

# **Entanglement and the Modern Australian Rhythm Method: *Lantana*'s Lessons in Policing Sexuality and Gender<sup>1</sup>**

**Kirsty Duncanson, University of Melbourne**

**Catriona Elder, University of Wollongong**

**Murray Pratt, University of Technology Sydney**

## **'Oh, what a tangled web we weave ...'<sup>2</sup>; Deceit and Plotting in Suburban Sydney**

The idea of belonging and national identity has been a long-standing theme in Australian film (Dermody and Jacka 1988). As with many other nations film in Australia is often seen as an important cultural medium where national stories and storehouses of sense can be (re)produced. The 'AFI' genre of film of the early 1980s<sup>3</sup>, many of which were successful both in local and global terms, created a body of films that reflected a particular (and for many people quite pleasurable) sense of Australianness (O'Regan 1996). Since this time there has been a plethora of films that have responded to, moved away from, ignored or complicated this national(ist) genre, while nonetheless remaining engaged with contemporary Australian issues. One such film is Ray Lawrence's *Lantana*, critically acclaimed at its release in 2001, and acquiring substantial international kudos ever since.

The film produces a complex but optimistic view of Australia. It provides a multi-centred representation that responds to and contests the simplistic early national vision of Australia as a white blokes' heaven. In doing so, it also contests the vision of a brutal,

---

<sup>1</sup> Sections of Kirsty Duncanson's contributions were originally delivered at two 2002 conferences: 'Opening Law, Law and Society', Wollongong, and 'Mediating Law: Law and Literature Conference'. The paper was presented in its current form at the 2003 Institute for International Studies Workshop at Lake Macquarie. Thanks to all those who commented, and in particular to Paul Allatson for his contribution to the introduction and planning of the paper, and for acting as discussant at the IIS Workshop.

<sup>2</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *Marmion: A Tale of Flodden Field*, 1808, canto xi verse 17.

<sup>3</sup> The AFI (Australian Film Institute) genre is a term used to refer to films that emerged after the federal government tax assistance scheme was introduced to encourage local film production. Films such as *My Brilliant Career* (1979), *Breaker Morant* (1980) and *Gallipoli* (1981), which were high production quality period dramas that celebrated a particular type of Australianness, and addressed what Dermody and Jacka refer to as 'the riddle of national identity', belong to this group.

racist Australia which events such as the rise of the One Nation Party, the Tampa incident, debates over saying 'sorry' and the detention of refugee children, produced. In a documentary feature accompanying the special edition DVD—*The Nature of Lantana*—the actors themselves talk of *Lantana* in terms of its egalitarian direction and writing, noting the 'quite different Australian experiences' (*Lantana* [DVD] 2002) that are reflected through the intertwining connections and coincidence of the narrative community. The film, moving quickly from a few art-house cinemas to many multiplexes for many weeks, struck Australian audiences, critics and award givers as a good film about 'basically good people', people that rang 'brilliantly' true (ibid). Moreover, its success as an international film produced a range of responses to *Lantana*, some more rooted in the forms of Australian identity it conveys—others passing these by to find tales of everymen and women with unanchored and possibly timeless resonances of beleaguered straight relations in a (largely) white country.

This paper argues, however, that it is possible to read the film as producing a fantasy of a 'good' Australia and, at the same time, conducting a filmic regulation of what constitutes Australianness. In many ways the imaginary of Australia offered in this film, to its contemporary, urban, professional and intellectual elite audience, still draws on and (re)produces a vision of an Australian community that uses the same narrative framework as the cruder discourses of 'white Australia' offered to an earlier generation of cinema-goers. In Ghassan Hage's words the 'good Australian nationalist' shares much the same vision of Australia as the 'evil white nationalist' from whom those belonging to the former group confidently distance themselves (Hage 1998). Dominant narratives of Australia, which have explored ideas of belonging, community and nation have drawn on ideas of ethnicity and land to shape them. The vision of the bounded Australian nation (as island continent) that must be protected from a potentially 'swarming' external foe and an oscillating vision of an infant like/warlike 'internal' Indigenous population, who also needed to be controlled, have dominated national discourses for a century. This film's central motif of the lantana bush, the out of control weed, that is known as both foreign and local, once loved for its vivid pink and yellow clusters of flowers, now despised for the colonising tendency of its interlacing branches, is emblematic of this historical

tension. *Lantana* self-consciously maintains this tension about the local and the foreign at its core. The ensemble cast, which includes well-known actors who are considered as to be ‘anglo’, ‘ethnic’ and ‘Indigenous’, are presented, in many cases, as entirely unremarkable within the world they inhabit. The film plays with Australian audiences’ understandings of themselves as ‘heir to’ a history of racism. The use of notions of ethnicity in this ironic and self-reflexive way suggests a maturity of response by the audience: any remaining potential for racism is understood and under control—we know how to be good multiculturalists.

