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Hiding Behind Nakedness on the Nude Beach

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws upon a series of experiences between 1980–85, when I identified as a naturist during my summer holidays in Europe, and in a visit to Wreck Beach in Vancouver (where I felt very much at home). At the time, I was aware that nude beaches were much less threatening to me as a large woman than are conventional 'textile' beaches. This paper draws upon those experiences to theorise why this might be the case, and why I have been absent from beach culture for much of the past decade.

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INTRODUCTION

It is only as I begin to work on this paper, to tease out my ideas and understandings of the years I spent as a nudist, that I begin to understand the margins of the circumstances in which I placed myself. I experienced my nudist activity at the time as uncomplicated, natural, and pleasurable—if somewhat hidden. It is only as I come to theorise these choices that I see that they are inscribed with all kinds of different taboos, invisible to me then. This paper starts with my individual exposure to naturism, traverses different experiences and politics of nudism and nudity, and ends with the pressing issues of genital display.

In the years that I was a nudist, I would have eschewed that term. I was not a nudist, I would have said, but a naturist, doing what came naturally. You probably don't need telling that it's much more pleasurable to dry a sea-wet body in the sun than to have a yard or two of clinging wet Lycra swaddling the skin. Further, as a larger woman, I found that I far preferred my experience of nudist beaches to those of textile beaches, and I'll say why shortly. I had suspected this experience of preference was primarily—perhaps solely—a matter of body image, and that this paper would be replete with body-image authorities, but that's

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not how it worked out. Sometimes you do have to start writing to find out what you want to say.

My first adventure into nudism was at the point where I had moved from student life into the fully fledged workaday world. I had a salary, a mortgage, a new husband and we—he and I—were on a summer holiday. Echoing the north/south division raised by Michael Taussig (2000), where the North of Europe represents Spirit and Discipline and the South of Europe Passion and Beauty, I had travelled from the North to the South in search of recreation.

Summer holidays are themselves objects of scarcity. They represent a two-week break at a time of year when summer is much anticipated (but rarely arrives) in Britain. The summer holiday was the quintessential 1980s, middle class, bourgeois equivalent of bread and circuses. An inordinate amount of time was spent in planning 'the summer holiday' beforehand, and then reminiscing about it afterwards. It was a recreational ritual of the salaried classes and we were keen to join in the game. The South of Europe to which I ventured was not the Greece or the Italy identified by Taussig as destinations of passion and beauty, but the Dalmatian Coast, predominantly now Croatia.

FIRST CONTACT WITH THE NUDE BEACH

In the early 1980s, Yugoslavia—particularly as packaged by Yugo-tours—was all the Western/Northern tourist could hope for. It had passion, beauty, sunshine, and low prices. A generation of returned Yugoslav *gastarbiter* (German 'guest workers') were well in tune with the ideals of Northern European customer service and had anticipated most tourist wants and needs. They had also, since 1961 (Baxandall, 1981, pp. 190–191), catered for some niche markets of which I was shortly to become aware.

As I recall, it was on our very first day at Mlini, a short boat trip from Dubrovnik, that I discovered the difference between the 'textile' beach and the FKK (*Freikorperkultur*—German for 'free body movement') beach, both of which were comfortably close to our pension-style hotel. The textile beach was actually labelled 'textile beach', and I wasn't sure why at first. It faced the hotel, a road and a café away. It was reasonably well populated by the predictably pale-skinned tourists reclining on towels and lounges. A sign reading 'FKK' pointed to the left, along a path that disappeared from sight at the crest of the hill. We followed the path.

The path led over a rise and around a bend. That bend revealed a pebble and sand beach upon which all the people were bare. It was maybe a hundred metres or so from the textile beach, but it felt like a different

country. The beach was fully serviced—it had a café/bar/restaurant, toilets, sun umbrellas, table and chairs on a balcony overlooking the beach, and waiters in white shirts and black trousers. I was later to discover that this level of comfort was a specific outcome of history, geography, and economy.

Amazing as it may seem now, my partner and I stripped off without hesitation. We hadn't known, when we set out, that we were looking for a nude beach. Once we found the beach, however, it was clear that this was what we had looked for all along. If the summer holiday is the programmed-unprogrammed experience of the working year, this nudist beach was the programmed-unprogrammed experience of the summer holiday. To turn around would have been unthinkable.

