ownership, memory, and identity are on public

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display: a place of pleasure, leisure, and pride. Michael Taussig argues that the beach is a site of fantasy production, a playground where transgressions and pleasure occur; it is “the ultimate fantasy where nature and carnival blend as prehistory in the dialectical image of modernity.”³

As an island continent, beaches are the visible terra manifestation of Australian borders, which operate simultaneously to include and exclude. During the twenty-first century these borders may seem to be more permeable because of the economic and cultural processes of globalization, but territorial sovereignty reigns supreme in Australia and Europe, which is evidenced by border patrols that serve to exclude those who are uninvited. Within Australia, we are constantly reminded of the central role of possession in civilizing “others” and the association between war and borders that is reinscribed through our treatment of asylum seekers who travel by boat, attempting to land on our beaches. Australian federal governments have built mandatory detention centers fenced with razor wire and patrolled by guards in order to accommodate the “illegal boat people” who have been successful in landing on our beaches after escaping from war-torn countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. In taking possession of their bodies and imprisoning them, the nation-state exercises its sovereignty in violation of several human rights conventions that it has signed. This performative sovereign act of violence and disavowal has historical roots. Despite international law, the British invasion in the form and arrival of the first naval boat people produced invisible borders left in the wake of colonization that continues to deny indigenous people our sovereign rights. Many authors have argued that within Australian popular culture the beach is a key site where racialized and gendered transgressions, fantasies, and desires are played out, but none have elucidated how these cultural practices reiteratively signify that the nation is a white possession.⁴

In this article I examine how white possession functions ontologically and performatively within Australian beach culture through the white male body. I draw on Judith Butler’s idea of performativity in that a culturally determined and historically contingent act, which is internally discontinuous, is only real to the extent that it is repeated.⁵ Raced and gendered norms of subjectivity are iterated in different ways through performative repetition in specific historical and cultural contexts. National racial and sexual subjects are in this sense both doings and things done, but where I differ from Butler is that I argue they are existentially and ontologically tied to patriarchal white sovereignty. Patriarchal white sovereignty is a regime of power that derives from the illegal act of possession and is most acutely manifested in the form of the Crown and the judiciary, but it is also evident in everyday cultural practices and spaces.⁶ As a means of controlling differently racialized populations enclosed within the borders of a given society, white subjects are disciplined, though to different

degrees, to invest in the nation as their possession. As a regime of power, patriarchal white sovereignty manifests through white male bodies' performative reiteration of white possession. In this way, performativity functions as a disciplinary technique that enables the white male subject to be imbued with a sense of belonging and ownership produced by a possessive logic that presupposes cultural familiarity and commonality applied to social action. In this context, I will examine how the beach is appropriated as a white possession through the performative reiteration of the white male body. I then discuss how indigenous artist Vernon Ah Kee contests this performativity in his installation CANTCHANT.⁷

PERFORMING THE COLONIAL SUBJECT

Colonization is the historical process through which the performativity of the white male body and its relationship to the environment has been realized and defined particularly in former British colonies such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States.⁸ In staking possession to indigenous lands, white male bodies took control and ownership of the environments they encountered by mapping land and naming places, which was an integral part of the colonizing process. One of the first possessive performances by the white male body occurred on the beach when Lieutenant James Cook landed at a place he named Botany Bay on April 28, 1770. For some time his boat had been under surveillance by the Kamegal clan of the areas now known as Cooks River and Botany Bay and by the Gwegal clan at Kundull (Kurnell).⁹ At first, the Kamegal and Gwegal clans thought the large boat was a big bird entering the bay, but as it approached closer they could see that there were people on board who were similar but different from themselves.¹⁰ When Cook and his men landed on the beach at Kundull, they were trespassing on Gwegal land and hence were challenged by two Gwegal warriors who threw spears at them while shouting out in their language *Warra Warra Wai*, or go away. Cook's crew retaliated by firing muskets and wounding one of the Gwegal warriors. The warriors retreated leaving behind their spears and shields on the ground. Cook never interpreted this encounter, and others, as an act of indigenous sovereignty while he made his way up the east coast of Australia. Instead he rescripted us as living in a state of nature with no knowledge of or possession of proprietary rights.¹¹