In contrast, the trope of sexuality in *Lantana* provides the real sense of edginess and anxiety about belonging. It is in this arena that the film sets up an idea of danger and—less self-consciously, and in the end more aggressively—marks out who is and who is not part of the community. A familiar vision of Australia as a heterosexual nation, whose citizen’s duty is to increase the ‘white’ population through reproduction, haunts the film. In this context the motif of lantana signals an ambivalence about difference and the exotic. Lantana is both desirable because of the difference in its attractive Latin looks and repulsive or feared because of other qualities inherent within its difference: a refusal to behave and a propensity to get out-of control, spread and potentially takeover. The film here explores desire for a taste of the other (a gay man, a newly separated woman, a Latin dance teacher). However, these fantasies are in the end emphatically shut down. The film ends by producing a vision of subtly normalised hetero, mono, familial (though not necessarily happy) forms of desiring, loving and reproducing in contemporary Australia. Felicity Collins, reviewing the 2001 AFI Feature Film Awards, indicates the ways in which *Lantana* appeals to both Australian and international audiences, pointing to the film’s milieu as a construct built of ‘recognisable Sydney habitats, from the inner-city renovation to the suburban double brick or weatherboard bungalow, to the architect designed bushland retreat’, while at the same time stressing its marketability ‘as a genre film featuring billable names’ (Collins 2001, p. 20). Building on Collins’ focus on the contrasting home settings that the film uses, *Lantana* is perhaps best described, in real estate terminology, as ‘deceptive’. As a murder mystery, the film is deceptively simple—a whodunit where nobody did, an American psychiatrist, struggling with personal

anxieties, goes missing: what has happened to her? As a love story, the tale of the male detective who needs to learn a hard lesson in self-expression, and of his partner, unhappy and frustrated by marriage, is deceptively banal: can salsa classes save either of them? Yet close up, as Michael Fitzgerald (2001, p. 77) suggests, '*Lantana* is a pungent, prickly tangle'. It is in liminal neighbourhoods and spaces—borderlands where the city meets the bush, or at least the suburban scrub—that lantana, if left unattended, grows out of control, chokes and threatens the native and the desirable. In keeping with the habit of the introduced and invasive weed signalled by the film's title and its marketing sub-title, 'It's tangled',<sup>4</sup> these narrative tendrils spread rapidly, intertwining with other life stories, all of them eventually being snagged together in a dense understorey. The film's storylines are nefariously bound up with a growing anxiety, which, mimicking the plant's habit, tangles up and threatens to destroy those shoots of hope it encounters. In a similar way to the style of plotting employed by Robert Altman, Lawrence's ongoing exposition engineers chance meetings between characters who would otherwise not collide (literally in the case of Leon bumping into Claudia's mystery man while jogging), while at the same time rhizomatically spreading otherwise discrete stories into each other.

The narrative is organised around four couples (or once were and would-be couples). Each of the couples is linked via the initially mysterious body of a woman held within the spines of lantana growth. Each couple is positioned in a different stage in their relationship. The professional couple of psychiatrist Valerie Somers (Barbara Hershey) and John Knox (Geoffrey Rush), a Dean of Law, has lapsed into a quasi-Platonic set of routine arrangements since the murder of their daughter, Eleanor, as they commute without communicating between the city centre and their Northern Beaches architect-designed home. Leon (Anthony LaPaglia) and Sonya Zat (Kerry Armstrong), an Inner West police family complete with two sensitive teenage boys, are menaced throughout the film by a potentially terminal breakdown in trust, as Leon plays away from home with

---

<sup>4</sup> This subtitle appears on the cover of the video version of the film available in Australia. The DVD cover replaces these words with an approximation of a phrase spoken by the character of John, "sometimes love is not enough".

Jane O'May (Rachael Blake), and Sonya keeps secret her therapy sessions with Valerie. Major renovations are required, of the same order as the home improvements which their bijou terrace is undergoing. In less salubrious streets, Jane is already apart from her easygoing husband, Pete (Glen Robbins), showing little interest in getting back together with him—she wants her too tight wedding ring to be 'cut off'. Only Jane's fertile neighbours, Paula (Daniela Farinacci) and Nick D'Amato (Vince Colosimo), impoverished, and perhaps the only characters clearly positioned with the film as 'ethnic', share an emotional and physical togetherness which, although tested by potential infidelity and lack of trust, contrasts with the sedate affection of the more 'anglo' couples. Each couple is required to fend off a creeping malaise of lovelessness, and the risks of isolation that the failure of heterosexual coupledness may bring. On the fringes of these dyads, Claudia Weis (Leah Purcell), Leon's trusty detective sidekick, is moving steadily towards coupledness as she plots her moves on a man she sees often in the same restaurant, while Patrick Phelan (Peter Phelps), a gay man having an affair with a married man, who is in therapy with Valerie, is set up as a potential threat to marital rejuvenation.

### **Imagining the Community, or The Parable of the Good Neighbour**

*Lantana* self-consciously sets out to represent a more multi-dimensional Australia than the international stereotype that gets regularly recycled in films about crocodiles or war experience. In this sense *Lantana* in many ways represents Australia in a global context, an 'ethnoscape', that is a 'landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live' (Appadurai cited in Kaplan 1997, p.12). As Kaplan points out, Appadurai's idea extends Benedict Anderson's notion of the 'imagined community' to 'imagined worlds'—a useful way of 'indicating how the globe has "shrunk"' (ibid p. 12), fitting the whole world into the paradigm of the nation. The motif of lantana (an import from South America), the now at home second generation Italian-Australian family and the Latino dance teachers signify this ethnoscape.

The film is, however, obviously set in a globally recognisable Australia and, for a domestic audience, refers clearly to both earlier and contemporary debates about

Australianness.<sup>5</sup> As suggested earlier, the national vision which *Lantana* projects is associated with a post-Pauline Hanson image of Australia as a successful multicultural and tolerant community. The film represents Australia as democratic, thoughtful, multi-ethnic, multi-sexual, and multi-class. This is most obviously demonstrated by the ensemble cast who are a cross section of Sydney population—gay, straight, ‘white’, ‘ethnic’, ‘black’, professional, trade, married, single, and separated. The landscape of the film also traverses the different economic and social locales of Sydney mapping the diversity of the Australian economic, social and cultural landscape. The trope of lantana—an introduced ‘weed’ and an everyday suburban feature of the landscape—becomes axiomatic of this new Australia. The subtly uneasy status of the plant as both local and exotic, as everyday and as something to be eradicated underscores a certain uneasiness with which this new Australia is understood.