BONA FIDES ON THE NUDIST BEACH

Stripping off, at the tree-line, just before the trees gave way to the beach and the naturist enclave, was the polite thing to do, notwithstanding the pallor of English skin and/or the size and shape of the body. It seemed in some way rude—and in nudist terms it is—to be clothed in the presence of nakedness. Nudity on the nude beach is evidence of one's *bona fides* and of one's good manners. It is not primarily indicative of display—on the contrary, it is a symbol of conformity and of a willingness/eagerness to fit in. At the time of my first visit to the Adriatic, I had, for a decade or more, experienced the beach as a place of threat, and rarely wore anything more revealing than a neck-to-ankle kaftan. On a nudist beach, however, there is a subtle pressure to strip off—social norms regarding size, shape, and age are irrelevant compared with the key indicator of conformity.

As Jack Douglas had commented a few years earlier (Douglas, Rasmussen, & Flanagan, 1977, p. 13), 'at some unknown time, I began to feel vaguely uneasy about wearing a bathing suit when the nude people looked at me'. I was later to learn that the nude beach attracts the voyeur and the *frotteur*: the masturbating, sand-dune-dwelling, rain-coat-wearing loner who hangs around at the fringes of the dunes. Thus, a newcomer to a nudist beach is of intense interest up to the point at which they disrobe: the 'with us or against us?' moment. Attractively (for me), it's when you're naked on the nude beach that the attention evaporates.

I feel, having now discussed beaches at some length, I should show a brief clip from a nude beach local to my home-town of Bournemouth, on the south coast of England. I was, for most of the time of my active nudism, a researcher/director with *Songs of Praise*, a BBC TV religious program. At one point, however, I was on attachment to Schools TV'

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working on a Sex Education program, and this was how I came to find and film a nudist family to illustrate the physical differences between male and female, adult and child. In this research endeavour, I had to use my *bona fides*—the all-over suntan and my willingness to do my research (if not the filming) in the nude.

There is a freedom on the nude beach: by appearing without clothes, the nude female subverts the power to be undressed by the male gaze. However, this power is magnified in the case of the older/larger female: it is the power to challenge and confound the expectation of the male gaze. Men's expectations of nudes are conditioned by available in/appropriate images of nude women, chiefly as accessed through film, in various porn, soft porn, and (originally) naturist magazines, but also as available through representations of the female nude in art:

The number of famous paintings of women is legion, but they are paintings of the unnamed (or only circumstantially named) and, almost by definition, the beautiful—and, endlessly, paintings of the nude. They are paintings which are addressed to the male viewer in which a large part of the appeal is the representation of the woman's look at and need for the absent man. (Edholm, 1992, p. 161)

The larger woman on the nudist beach is an inversion of that order. She is there for her pleasure, not for the pleasure of the other. One French model-turned-artist, Suzanne Valadon, painted her 'mid-shot': head, shoulders, and breasts in the nude at 66:

Because Woman is only valued in this way when presented as sexually desirable and, by definition therefore, as young, the challenge is considerable. Through its explicit sexualization, through the nakedness, of a sixty-six-year-old-woman...she is disrupting a whole set of easy identifications...making her viewer think through ways in which she or he looks at women and their bodies. (Edholm, 1992, pp. 170–171)

The expectation is that the naked woman will also be the conventionally young and beautiful woman, thus the larger female nude challenges the conventional and operates in a subversive and resistant way to reposition the image of the naked female in a way that younger, more conventionally beautiful bodies cannot.

What is unclear from that sequence, shot on Studland Beach, is how far the nudist beach is from the closest access point. Effectively, the crew—and the nudists—had to walk three-quarters of a kilometre to get to the clothes-free area. My experience of nude beaches in the UK, Canada, and Australia is that they are difficult to reach and regulated essentially through their inaccessibility. It is most unlikely that a Northern European nude beach would be stumbled across by accident. It is quite possible that, had the FKK beaches been equally inaccessible, I'd never have experienced nudism.