Cook took possession of the Gwegal warriors' weapons and transported them back to Britain where they are now on display in a museum housing the property of people from different countries accumulated through purchase, plunder, and theft. After eight days in Botany Bay, Cook and his crew sailed

north up the coastline of Australia. Cook made good use of his telescope by surveying the beach to watch indigenous people as he sailed past their lands, noting in his diaries that we ranged in color from chocolate to soot.¹² After several months of sailing northward bound, he eventually took possession of the whole eastern coast from the 38° latitude in the name of King George III after landing on the beach of an island he named Possession situated off the tip of Cape York Peninsula. The firing of guns, the raising of the British flag, and the male crew bearing witness ceremoniously marked the assumption of sovereignty. The performative act of possession enabled by patriarchal white sovereignty is constituted by violence, transgression, voyeurism, pleasure, and pride. These originary performative acts by the white male body would later become an integral part of Australian beach culture within modernity.

Some eight years after Cook, eleven British naval ships arrived in Botany Bay, and Governor Arthur Phillip, as the embodiment of colonial power, planted a British flag in the sand on the beach staking a possessive claim to lands that belonged to the Eora and Gadigal nations. The invasion had begun, and the lives of the people from the Kamegal and Gwegal clans were never the same, as violence and smallpox took its toll on the beach. During the next century through containment, disease, and death, indigenous people were removed from beaches that were required for colonists. In the white colonial imagination we had become abject subjects; our lives and our bodies were physically erased from the beach.¹³ The only subjects who determined which bodies mattered on the beach were almost exclusively white males, embodying the possessive prerogative of patriarchal white sovereignty as a colonial norm.¹⁴

Despite the apparent promise of open access and use, in the twenty-first century public spaces are predicated upon an assumption of objectivity and rationality, which values but no longer explicitly marks or names whiteness or maleness. The beach, as a public space, continues to be controlled by white men, the embodiment of universal humanness and national identity. During the nineteenth century, the beach featured as a place where natural features were of interest to predominantly white male visitors who were influenced by European romanticism. The beauty of the beach appealed to observers, and “its sublime features; those characteristics which stimulated an intensity of emotion and sensation [valuing] poetic mystery above intellectual clarity.”¹⁵ Perceived as such, the beach enabled the performance of a gendered white ontological experience in which nature fed the soul and culture nurtured white men’s sensibilities. The beach was also an intersubjective place where men could socialize with family and friends or watch other beachgoers reproducing the British custom of promenading at the seaside, which had been the preserve of wealthy and middle-class people. The beach was and remains a hetero-normative white masculine space entailing performances of sexuality, wealth,

voyeurism, class, and possession. However, these different attributes of white male performativity underwent a transformation through the introduction of surf bathing. During the nineteenth century, surf bathing was performed exclusively by white males but was not a predominant part of beach culture because the Police Act of 1838 restricted swimming to the early hours of the morning and preferably on nonpopular beaches. The public display of the white male body was perceived to offend the moral sensibilities at the time. It was not until the early twentieth century that surf bathing became a part of modern beach culture due in part to the shifting codes of Victorian morality and increased control of the sea and the surf.¹⁶ Eugenics also played a part in the shift. "Whereas picnicking and promenading defined masculinity in terms of an emphasis on the respectability and moral authority of colonialism, surf bathing and lifesaving defined masculinity in terms of a strong, fit, well muscled and racially pure white body."¹⁷ This representation of the white male body was in contrast to the perception of policy makers during the turn of the century, who facilitated the removal of the indigenous body from the beaches and lands onto reserves and missions. The indigenous body was represented as being terminal. The common phrase used at the time to describe the containment and removal was as a benevolent act of "smoothing the dying pillow."¹⁸