Through its structure, the film also encourages its viewers to be drawn into an idea of themselves as part of this new and ‘good’ Australia. As Mark Freeman notes, the film is organised in terms of a ‘multi strand narrative [that provides for the] delicate interweaving of plotlines and characters to form a larger scale mosaic’ This mosaic structure can lead the viewer to experience the film in terms of a ‘community’s experience’ (Freeman 2001, para. 1). This community feeling is built up through the connections that are slowly established between characters from different strata of the city. The resulting texture has a patterning, a paralleling which occurs in terms of the characters’ lives as couples within a wider community, a community that extends outward to include the audience itself, giving ‘the sense that this is not one particular person’s experience and therefore removed from my own’ (ibid). The idea of community and connection is also reinforced by the (local) audience’s knowledge of the actors who

---

<sup>5</sup> See for example discussion about the use of the term ‘unAustralian’, Mark Dapin, ‘Aussie Rules’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 February 2003, Good Weekend, p.16-20.

play many of the characters. They are actors who are part of the ‘national community’, known for roles in many different productions about Australia and Australians.<sup>6</sup> As Richard White’s book, *Inventing Australia*, demonstrated nations (as culture) are always under construction and always contested (White 1981; Kaplan 1997, p. 32). Homi Bhabha also notes national culture is ‘always [in] a process of hybridity, incorporating new “people” in relation to the body politic, [and] generating other sites of meaning’ (Bhabha 1990, p. 4). *Lantana* is a film that seems to open up a space for the recognition of the ‘new’ liberal nature of the Australian (or at least the Sydney) community. It constructs a vision that contests the Howard-Hanson view of the community. For example, within the ensemble the characters are not overtly marked according to ethnicity, though local viewers understand ‘who’ the actors are. This inter-textual (local) knowledge of Colosimo, Purcell and LaPaglia as ‘ethnics’ informs the film without ever needing to be developed thematically. Purcell’s well-known Murri heritage, for example, is left unmarked within the film’s diegesis. The audience are invited to view these characters simply as Australian, or as Sydney-siders, and so demonstrate their liberal leanings. The sexual preferences of the characters are similarly airily represented as unremarkable. The filmmakers seem to have aimed to represent a range of contemporary possibilities and, further, to unsettle stereotypes by engaging straight actors to play gay characters.

Yet when the tangled branches are teased apart, *Lantana* contains traces of a more disciplining story that sees sexual and ethnic difference ambivalently—as desirable and yet troubling. In many ways the discourse that underpins *Lantana* is the same common and limited understanding of diversity and tolerance that sustains less-liberal imaginings of the Australian community. Jennifer Rutherford, in her book, *The Gauche Intruder*, examines an Australian fantasy of neighbourliness that she observes at work ‘on both sides of the political divide’ (2000, p. 7). The narratives of Pauline Hanson’s supporters

---

<sup>6</sup> Cast members’ previous and well known roles include for example: Kerry Armstrong – *Sea Change*, Peter Phelps – *Stingers*, Rachel Blake – *Wildside*, Glen Robbins – *The Panel*, and Geoffrey Rush in his Oscar winning performance in *Shine*.

and those of her critics both employ a fantastic moral code that is, she writes ‘posited as uniquely Australian’ (ibid). This is the fantasy of the ‘Good Neighbour’. This fantasy, Rutherford writes, is inextricably caught up in an aggression towards alterity in both the self and the Other (ibid p.12). Together the fantasy and the aggression perform a regulation of Australianness, of national character and national type. This regulation Rutherford breaks down to a Foucauldian ‘quotidian...microgesture and ... policing of the self’ (ibid). While the ‘link between morality and aggression’ is relatively easy to identify in the crude discourses of right wing hate (Rutherford 2000, p. 10), this co-dependent and regulatory couplet is also identifiable in the ‘most unexpected places’ (ibid p. 14), in the progressive visions of Australia as ‘inclusionary, multicultural and sexually equitable’ (ibid p. 12). As Rutherford observes, ‘closure is effective in the very moment when Australian discourses of nation seem most open, most progressive, most liberating’ (ibid p. 22). That is to say the regulation of identity takes place in the very discourses that work to celebrate polyvancy. In this sense *Lantana*, its marketing and its reception, can be seen as a moments of imagined community which can be read as simultaneously open, progressive, liberating *and* as closing down the potential freedom of such liberation through the regulation of a national character and an implementation of white Australian moral codes.

### **Towards Better Homes and Gardens – The Place of the Exotic in Suburban Marital Design**

One of the key spaces where a regulation of Australianness takes place in the film is in the subtle, and mostly unacknowledged, hetero-normativity that marks Australian belonging. The couples are measurable, within the film’s value system, in terms of their ability to achieve or mimic a gendered heterosexuality, especially with regard to their familial roles. One of the couples (John and Valerie) blamelessly fails to achieve the goal as the result of a grief from which there is no recovery. Another (Sonya and Leon) teeters on the brink because the man in the couple is unable to overcome the emotional limits of blokey–Australian masculinity. Patrick, the unsympathetically portrayed gay man ‘fails’ not only because he eschews the heterosexual option, but also because he hangs around the edges of another family, as if drawn to the light. Jane, more than estranged, strangely



detached, represents a similar threat both to Leon and Sonja's marriage, and to the happy family next door as she revels in leading all on a merry dance.