CLUBS AND BEACHES

There's more to nudism than the nude beach, however—there's the club. This is sometimes referred to in high-camp comedy as 'the nudist colony', or 'the nudist camp'. Clarke, in his *Nudism in Australia* (1982,

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pp. 299–306), discusses the differences between the patrons of Perth’s premier nudist beach, Swanbourne, and the local naturist club, Sunseekers (both of which I’ve been to). The major disparities Clarke identified relate to gender and marital status—the clubs discourage single male applicants, and (out of 90 interviewees) 85% were in formal marriages, with a further 8% in de facto relationships. Among the beach respondents, over half of the 115 interviewees were neither married nor cohabiting.

Table 1: Gender, marital status, number of children, and age statistics for patrons of Swanbourne (nudist beach) and Sunseekers (naturist club), Perth, Australia.

		Swanbourne (115)	Sunseekers (95)
Gender—male:female		2:1	1:1
Married/de facto		50%	92%
Children:	none	56%	10%
	1 or 2	33%	39%
	3 or more	11%	51%
Age:	under 35	63%	46%
	36+	37%	54%

Source: Clarke (1982).

Although these differences reflect and engender a variety of complex and interesting distinctions between experiences of club nudism and the nude beaches, these are not central to the life of hiding behind nakedness on the nude beach. Instead, I will now move into the final stage of the paper, discussing the FKK beach, the (Californian) Nude Beach, and (finally) the construction of nudism as a focus for genital anxiety.

WHAT IS HIDING BEHIND THE NAKEDNESS ON THE NUDE BEACH ?

I had no idea, when I first ventured onto the FKK beach by Mlini, that it was so different from ‘mainstream’ nudist beaches. I was to return to the area for more than five other holidays, so the experience became a normalised one for me. It’s not until I started my research for this paper that I fully internalised how distinct and varied different cultures of nudism are. According to Baxandall (1981, pp. 190–191), the former Yugoslavia had deliberately decided to go into the nude holiday business in the early 1960s. This may have been because of the ‘estimated eight million tourists from Germany [who] seek a nude beach when they go vacationing’ (Baxandall, 1981, p. 158). FKK stands for *Freikorperkultur*—German for ‘free body movement’—based, according to Baxandall, on the philosophies of Richard Ungewitter, who had to self-publish his book

Nakedness in 1904, but who was one of a number of pro-nudist German thinkers of the time. Thus, nudism in Germany has a century-old history.

One of my first impressions of the FKK nude beach was its inclusivity. There were at least two families of four generations *in situ*. The elders appeared to be couples in their seventies, while the youngest members of these groups were toddlers and a baby. The bodies of these family members had been inscribed by interesting lives. One of the elderly men had lost a leg, and his scarred torso bore evidence of entry and exit wounds. Someone had had a heart by-pass. An older woman bore the marks of (probably) a caesarean. The bodies were 'interesting', very different from the anodyne perfection we associate with most contemporary nudity. Everyone was very friendly to us—as friendly as possible when there's no language in common. It was only in writing this paper that I realised what these bodies had hidden.

The age of the elder men, and their bodily injuries, were clearly indicative of service in World War II. As I came to think about the prevalence of the FKK movement, and its continuing strength in the 1980s, it gradually became clear that widespread nudism was a phenomenon of Germany between the wars, particularly at the time of the Third Reich. I was somewhat reassured to read Baxandall's comments about Ungewitter's ideas being 'banned by the Nazis (who feared the FKK organizations were hotbeds of socialism and communism, which they were—they were the seedbeds of the free-seeking spirit in all areas)' (1981, p. 158). Nonetheless, this sense of reassurance did not last.

One of only four books that deal with nudism in my university's library is a tome called *Empire of Ecstasy* (Toepfer, 1997), which sets out to deal in depth with nude dance in Germany between the wars. It looks, feels, and reads authoritatively, however, especially in the detail:

Nudity was for Ungewitter the projection of human identity uncontaminated by capitalism and socialism, the two forces most responsible for the corruption of Aryan racial beauty...Ungewitter aligned his views with those defining the strange cult surrounding the Viennese journal *Die Ostara*, whose membership excluded all but blond males of 'Aryan-aristocratic' beauty. (Toepfer, 1997, pp. 37-38)

Whatever the personal histories of the friendly people and their extended families on Mlini's FKK beach, the racist philosophies that influenced Nazism may well have been hiding behind their nakedness.