BEACH LIFESAVERS: PERFORMING WHITE MASCULINITY

By 1907, white middle-class men had formed the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia in response to the public representation of their surf bathing as being an "affront to decency."¹⁹ They soon gained public approval by rationalizing their objectives as humanitarian and claiming that surf bathing was a disciplined organized sport involving military drills. Unlike lifeguards, who were paid for their services, surf lifesavers were volunteers who undertook training in order to protect people on the beach and were responsible for the safety and rescue of swimmers, surfers, and other water sports participants. Regimentation, rigor, and dedication to the service of the nation produced fit and disciplined white male bodies. The media reported favorably on the suntanned white male bodies, representing them as the epitome of Australian manhood. Suntanning enhanced the aesthetic modalities of the white male body, appropriating and domesticating the hypersexuality signified by black skin. Suntanning renders the presence of color as a temporary alteration that works to affirm the dominance of white masculinity and its ownership of the beach. The brownness of the white male body becomes "a detachable signifier, inessential to the subject, and hence acceptable" because it is not permanent.²⁰ As a detached signifier, it does not disrupt the "somatic luxury of white [male]

subjects to roam and return to the tabula rasa of ideal whiteness where it is conveniently restored to its apex of privileges” as the embodiment of nation.²¹ The surf lifesaver’s performance of discipline, strength, bravery, mateship, loyalty, and rigor embodied the attributes of white national identity, which were later ascribed to the body of the Digger who fought at Gallipoli in Turkey during the first World War. The term *Digger* is an appellation applied to Australian and New Zealand soldiers because of their trench-digging activities during the Gallipoli campaign, which required strong and fit bodies in order to undertake the hard work. The transference of the attributes of the surf lifesaver to the Digger was not a coincidence. Many surf lifesavers volunteered for the two world wars, and, in some cases, surf lifesaving clubs were closed because of the declining numbers of young men.²²

The suntanned and hypermasculinized white body of the Digger became inextricably tied to the birth of Australian nationalism within the white imaginary during the late twentieth century. This national identification with the performativity of invasion and taking possession of other peoples’ lands embraces and legitimizes a tradition of patriarchal white sovereign violence embodied in the white male body on the beach in Australia and abroad. More than fifty thousand Australian soldiers volunteered to go to war in Europe to defend the sovereignty of the British Empire, an empire that was founded on the invasion and theft of indigenous peoples lands. The first convoy of predominantly white male volunteers left Western Australia in November 1914 and arrived on the beach at Gallipoli on April 25, 1915. Staking a possessive claim to the beach, on April 29, Lieutenant General Sir William Birdwood decided to name the area Anzac Cove in honor of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) that served at Gallipoli. Despite this possessive claim, the Turkish government did not name the site Anzac Cove officially for another seventy years, agreeing to do so in part as a gesture of goodwill and respect tied to the Australian government’s funding package to maintain the site. At that fateful site, the Turkish army decimated the Australian and New Zealand armies, with thousands of soldiers losing their lives. Though Gallipoli was a spectacular strategic blunder, in her excellent book *From Diggers to Drag Queens: Reconfiguring National Identity*, Fiona Nicoll explores how the body of the white male soldier was constructed as a metonym for the Anzac spirit, which has increasingly divested the Digger of its origins in values of militarism and racial supremacy.²³ The Digger’s white male body signified egalitarianism, discipline, irreverence, bravery, loyalty, endurance, and constitutional opposition to authority. As Nicoll argues, the Diggers’ hypermasculinized and idealized body in cultural representations was in contrast to the actual traumatized and disfigured white male bodies returning home.