The film offers a solution for those who are failing. It is possible to learn the steps to passionate heterosexual happiness. In the film the characters that teach you the steps are ethnically marked. The key to heterosexual passion for couples is available by copying the steps of the salsa teachers—nameless and unrounded characters who present a caricature of Latino passion. The salsa class, attended by the Zats, and also by Jane, frames the action with an early didactic lesson in 'passion'—the one quality, we later learn, that Sonya wants back in her marriage. Leon, returning to his wife's arms after a scene of infidelity with Jane, is upbraided by the dance instructor—'It's about sex, about a man and a woman, groin to groin. Get it?' Similarly, the key to family happiness is available by mimicking the easy-going lifestyle of the non-Anglo family or by watching Claudia's honest and open approach to finding a partner. It is through the exotic that you get the hang of contemporary Australian desire.

Exoticism figures in *Lantana* as a potential catalyst for marital happiness—a sophisticated plan from other continents or cultures which, if followed correctly, can result in a successful renovation; the touch of spice that, if taken in moderation, can pep up the passion levels. Yet, like the non-native shrub itself, this exotic other can easily get out of hand and take over. Viewing the film from a contemporary Australian perspective, it is difficult not to consider these motifs according to the pervasive rhetorics and fantasies of invasion, the perceptions of 'swamping' by an uncontrollable and unknowable otherness with which the Howard government has cauterised public discourse on issues of immigration and asylum. However, the paradigms of nation in *Lantana* operate in quite other, altogether more domesticated ways.

As Ghassan Hage argues in *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, 'Howard's rule involves the recentring of an always existing but until now marginalised subculture of colonial White paranoia' (Hage 2003, p. 4), according to which 'the nation, instead of a reality that needs to be protected, becomes a fantasy that needs to be protected from reality' (ibid). Using

the metaphor of fencing off desirable property, or of self-maintenance, to describe this transformation in protective strategy, Hage shows how the idea of a worrying country emerges through a sense of failure in the management of borders—the fences, the act of fencing itself, rather than kept discretely out of sight, when ‘conditions of hope scarcity’ prevail (ibid p. 32), becomes introduced within the national consciousness.

With the possible exemption of a barely glimpsed gang of supporting drug dealers whose appearance may be sufficiently Middle Eastern to ‘alert’, the cast of *Lantana* is, on the surface, unmarked by the ethnic faultlines of Australian immigration/terrorism debates of the early 2000s. Yet, akin to the forms of worrying which Hage identifies as permeating contemporary national consciousness, anxieties about the nature and extent of belonging, security, and the home, are tangled up with the forms of plot-making, the mediation between fantasies and realities, in which its couples are engaged. While the casting of Hershey as Valerie was, as revealed by producer Jan Chapman as not initially planned (*Lantana* [DVD] 2002), her American accent marks the character as an outsider, unable to interpret Australia and its ways. Valerie’s disappearance—from home, from the film where she is replaced by a spectacularly fake-looking dummy in the crime scene reconstruction—indicate moments of otherness not easily accommodated within the mosaic. Marking the film’s clearest act of occlusion, her disappearance from the plot suggests a primary, but significant, subtle fencing-off of the Australian specificity from more culturally pervasive Anglo others.

Issues of ethnicity, however, are largely disregarded in the worldview projected by *Lantana*. Characters such as Leon and Sonya Zat, Claudia Weiss, Paula and Nik D’Amato belong squarely and unquestionably within a multi-heritage, although assimilationary, and therefore ultimately monocultural cityscape. These characters are positioned as just one other variant of being Australian in the new ‘inclusionary, multicultural and sexually equitable state’ (Rutherford 2000, p. 12). Indeed, the worries that the characters share are less of the order of race paranoia, than of a concern with belonging per se, and most often in terms of coming to terms with a certain fragility about one’s place, or role within socially constructed sexual norms.

### **Backyard Blitz: Time to Get Rid of Unwanted Pinks and Painted Lady Chrysalises**

The search for passion, encouraged through a flirtation with an unknown is also dangerous. As the eponymous plant signifies there is the problem of what do with the exotic after its introduction. *Lantana* is a film that seeks to demonstrate the tangled and often choking effects of relationships. In doing so it draws on discourses that have long underpinned ideas of Australianness—ideas of an ‘Other’ who when taken into the home, threatens to take over and destroy it.

Jane, Patrick, and Leon are having affairs. Jane and Leon with each other. Patrick is having an affair with a married man. It is through the two characters, Patrick and Jane, as they traverse conventional moral codes, that the new fantasy of Australia as a good neighbourhood simultaneously enunciates sexual equity and regulates the performance of white Australian sex. The enunciation of sexual equity, although appearing, on one level, implicitly within the film itself, is drawn out more clearly in the extended packaging of the DVD. The interviews with the actors and the discussions of the producer, director and writer that make up the commentary track and the documentary, *The Nature of Lantana*, present a vision of Australian community as egalitarian, progressive and open (*Lantana* [DVD] 2002).

The core creative team, Jan Chapman, Ray Lawrence and Andrew Bovell, document their participation in such a community in their description of the casting process. Their refusal to engage with the stereotyping of homosexuality is asserted as they describe the difficulty in finding the right man for the part of Patrick Phelan. In choosing the well-known heterosexual actor Peter Phelps,<sup>7</sup> the team still faced problems as Phelps instinctively added camp intonations to the dialogue. However, after much practice, we are told, the character of Patrick began to emerge as the straight-acting gay guy they wanted to present. As they discuss this decisive negotiation of homosexual representation

---

<sup>7</sup> Phelps would be well known to audiences through his regular appearance in such popular series as *Sons and Daughters* and *Stingers* on prime time television.

the team demonstrate their own progressive and open attitudes towards possible forms of sexual identity. Australia appears as a sexually equitable nation.

