

From Diggers to Drag Queens: Configurations of Australian National Identity. By Fiona Nicoll. Annandale and London: Pluto Press, 2001. Pp xxiv + 268.

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Fiona Nicoll's study begins at the most visited museum in Australia; the recently renovated War Memorial in Canberra. It progresses, as the title promises, to the most visited event in Australia; the gay and lesbian Mardi Gras festival in Sydney. Between the two shibboleths of the ostensible extremes of Australian national identity lies, fortuitously, an examination of icons connected with Australia's ongoing process of reconciliation and multiculturalism. Following notions of the semiotic regime or a regime of signs laid out by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Nicoll questions the ways in which various icons and fetishes of Australian national identity are mutable and transformable to suit ever-changing cultural shifts, yet continuously function as exclusionary tropes. Engaged in questioning the sometimes occulted, but sociologically important, disparity between the metaphoric and metonymic potential of icons of national identity, Nicoll challenges her readers not only to consider what it means to be an Australian, but, more importantly, how exclusionary nationalist models of Australian identity actually are.

In his analyses of some of the political problems arising from modern absolutist appraisals of culture and nationality, Paul Gilroy points out that essential culture is often constructed as a specifically gendered ideality. Australian nationality, like most other national fictions, is based upon the masculine: Australia was 'discovered' 'settled' 'cultivated' 'defended' and legislated by men. Obviously, there are notable exceptions, but they remain notable exceptions that we recall for their peculiarity. Like many cultural or national fictions, the fiction of Australian national identity has been engendered as masculine. Although diggers and drag queens are both male, Nicoll's discussion reveals that the anxiety underlying the configurations of national identity is indeed a protracted crisis of masculinity not necessarily 'maleness.' This becomes especially evident in her discussions of the 'feminized' body of the shell-shocked digger, the infantilization of the Peoples of Australia's First Nations, Pauline Hanson's rather bizarre assertion that she represents the "White Anglo-Saxon Male"¹ and Pauline Pantsdown's drag parody of

¹ Nicholl 197. Pauline Hanson founded the radically right-wing One Nation federal political party in Australia in 1996.

Hanson's professed representation of White Australian masculinity. Nicoll's inquiry reveals the subtle and not so subtle ways in which the semiotic regime which encompasses notions of national identity dictates that whoever is not 'masculine' is not Australian. Those who are not 'masculine' includes, women, Aboriginal Peoples, immigrants who are not of Anglo-Celtic origin, homosexuals, and men, who may meet all other 'masculine' criteria, but who have been 'feminized' by physical injury or psychological trauma.

Specifically written for "all citizens who, for one reason or another, find themselves expelled from the celebratory sphere of national identity" (Nicoll 215), Nicoll's book covers a range of foci that extend from the trenches of Gallipoli to the streets of Sydney. With such a broad base of analysis and readership, Nicoll's study cannot help but have elisions and exaggerations. Interestingly enough, Nicoll does not mention the Women's Land Army of the War years, or the drag kings of Mardi Gras, other than a quoting Ashley Gerber-Jones' comments on the 1996 Women's Cricket Team of Liechhardt (Nicoll 198-9). Her assertion that Violet Teague's 1921 painting, *Anzac Christmas*, rather than fostering a recognition of women's role in the formation and reproduction of national identity, the Christian iconography of virgin and child functions as a "sacred frame to support the homosocial trinity of Simpson, his mate, and the donkey" is, at best, something of a stretch.² Nicoll's argument that one of the ways in which modern cultural sites, as products and producers of the semiotic regime, compensate for the absence or even the willful exclusion of the historical subjects is to create an elaborate *mis-en-scene* is a point well made. However, her subsequent statement that "the period streets of Disneyland through to the entire Native American village placed within the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa" (Nicoll 30) exhibit such a technique subtly collapses Disneyland with Canada's national museum.³ More importantly, the

² Nicoll 86. This is a reference to the famous John Simpson Kirkpatrick who is celebrated for his short career as a stretcher bearer in the Monash Valley with the iCi section of the 3rd Field Ambulance of the First Australia Division of the Australian Imperial Force in WW I. In the twenty-four days of his service, Simpson, with the assistance of several donkeys, is credited with saving the lives of many men. The known names of his donkeys include Murphy, Abdul, Duffy, and Queen Elizabeth.

³ Some early critics of the museum have referred to the Canadian Museum of Civilization as Disneyland North. During the early 1980s, when the Canadian Museum of Civilization's new home was in its planning stages, the Disney theme parks were indeed examined by the museum's staff; along with museums, galleries, heritage centres, world expositions, historic sites, pioneer villages, etc. The kind of environmental reconstruction featured in the Grand Hall has a long pedigree in both open air

statement goes on to misrepresent the museum's Great Hall exhibit as an "entire Native American village." There are only six houses in the Great Hall, certainly not enough to form an entire village and each house represents a different and distinctive culture not a collective singular 'Native American' or even 'Native Canadian' people. The architecture of the Tsimshian, Haida, Nuxalk (Bella Coola), Central Coast, Nuu-Chah-Nulth (Nootka), and Coast Salish peoples are quite distinctive and cannot be mistaken for a singular style. If, as Nicoll asserts, we must be vigilant against accepting a false homogeneity within the ideality and iconography of Australian nationalism, we must also be cautious of neglecting to recognize the disparate components that make up the cultures and peoples of *all* nations.

From Diggers to Drag Queens is a provocative book with a provocative title, and Nicoll's reading of icons of national identity is indeed a challenge to her readers to recognize the implicit exclusionary nature of the ways in which Australian national identity is fetishized. The breadth of Nicoll's study is sometimes frustrating as it prohibits her from the comprehensive analysis that her argument warrants. Although the reader is left with some lingering questions, Nicoll's book succeeds in its intention to challenge our complacent notions that Australian national identity is polysemic sign, rather than a very exclusive and well patrolled enclave of masculinity.

Works Cited

- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Nicoll, Fiona. *From Diggers to Drag Queens: Configurations of Australian National Identity*. London: Pluto P, 2001.

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and indoor museums, stretching back over a century, and has nothing to do with Disney. I am grateful to Stephen Alford of the Canadian Museum of Civilization for providing me with this information.