Following the carnage of World War I, the lifesaver was used as a signifier of national identity in order to endow the broken body of the Digger with a new life and new masculine virility. During the interwar period and up to the 1950s, the media represented the white male body of the surf lifesaver as the embodiment of the Anzac spirit and the nation. In 1923, the president of the Surf Life Saving Association stated in the *Daily Guardian* that “we shall rear a race of men finer than the Anzacs, whom the whole world admire[s].”²⁴ In 1941, the commentary in a newsreel item shot at a Bondi beach carnival stated that “mighty deeds spawn men of might. This is the crucible from which fighting material emerges volunteer life savers, volunteer fighters. The amateur surf clubs have an enlistment record second to none.”²⁵ The embodied signification of the white surf lifesavers as a nation is also demonstrated by their inclusion and performance in national events such as the opening of the Harbour Bridge in 1932, the Australian Sesquicentenary in 1938, Queen Elizabeth’s 1954 visit, and the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. During the 1940s, photographer Max Dupain captured Australian beach culture in his representations of white male bodies in photographs that include the infamous *Sunbaker* (1937), *Surf Race Start* (1940), and *Surfs Up* (1940).²⁶ Dupain’s portraits of white male bodies performing in the service of the nation represented the beach as a white possession: a space of leisure, pleasure, and pride.

During the 1930s, surf lifesaving clubs were conferred with a legal proprietary right to the beaches by local councils that officially gave them the power to control, police, and rescue members of the public. Despite the official sanction of surf lifesavers’ ownership of the beach, their proprietorship was challenged after World War II through the emergence of a new white masculinity in the form of the surfer. Surfing was represented as a form of hedonistic leisure in public discourse, evoking anxiety about the moral decay of young men and women. Surfing produced a competitive individualized white form of masculinity that attracted more women onto the beach. This hedonistic form of leisure was in contrast to the volunteer surf lifesavers who patrolled the beach and saved lives in the service of the nation. During the 1960s, surf lifesaving clubs attempted to restrict surfers’ use of the beach by imposing taxes and restricting the use of surfboards to certain areas. Surfers responded by establishing “administrative associations to regulate, codify and legitimize what they now defined as a sport” in order to stake a possessive claim to the beach.²⁷ During the 1960s and 1970s, tension existed and violence occurred between these two forms of embodied white masculinity usually over territory, sexual access to women, and prowess in the water. Verbal abuse was common on the beach. Surfers taunted surf lifesavers by calling them “seals” because of their regimented training and “dickheads” because their caps looked like the heads of condoms, and their swimming attire was referred to as a “budgie

smuggler” because it exhibited the outline of small male genitalia particularly on cold days. Surf lifesavers responded to surfers by calling them “seaweed” because of their long, bleached, and matted hair and their supposed inability to master the waves. These white heterosexual territorial wars abated to some degree when surfing was recognized nationally as a professional sport through organized professional tournaments that were covered by media and sponsored by corporations. Similarly, people recognized surf lifesaving as a professional sport predominantly through the Iron Man tournament series sponsored by corporations. The sexualized white male body of the suntanned surfer and the lifesaver was commodified to sell anything from Coca Cola to fashion and spawned a new genre of documentary surfing films and televised sport.

White male participation in surfing started during the 1930s, but the white male’s dominance of the surfing scene did not occur until the 1960s. Booth argues that after World War II, mass consumer capitalism created the conditions by which leisure as a social practice became tied to individual lifestyles.²⁸ Surfing was and continues to be a Native Hawaiian cultural practice introduced to the west by Duke Kahanamoku. The Native Hawaiian form of surfing was to flow with the waves and was an integral part of their culture for more than 1,500 years.²⁹ Surfing was not considered to be a competitive practice, and when white Australian and South African surfers decided to invade the Native Hawaiian surfing beach of the North Shore of O’ahu during the late 1970s, they were confronted by members of Hui ‘O He’e Nalu, who asserted their sovereignty over the beach. For the Native Hawaiian surfers, the invasion of their beach by white male surfers was a performative reiteration of the invasion by white American marines supporting the white patriarchy that overthrew the Hawaiian monarchy in 1890. Native Hawaiian surfer resistance eventually earned the respect of the International Professional Surfing organization, which conceded to a reduction in annual competitions at North Shore. Despite the assertion of Native Hawaiian sovereignty over the waves and the beaches, white Australian and South African surfers staked a possessive claim, colonizing surfing by riding the waves, “conquering,” “attacking,” and reducing them to stages on which to perform aggressive acts. This became the dominant form of professional surfing whereby surfers represented their respective nations by embodying the violent attributes of patriarchal white sovereignty. By the 1980s, the blond-haired, barrel-chested, suntanned white male body sauntering in board shorts and thongs had become a new icon of beach culture reflecting the hedonism of youth during the 1960s and 1970s in Australia. The hedonism of surfing carried with it sex, sun, and surf. Artists such as Brett Whiteley, whose reclining nudes and bikini-clad beauties on the beach reflected a theater of indolence, captured sex, sun, and surf in paintings. The catalog for the Art Gallery of New South Wales exhibition, *On the Beach*:

With Brett Whiteley and Fellow Australian Artists, states, "It was not only the allure of these inherently erotic bodies [in] languid stupor that compelled Whiteley's fascination for this iconic aspect of Australian landscape; it was also the beautiful vistas of beach and seascapes which provided such fertile ground for his inspirational paintings and drawings."³⁰ As the embodiment of patriarchal white sovereignty, Whiteley, like the surfers and lifesavers, performatively exhibits the possession of white women's bodies on "their" beach. While white women are subject to the possessive white male gaze, their presence on the beach is tied to the heteronormativity of patriarchal white sovereignty. The white females can stake a possessive claim to the beach in ways that indigenous women cannot. As I have argued elsewhere, white women have access to power and privilege on the basis of their race through unequal gendered relations.³¹

After the economic downturn of the 1980s and a decade of multiculturalism and indigenous rights claims, the militarized white male body of the Digger as the embodiment of nation was returned to the beach within the national imaginary. Former Prime Minister John Howard strategically deployed the memory of Edward "Weary" Dunlop as the quintessential Digger who represented core national values of mateship, egalitarianism, and a fair go.³² Dunlop was a fearless and strong leader, a qualified surgeon who achieved sporting and military success.³³ Taken as a prisoner of war during World War II, he attended to his comrades, risking his own life by challenging his Japanese captors to provide medical provisions for the sick and wounded. He continued to campaign for the rights of soldiers after the war and was a committed humanitarian. Like Howard, former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating also used the Digger in nationalist rhetoric, but he did so in a different way. As Nicoll argues, Keating's eulogy to the "unknown" soldier "presented . . . a figure capable of drawing the diverse threads comprising contemporary Australian society together in tolerance."³⁴ In his attempt to reorient Australia's core values toward a postcolonial future, Keating performed the Digger by walking the Kokoda Trail in the excolony of Papua New Guinea and relocating the white male body in the Pacific and away from Europe. As the embodied representation of patriarchal white sovereignty, Keating was also signifying Australia's role as a former colonizing nation that served to displace and negate the ongoing colonization within the nation.

Following Keating's performance, Howard visited the majority of overseas Australian war memorials, and his attendance and conveyance of respect were televised to the nation. In particular, his visit to French battlefields signified to the nation that he had been touched by war because he carried a diary belonging to a family member to the site. Howard legitimated his authority as an Australian leader of the nation by vicariously linking himself to the Digger tradition through his family's wartime contribution. He strategically deployed

the Digger nationalism, connecting World War I to Timor and then Iraq in order to substantiate our involvement in war by frequently using the term *Digger* in his speeches.³⁵ Howard was at Anzac Cove, Gallipoli, when a contingent of Australian troops arrived in the Muthanna Province of southern Iraq on April 25, 2005.³⁶ Howard's performative reiterations of Digger nationalist subjectivity in order to justify Australia's deployment in Iraq, in the name of patriarchal white sovereignty, perpetuates the historical connection of the white male body to possession and war. Howard's militarization of Australian history through the Digger-rescripted nationalism resulted in an unprecedented rise in attendance by predominately white youth at memorial services above the beach at Anzac Cove during his time in office. The somber remembering and respect shown during the memorial service at Anzac Cove performatively reiterates the relationship among the white male body, possession, and war in the defense of the patriarchal white sovereignty signified by the place of encounter: the beach.