The fantasy of Australia as a Good Neighbourhood is further established in their discussion of Jane O'May. While producer Jan Chapman acknowledges the potential for judgement in the creation of Jane's character (the woman having an affair with a married man), director Ray Lawrence insists in his own suspension of such judgement. Chapman celebrates the depth and sympathy the actor brought to the part of Jane, and Lawrence celebrates his own positive attitude to all the actions and motivations of all the characters, but particularly that of Jane. Again, they spell out a progressive, non-judgmental Australian community.

However, both these characters 'worry', in Hagian terms, the couples they encounter as they cross borders. Jane, rootless, and a (family) invader, within this paradigm, is perhaps least perturbed of all the characters about her status as an unwelcome border crosser, yet she menaces the others with the potential revelation how flimsy are their own border protections. Her freedoms from neighbourly conventions, manifested by inviting Nik into her house, unaccompanied, for coffee, financial interference, and most disturbingly, taking on the roles of mothering and home maintenance during their absence, require 'management' by Paula and Nik next door, who successfully re-project the inviolable fences of their own coupledness sufficiently that they do not suffer. When Jane softly intimates to Leon that his sexual border crossing might be leading somewhere, he aggressively informs her that they are just having a one night stand over two nights. In order to imagine himself as 'good' Leon must punish Jane and himself. Similarly when Patrick enters into a bantering discussion about the rights and wrongs of adultery he so challenges Valerie's fantasy of her workable marriage with the reality of the lack of trust that underpins it, that she is left gasping for air.

In the process of asserting this fantasy of sexual equity and rational suspension of moral judgement, a further, more subtle form of regulation of sexuality is taking place. In the very earnest quality of the creative team's endeavours to imagine and assert a 'new'

Australia, a conventional national moral code persists. Thus as Lawrence documents his open attitude in directing the character of Jane O'May, a discrete regulation of Australian gender values occurs. While Lawrence uses Jane and Patrick to demonstrate his suspension of moral judgement, the film still 'punishes' them for their non-compliance to the hetero-norm. Patrick undergoes a slightly unprofessional basting from Valerie about the morality of his choices, while Leon in the matching conversation with Valerie's partner John is treated to a gentle lesson in trust over a single malt on the balcony. At the film's end Patrick stands forlornly on a street corner, observing his ex-lover back with his wife and child.

In a similar vein, in the DVD documentary there is a need to state overtly that no moral judgement is made about Jane having an affair, while it goes unremarked that a male character is doing the same. In fact, Jane O'May has separated from her husband before embarking on an affair with a man who remains married. Leon Zat, still very much married with kids, is discussed, in the DVD supplements, not in terms of his the morality of his sexual decisions, but in terms of his vulnerability to judgement. It is not even conjectured that he might be judged as an 'affair driven slut' as actor Kerry Armstrong described Jane. Rather, our judgement of Leon is forestalled as he is the character on a journey in this story—the character who learns from his mistakes. It is Patrick and Jane, representatives of a sexuality not ordered by monogamous heterosexual desire and reproductive imperatives, who worry both cast and audience and threaten to lower the tone of the neighbourhood. It is these challenges to the established order that, like *lantana* creeping up, need to be trimmed, hacked, uprooted and left to wither. Writing of the outback's inherent resistance to colonisation, Hage connects this "undomesticisable remainder" even within domesticised spaces' (2003, p. 51) with a sense of fragility which he locates within the Australian colonial psyche:

Awareness of one's fragility is usually considered healthier psychologically than denial of it, and it could be argued that this awareness has helped shape some of the better aspects of traditional Australian culture, including its trademark self-deprecating sense of humour. However, when it is added to the nationalist drive to 'domesticate everything', it transforms into the anxiety vis à vis undomesticated 'cultural otherness' which has marked the Australian psyche from the very beginning. (ibid p. 52)

The anxieties inherent in the lives of *Lantana*'s couples indicate that it is possible to locate the problematics of cultural otherness somewhat closer to home than might be imagined, as a projected form of endogenous worry, the great white fear of 'going bush' which characterises a persistent uneasiness with the unresolved colonial enterprise. Equally of note, however, is the extent to which domesticisation, and in particular the management of gender and sexual fragility is linked with *Lantana*'s central motif, the exotic, or tropical form of Latin(/o) 'cultural otherness' represented by both the invasive weed and the salsa classes.

**'So what are you telling me? You're a man?' (Leon Zak to his son)**

Counterbalancing the trope of the robust and invasive lantana is the idea of a vulnerability of the 'natives'. This dyad is represented from the first scene when the camera tracks over Valerie's broken body, caught in the lantana at the bottom of the cliffs from which she fell after running scared through the bush.