One of the remaining three library books dealing with nudity was a surprise of a different kind. I recognised the look and the feel of Douglas, Rasmussen, and Flanagan's (1977) *The Nude Beach* from a trip to Wreck Beach in Vancouver in 1983. By then, I was an established nudist. It was

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not simply a matter of taking all available opportunities to go nude, it was more a matter of seeking out such opportunities. The purchase of a book such as Baxandall's (1981) *World Guide to Nude Beaches and Recreation* meant that—in the western and northern world—I always knew where the nearest nudist beach could be found.

On the day we visited it, Wreck Beach had all the hallmarks of a hippie convention. There was make-your-own music, family circles and barbecues, and plenty of friendly conversation about who we were, how long we were staying, where we'd come from, etc. It came as something of a shock to hear the police sirens and watch six fully-clothed police officers, with guns and truncheons, park their cars and high-tail it over the sand towards the unofficial line that marked the start of the nudist beach. In addition to the weapons and technological apparatus with which they were covered, these officers also brought long, thin sticks. The beach fell totally silent and everyone on it froze. We watched in bewilderment as the officers methodically covered the beach, ignoring the naked people who silently watched their progress, spearing the sand at regular intervals. They were looking—it turned out—for Eskys. They found one, with beer in it, and challenged the owner to come forward. When no one did, they confiscated it and left the beach. In Canada, 'drinking in public' is illegal.

What I hadn't realised, when I was on Wreck Beach, is that nudism is associated—by some Californian hippies, at any rate—with the chance to 'score' sexually. This hadn't been my experience on the FKK beaches. Nude beaches appeared to me much more restrained than textile ones and unaccompanied women seemed to be less hassled. There's very little public kissing or necking on a nude beach, for fairly obvious reasons, except out of public sight or in the water. So it was a surprise to me to open Douglas, Rasmussen, and Flanagan's book (1977) to discover that this sociological study revealed a close-to-one-track mind:

The middle three chapters (of seven) are:

- Heavy sex
- Voyeurs, body fetishists, and exhibitionists
- Casual sex

In the 'politics and the future of the nude beach' chapter, the sixth, there was no discussion about racist claims to Aryan supremacy, or the Third Reich, but the military metaphor remained clearly evident:

As with military battles, the outcomes of political battles are always uncertain. But the nude beaches have a lot going for them politically. Law enforcement could not eliminate nude beaching now, but it could greatly

restrict its size...the outcomes of the battles depend largely on what people think and see is happening on the beaches, and above all on how they feel about them. (Douglas, Rasmussen, & Flanagan, 1977, p. 194)

And as for the objectivity of the research:

One student heatedly tried to convince me and my colleagues that there wasn't any significant sex on the beach at all, even though we knew he was with some people we knew to be into super-casual stuff, and he insisted against all arguments that we were trying to close the beach down by dealing with the sex scene. (Douglas, Rasmussen, & Flanagan, 1977, p. 196)

So, as well as the Third Reich, I'd like to suggest that the born again peace-and-love hippie certainly was (hard in these post-AIDS days to be sure of a 'certainly is') another aspect of society that hides behind nakedness on the nude beach.

Which gets me to my final discussion point: the delicate issue of the public pubic. I'm keeping the matter of the public erection for the final part of this paper; first, I'll quickly address the issue of the female pubic area. Douglas, Rasmussen, and Flanagan claim that 'All of our Western societies have strong laws against most public genital nudity' (1977, p. 9). This probably shows that Douglas, Rasmussen, and Flanagan were unaware of the nature of the FKK movement between the wars, didn't keep up with western art, and hadn't been watching much film or documentary from the 1960s and 1970s. Clarke runs a more complex argument relating to the public representations of female nudists:

nudist magazines themselves [may have] dissuaded many women from joining [the movement]. Before the 'pubic hair barrier' was broken, photographs had to be retouched for publication, i.e. the genitals painted out. One means to avoid this was to depilate the female...The impression may have existed in the minds of many potential women nudists that they would also be required to do so on joining. (1982, p. 236)