In Australia, on December 11, 2005, the beach once again became a place where transgression, violence, and white possession were on display. On that day at Cronulla beach, approximately five thousand predominately white male bodies rioted over the alleged bashing of a surf lifesaver by Arabic-speaking youth. The racialized production of the "terrorist" as an internal and external threat to the nation after the 9/11 attacks and the Bali bombings provides a context within which to understand the Cronulla protesters' rearticulation of white Australians' possessive claims on the beach as their sovereign ground.³⁷ Most clearly signified by the pervasiveness of the wearing and waving of the Australian flag were the explicit claims to white possession printed on T-shirts, inscribed on torsos with body paint, and written on placards waved before media cameras during the protest, including "We Grew Here: You Flew Here," "We're full fuck off," and "Respect locals or piss off," and the sign written on the beach for the overhead cameras: "100% Aussie pride." The white male body became the signifier of protest by embedding itself within the material body of the sand through the inscription of the slogan "100% Aussie pride." These embodied significations construct whiteness as an inalienable property, the purity of which is always potentially at threat from racialized others through contamination and dispossession.³⁸ At Cronulla, the white male body performatively repossessed the beach through anti-Arabic resentment, mimetically reproducing the racialized colonial violence enacted to dispossess indigenous people.

In response to the events of 2005 one of Australia's leading indigenous artists, Vernon Ah Kee, of the Kuku Yalandji, Waanji, Yidinji, and Gugu Yimithirr peoples, applied his creative talents. Ah Kee's work has challenged Australian popular culture, racism, and representations of indigeneity. He was commissioned to exhibit at the prestigious Vienna Biennale in 2009.



FIGURE 1. *Returning the Gaze*. Photo courtesy of Vernon Ah Kee, 2007.

The Cronulla riots provided a context for Ah Kee's *CANTCHANT*, which offers its audience an aboriginal man's rendering of the beach drawing on, but in opposition to, its signification within popular culture as a site of everyday white male performativity and representations of "Australian-ness" (see fig. 1). Common ownership of the beach looms large in the Australian imagination, but as violent attacks on Cronulla beach on December 11 demonstrate, not everyone shares the same proprietary rights within that space. His work frames the beach as an important site for the defense and assumption of territorial sovereignty. It is the place where invaders have landed and on Australia Day it is reenacted as the place where Captain Phillip planted a flag in 1788 in the name of some faraway sovereign in order to signify white possession.

Ah Kee plays with the idea that iconic beaches such as Bondi and Cronulla are white possessions: public spaces perceived within the white Australian imaginary as being urban and natural, civilized and primitive, spiritual and physical. He is acutely aware that the beach is a place where nature and culture become reconciled through the performativity of white male bodies such as lifesavers and surfers. Ah Kee undoes this reconciliation by disrupting the beach as a site of fantasy production where carnival and nature synergize as prehistory in the dialectical image of modernity. He challenges white possession of the beach by making visible the omnipresence of indigenous sovereignty through the performativity of the indigenous male body. He brings forth the

sovereign body of the indigenous male into modernity by displacing the white male body on the beach (see fig. 2).