In keeping with classics of Australian cinema, such as *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Weir 1975), the representation of women as susceptible to the hostilities of the untamed is not unexpected. Images of women running, terrified through the bush are a familiar trope of the Australian thriller/horror genre. Cultural theorist Meaghan Morris takes it beyond cinema and suggests that it (the fear of the bush?) is a cultural memory—something the white Australian community knows without having experienced it directly (Morris 2002, p. 16). Hage in a different context suggests that it is the impossibility of domesticating the bush that is at the centre of this fear. Central to these ideas of the bush as unconquerable and something to fear is the notion that this fear is of nothing. The bush and more specifically the outback have long been represented as a nothing, a blank (Haynes 1998). So Valerie's death is ultimately caused by her fear of threat that does not exist—she dies of nothing. Although the framing of the chase scene, as narrated by the innocent Nik, is true the sequence is interspersed with images constructing Nik as a credible and potential threat. Moving from the driver's seat he appears ominously silhouetted in the ute's headlights—arms held away from his body as he throws his cigarette aggressively into the roadside and turns to pursue her.

According to *Lantana*, women's security, mental health, wellbeing are defined according to their adherence to a heterosexual monogamous regime. While Sonya eventually resists the fumbling advances of her potential Latino lover (more, the camera suggests, because of the naughtiness of his car, his status as living with his mother, and advances), Jane's neediness, or perhaps the strength of her fantasy, blinds her to the moral consequences of her affair with Leon, and her disregard for Pete. Valerie's dash through the undergrowth, too, can be seen as her losing touch with the gendered, here supposedly asexual, realities of her relations with the male, while her classic case hysteria, as we have seen, is provoked by the fear that her sexuality will not be enough to anchor her flailing relationship with John, that making love to her will be, in the words of Patrick's hardest hitting parley, 'like trying to fill an empty well'.

Yet, vulnerability in *Lantana* is by no means a uniquely feminine attribute. It might be argued, in fact, that men in the film, and in particular Leon Zai to the extent that his story emerges as the central parable, are equally vulnerable, and, in keeping with psychoanalytical views on masculine repression, less able to cope with or express that vulnerability. Drawing on Carol Staudacher's *Men and Grief*, Jean-Pierre Boulé identifies 'risk-taking and excessive sexual activity' as 'a way to numb the pain of loss'. 'A consequence of this behaviour', he writes, quoting from Staudacher, 'is that all sorts of other emotions, including fear, will not be expressed and that the man is much less likely "to exhibit genuine compassion towards others"' (Boulé 2002, p. 73). Leon's affair with Jane, although it is questionable what might count here as 'excessive', certainly represents for him a combination of risk and sexual activity. Yet, rather than the result of his grief for a loss, in his case, the sequence of events seems to be awry: his sexual risk creates rather than arises from the possibility of loss—the loss of Sonya who 'might not be home' when he returns; while the inability to express compassion seems to be at the very heart of his crisis in masculinity.

It is through a series of set pieces—all involving Leon and the other men—that the issue of masculinity, heterosexuality, and being a husband are explored within the context of

ideas of loss. Both John and Leon are suffering a grief—John for the loss of his daughter and the ongoing impact this has on his life and marriage, Leon, as suggested earlier grieves for the potential loss of the marriage he treats so carelessly. Similarly Pete mourns the end of his marriage and Claudia's would-be date, who breaks down in Leon's arms mourns without explanation. Not surprisingly the fears and fragilities of the men are not set in the bush and they are homo-social more than hetero-social. The interactions between the men as they try and figure out the nature of passion and trust take place in suburban streets and bars, and over alcohol, in an ironic nod to the stereotype of the 'traditional' Aussie bloke.

Leon's basic lesson, from the dance class's homoeopathically measured injection of the exotic onwards, is in how to perform heterosexual passion. Yet a closer analysis of other early components of the film—his fuck with Jane, the domestic scene the following morning, his actions during the drug raid—indicates a more deeply rooted sense of crisis. His morning jog is punctuated by chest pains. Then his eldest son, leaving for school, Oedipally refuses to pleasure Leon with a goodbye kiss—he's sixteen now. Leon's questioning rejoinder, 'So what are you telling me? You're a man now? Is there some point where a son stops kissing his father?', rather than expressing ignorance this comment betrays a man all too aware, after the son's earlier topless appearance and later re-enacted in the bong discovery scene, of the expiry date on his 'droit de seigneur' over his children's being and bodies. Next we have Leon at work; putting the boot 'a bit hard', as Claudia tactfully suggests. This qualified admiration from Claudia prompts Leon to attempt to put her in her place by asking if she is seeing anyone. All in all, the opening scenes conspire to depict Leon's masculinity as vaguely awry, dysfunctional, laconically (perhaps Lacanianly) excessive.

This hyper-masculinity, staged to hold together a vulnerable man, is most closely interrogated in a series of set-piece dialogues between Leon and John (about whose heterosexuality aspersions are associatively cast through Valerie's misreading of Patrick), that pit these two characters head to head in a struggle to maintain, perhaps retain, their fragile senses of acceptable masculinity. The moral victor in this clash, despite being for



Leon ‘some kind of an academic’, is undoubtedly John. In their conversations Leon lies continually in order to produce a sense of the type of man he wants to be. He says: his marriage is ‘fine’, held together by ‘loyalty, love, habit, passion and the kids’; he ‘tell[s] his] wife everything’ and has never cheated on her. By contrast, John’s less showy approach to being a man is eventually vindicated when we discover ‘the real reason’ behind his non-assistance in Valerie’s emergency—his regular visits to the scene of their daughter’s murder provide a valid explanation for his otherwise suspect behaviour. John is working through his grief, still held back by his mourning, during which time ‘[e]motions in general become more inhibited; in other cases it is mainly feelings of love which become inhibited’ (Kleine quoted in Boulé 2002, p. 73-4). Leon’s inability to deal with his grief in any other way than aggressiveness (until it’s too late), his withholding of love, has no such justification. Relating the jogging collision incident to Pete O’May in the pub gents’ scene (with interesting parallels to the ‘mise-en-scène’ of the holocaust joke of Mathieu Kassowitz’s *La Haine*) Leon’s narration culminates in his distaste for the jogger’s tears (he thought, tellingly, ‘You fucking weak prick’). When Pete asks if all men want to cry at some point, his blokey full stop to the conversation is ‘Yeah, but you don’t’. Central to this film about learning to ‘dance’ is a character whose crisis in masculinity and return to monogamy results in him punishing himself and all his ‘others’ for his real and potential grief.