Then Clarke goes on to comment that female depilation appears to have been fashionable in some Australian clubs, particularly in the 1950s, and suggests that this may be because female nudists saw the retouched photos and thought it fashionable to follow suit. Even so, there was some evidence that female genital depilation was actually a preference of the males. George, a retired businessman, is quoted as saying that ladies would 'hardly think of donning an evening gown without shaving their armpits. Surely it follows that the principle should be extended when the whole body is exposed publicly?' A survey of an Australian club in 1968 indicated that 10% of women undertook full depilation,

50% trimmed to some extent, and 40% did nothing. Clarke goes on to note, however, that

the 'magazine illustration becoming a fashion' argument seems the most persuasive. It does not seem to be just a coincidence that after 1972, when retouching of pictures in magazines ceased to be necessary the practice of depilation in the nudist movement rapidly disappeared. It was almost unknown in 1981-2. (1982, p. 238)

The effect of all this was to create an area of insecurity and uncertainty about the appropriateness of female genital appearance that (nonetheless) barely began to balance the concerns of the males.

Rudofsky (1971), in addressing *The Unfashionable Human Body*, argues that embarrassment at an erection was seen by the early Church as a symptom of the fall from grace:

Fully to envision his [Adam's] embarrassment we must turn to Saint Augustine who supplied an important carnal detail on this point. In his *De Civitate Dei* he intimates that erection (the blushing of the penis) did not occur before Adam's fall; it was this 'shameless novelty' that brought nudity into bad repute. (pp. 20-21)

The magnitude of the fear of the uncontrolled erection can be gauged from the fact that all three pro-nudist books discuss the issue:

What about erections? Will you get one on your first visit? Possibly, but just put it in the sand, the towel, or the water until your steamy imagination adjusts to the reality that sex, as you know it, is not the reason these people are unclothed. (Baxandall, 1981, p. 12)

As may be expected, Douglas, Rasmussen, and Flanagan (1977) offer a more detailed discussion of hiding behind nakedness on the nude beach, even if—paradoxically—the first line of defence is not to be naked on the nude beach:

a man's sexual arousal is pretty obvious unless he can find some way to prevent its making a public announcement...the most common way is to keep your suit on...Probably the next most preferred manner of dealing with the problem is to sit on it for a while, or, more specifically, to lie on it. If you lie on your stomach no-one can see if you're erect or not...One method of dealing with the problem is especially fitted to the cold Pacific Ocean...cooling it off works very fast. (pp. 82-83)

Finally, Clarke offers the all-Australian view, quoting one of his interviewees, 'Mike':

I spent almost the entire day laying down drilling holes in the sand and I came back with a very sunburned back (but)...you get used to it, it's a

matter of sorting out the difference between nudity and sex and once you have sorted it out in the mind then there is no hassle any more. (1982, p. 231)

The general nudist argument is that partial clothing is more overtly sexual than nudity:

after a visit or two you may decide that the almost-nude beaches where \$50 string bikinis are paraded are more sexually titillating than a clothes-optional beach. That is certainly the case! Titillation sells the product. When the withheld is delivered, tensions and fears are erased. (Baxandall, 1981, p. 12)

CONCLUSION

It's my experience that, paradoxically, I feel less self-conscious in the nude, with other nude people, than on a conventional beach. There's a sense in which, since I do enjoy sun, sea, and sand, I hide on the nude beach. So, why haven't I been a regular nudist since the mid-1980s? The real answer, I suspect, is one of migration, energy, and the fact that the FKK regime has spoiled me for everyday Australian nudism. The walk from the car park to Swanbourne, carrying drinks, towels, chairs, sun umbrellas, etc., is just too much hassle, and the beach is hot, windy, and unprotected once the nudist line is reached. Unlike the idyllic beaches of the Adriatic, there are no attentive waiters offering round-the-clock cappuccinos and Scotch on the rocks. I like to think of myself as a social libertarian, but when all's said and done, I suspect that I'm just a sybaritic libertine, in disguise.

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