The beach is indigenous land and different memories are brought forth. Upon entering the exhibition, surfboards hang in the middle of the room as painted Yadinji shields with markings on one side in red, yellow, and black, the colors of the indigenous flag signifying our sovereignty and resistance. On the other side of the surfboards, the eyes of aboriginal male warriors silently gaze at their audience bearing witness to their uninvited presence. The gaze of Ah Kee's grandfather looks to the east surveying the coastline in anticipation of invaders. The silent gaze is broken by the text on the walls. Ah Kee the sovereign warrior speaks his truth. We grew here you flew here, we are the first people, we have to tolerate you, we are not your other, you are dangerous people, and your duty is to accept the truth for you will be constantly reminded of your wrongdoing by our presence. Aboriginal people are not hybrids and will not comply with what you think you have made us become. Moving out of the first room, one enters another room where a video clip plays the sounds of the land and water intermittently backgrounded by the song "Stompin Grounds" sung by Warumpi (an indigenous band). The song's key message to its audience is: if you want to know this country and if you want to change your ways, you need to go to the stomping ground for ceremonial business. Ah Kee performatively reiterates indigenous sovereignty through the use of this song, which offers its white audience a way to belong to this country that is outside the logic of capital and patriarchal white sovereignty. Ah Kee also plays here with irony because the Stomp is the surfers' dance made famous by Little Pattie, one of Australia's original surfer chick icons. White Australian youth have continued to stomp all over the beach as shown in video clips for Australian rock bands like INXS and Midnight Oil, in soap operas like *Home and Away*, and in the movie *Puberty Blues*.³⁹ Ah Kee's juxtaposition of the Warumpi band's call to dance for the land and the white performative dancing on the land reiterates indigenous Australia's challenge to white possessive performances and their grounding in patriarchal white sovereignty.

Entering the second room, Ah Kee invites his audience to bear witness to a seeming anomaly: aboriginal surfers at the beach. The video shows the aboriginal surfers walking around the Gold Coast surveying the beach before entering it with their shield surfboards. The surprised look of a white male gaze is captured on film. This surprise suggests that, to the white male beachgoer, aboriginal surfers are out of place; they are not white in need of a tan; they belong in the landscape in the middle of Australia not on the beach. Ah Kee plays on this anomaly by taking his audience to the landscape away from the beach where death is signified by two cemeteries. Suddenly guns are fired repeatedly at two white surfboards encased with barbed wire, one hanging from a tree and the



FIGURE 2. Sovereign Surfer. *Photo courtesy of Vernon Ah Kee, 2007.*

other tied to a rock. The barbed wire evokes the fencing off of the land against indigenous sovereignty and the wire that was used in the trenches at Gallipoli—both signify death and destruction. Ah Kee brings forth repressed memories of the violence of massacres, incarceration, and dispossession hidden in landscape that is far away from the beach.⁴⁰ As the clip moves back to the beach where memories of the violence inflicted on aboriginal people are repressed by the beach's iconic status within the Australian imagination, there is silence. Suddenly a lone indigenous surfer appears on his shield surfboard gracefully moving through the water and displaying his skill as he takes command of the waves. He is not out of place. He embodies the resilience of indigenous sovereignty disrupting the iconography of the beach that represents all that is Australian within white popular culture. Like a stingray barb piercing the heart of white Australia, Ah Kee's masterful use of irony and anomaly reinserts the indigenous male body at the beach, displacing the white male body as the embodiment of possession 239 years after Cook's originary possessive performance.

CONCLUSION

The production of the beach as a white possession is both fantasy and reality within the Australian imagination and is tied to a beach culture encompassing pleasure, leisure, and national pride that developed during modernity through the embodied performance of white masculinity. As a border, the beach is constituted by epistemological, ontological, and axiological violence whereby the nation's past and present treatment of indigenous people becomes invisible and negated through performative acts of possession that ontologically and socially ground white male bodies. White possession becomes normalized and regulated within society through socially sanctioned embodied performative acts of Australian beach culture. The reiterative nature of these performances is required because within this borderland the omnipresence of indigenous sovereignty ontologically disturbs patriarchal white sovereignty's possession and its originary violence. Ah Kee's work powerfully demonstrates the resilience of indigenous sovereignty and its ability to disturb the performativity of white possession ontologically. Continuing the tradition of his ancestors, it is appropriate that during the twenty-first century the silence of the beach becomes the object of Ah Kee's sovereign artistic warriorship.

NOTES

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