## **Conclusion**

Lantana’s ‘fumbling’ (Freeman 2001, para. 7) attempt to trim back the narrative and thematic shoots which had threatened to suffer all that was great and good throughout takes the form of a closing coda, with which each of the characters’ rightful place in the greater Australian scheme of things is assigned. Claudia gets her man, John stares at the coast, Jane dances alone with drinks and a ‘ciggy’ while Nik and Paula picnic with kids, Patrick is left out in the rain—the exotic has been exorcised, the values of heterosexual, marital belonging in the Australian community is reaffirmed and all is well in the garden. All? No, not quite. Leon and Sonya Zat return once more to the salsa class, although now cleared of cumbersome extras, leaving them close up and personal. Have they made progress, learned the steps to monogamous happiness on the stairways to their tolerant

Australian heaven? To the backdrop of Celia Cruz singing *Te Busco (I'm looking for you)*, the Zats dance slowly, intimately crossing and recrossing the screen, to all appearances successfully joined at the groin this time round. Yet, while Leon only has eyes for Sonya, his romantic gaze is never met. Sonya, more resigned than reconciled, instead averts her attention, refuses the easy resolution just as she shook her head moments earlier as her husband struggled with the wrong words of atonement ('I don't want to lose you'), words which suggest that his emotional journey is not yet complete. Their marriage, centrally positioned amidst the narrative entanglement as the epitome of modern Australian belonging, has been choked by the excessive vigour of the introduced exotic. Taking on that great emptiness that so terrified Valerie, it can be understood according to the tradition of the great nothing of the Australian landscape—the nothing so vast it kills. But this time, in the film, the nothing has been held in the figure of an exotic that has spread to become a weed so pestiferous in Australia that government scholarships are offered for its control. The familiar narratives shift, and the lantana plant can be read itself as another layer of white Australian law imposed on the landscape, imagined as overwhelming, in constant conflict with itself, self-consuming. The body of lantana regulates the gender and sexual laws that underwrite the community of the good neighbour in ultimately familiar ways. For all its engagement with traditional white Australian narratives, the film *Lantana* suggests a new problematic strata of regulatory law-making on the imagined white Australian landscape.

## Reference List

- Bhabha, Homi 1990, *Nation and Narration*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Boulé, Jean Pierre 2002, *HIV Stories: The Archaeology of AIDS Writing in France, 1985–1988*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool (UK).
- Collins, Felicity 2002, 'God Bless America (and Thank God for Australia),' *Metro Magazine*, 131/132, pp.14-24.
- Dermody, S. and Jacka, Elizabeth (eds) 1988, *The Screening of Australia, vol 2: Anatomy of a National Cinema*, Currency Press, Sydney.
- Fitzgerald, Michael 2001, 'Tangle of True Lies: *Lantana*'s thicket of suburban mystery twines around pungent themes of trust and alienation', *Time*, 22 Oct., p. 77.
- Freeman, Mark 2001, 'Caught in the Web: Ray Lawrence's *Lantana*', *Senses of Cinema*[Online], issue 16, September – October. Available: <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/01/16/lantana.html>
- Hage, Ghassan 1998, *White Nation*, Pluto Press, Annandale.

- Hage, Ghassan 2003, *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, Pluto Press, Annandale.
- Haynes, Roslyn 1998, *Seeking the Centre: the Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Kaplan, E. Ann 1997, *Looking for the Other: Film, Feminism and the Imperial Gaze*, Routledge, London, New York.
- Lantana* (motion picture) 2001, Sydney, Jan Chapman Films.
- Mitchell, Juliet (ed.) 1982, *The Selected Melanie Klein*, Penguin Books, London.
- Morris, M., De Bary, B. & De Jonge, H. (eds) 2002, *Race, Panic and the Memory of Migration*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver.
- The Nature of Lantana* (documentary segment on special edition DVD release of *Lantana* [2001]) 2002, Sydney, Jan Chapman Films.
- O'Regan, T. 1996, *Australian national cinema*, Routledge, London, New York.
- Picnic at Hanging Rock* (motion picture) 1975, Picnic Productions Pty Ltd, McElroy and McElroy Productions in association with Patricia Lovell.
- Rutherford, Jennifer 2000, *The Gauche Intruder: Freud, Lacan and the White Australian Fantasy*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.
- Straudacher, C. 1991, *Men and Grief*, New Harbinger Publications, San Francisco.
- White, Richard, 1981, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity, 1688-1980*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney.



# PORTAL

Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies

[Home](#) | [Current](#) | [Archives](#) | [About](#) | [Login](#) | [Notify](#) | [Contact](#) | [Search](#)

[Portal Home](#) > [Archives](#) > **Vol. 1, No. 1 (2004)**

[open journal systems](#)

## editor's welcome

---

1. Editor's welcome to the inaugural issue of *Portal*: Vol 1, no 1

[PDF](#)

*Paul Allatson*

## academic papers

---

Naked in the Gymnasium: Women as Agents of Social Change

[Abstract](#)

*Maja Mikula*

Capitalizing Asian Studies: Critical Scholarship and the Production of Knowledge in a Globalizing World

[Abstract](#)

*Tim Oakes*

Michel Houellebecq and the International Sexual Economy

[Abstract](#)

*Douglas Morrey*

Memoria y Retorno del Exilio Republicano Catalán (Memory and Return of the Catalan Republican Exile)

[Abstract](#)

*Roser Pujadas Comas d'Argemir*

Grassroots Women's Activism in Post-Soviet Russia: Surviving Social Change Together?

[Abstract](#)

*Rebecca Kay*

Entanglement and the Modern Australian Rhythm Method: *Lantana's* Lessons in Policing Sexuality and Gender

[Abstract](#)

*Kirsty Duncanson, Catriona Elder and Murray Pratt*

The Militant Nun as Political Activist and Feminist in Martial Law Philippines

[Abstract](#)

*Mina Roces*

Germany: Myth and Apologia in Christa Wolf's Novel *Medea. Voices*

[Abstract](#)

*Yixu Lü*

## cultural works

---

Flora y Fauna Crónica

[Abstract](#)

*Susana Chávez-Silverman*

Typicals/Típicos

[Abstract](#)

*Silvia Vélez*



# PORTAL

Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies

[Home](#) | [Current](#) | [Archives](#) | [About](#) | [Login](#) | [Notify](#) | [Contact](#) | [Search](#)

[Portal Home](#) > [About the Journal](#) > [Editorial Team](#)

[open journal systems](#)

## Editorial Team

### Editors

---

#### Academic Papers Editors

---

**Chair of Editorial Committee**

[Paul Allatson](#), Institute for International Studies, University of Technology Sydney

**Editorial Committee Member**

[Yingjie Guo](#), University of Technology, Sydney

**Editorial Committee Member**

[Maja Mikula](#), Institute for International Studies, University of Technology Sydney

**Editorial Coordinator**

[Wayne Peake](#), Institute for International Studies, University of Technology Sydney

**Editorial Committee Member**

[Murray Pratt](#), Institute for International Studies, University of Technology, Sydney

**Editorial Committee Member**

[Ilaria Vanni](#), Institute for International Studies, University of Technology Sydney

#### Book/Media Reviews Editors

---

**Editorial Coordinator**

[Wayne Peake](#), Institute for International Studies, University of Technology Sydney

#### Cultural Works Editors

---

**Chair of Editorial Committee**

[Paul Allatson](#), Institute for International Studies, University of Technology Sydney

**Editorial Committee Member**

[Maja Mikula](#), Institute for International Studies, University of Technology Sydney

**Editorial Coordinator**

[Wayne Peake](#), Institute for International Studies, University of Technology Sydney

**Editorial Committee Member**

[Murray Pratt](#), Institute for International Studies, University of Technology, Sydney

**Editorial Committee Member**

[Ilaria Vanni](#), Institute for International Studies, University of Technology Sydney

#### Editor's Welcome Editors

---

**Chair of Editorial Committee**

[Paul Allatson](#), Institute for International Studies, University of Technology Sydney

**Papers Not Dealing with the Special Issue Theme Editors** 

---

**Chair of Editorial Committee**

Paul Allatson, Institute for International Studies, University of Technology Sydney

**Editorial Committee Member**

Maja Mikula, Institute for International Studies, University of Technology Sydney

**Editorial Coordinator**

Wayne Peake, Institute for International Studies, University of Technology Sydney

**Editorial Committee Member**

Murray Pratt, Institute for International Studies, University of Technology, Sydney

**Editorial Committee Member**

Iliaria Vanni, Institute for International Studies, University of Technology Sydney

**Editorial Board** 

---

Donna Amoroso, Kyoto University, Japan

Chris Ballard, Australian National University, Australia

Jean-Pierre Boulé, Nottingham Trent University, UK

Jane Carruthers, University of South Africa, South Africa

Carolyn Cartier, University of Southern California, USA

Debra Castillo, Cornell University, USA

Suzanne Chávez-Silverman, Pomona College, USA

Deborah Cohn, Indiana University, USA

Suranjan Das, University of Calcutta, India

Donald Denoon, Australian National University, Australia

Dimitri Eleftheriotis, University of Glasgow, UK

Melba Falck, University of Guadalajara, Mexico

Rosemary Foot, Oxford University, UK

Maja Frykman, Malmö University, Sweden

Devleena Ghosh, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

David Goodman, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Peter Hulme, University of Essex, UK

Tom Keirstead, Indiana University, USA

Sun Hui Koh, Kagoshima University, Japan

Stephanie Lawson, University of East Anglia, UK

Victor López Villafañe, Instituto Tecnológico de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, México

Sumit Mandal, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

Margaret Morgan, California Institute of Fine Arts, USA

Meaghan Morris, Lingnan Univerisity, Hong Kong

Stephen Muecke, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

[Brett Neilson](#), University of Western Sydney, Australia

[Tim Oakes](#), University of Colorado, USA

[Diana Palaversich](#), University of New South Wales, Australia

[Charlie Panakera](#), The University of Waikato, New Zealand

[Andreas Pribersky](#), Vienna University, Austria

[Arturo Santa Cruz](#), University of Guadalajara, Mexico

[Maarten van Delden](#), Rice University, USA

[Jing Wang](#), Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA

Names are linked to email addresses and biographical statements, if provided.



[Home](#) | [Current](#) | [Archives](#) | [About](#) | [Login](#) | [Notify](#) | [Contact](#) | [Search](#)

Portal. ISSN: 1449-2490