Abstract:
Cricket occupies an ambivalent place in the Australian cultural imaginary, caught between former colonial origins and current pluralist aspirations, and retaining conservative leanings that can veer into 'ugly assimilationism'. Elite representatives are variably celebrated as national icons or uneasy sources of collective identity, given tendencies to become 'Ugly Australians'. Within the Australian cricket team, this combustive mix of nationalism, moralism, masculinity, and instrumental deviance coalesced into a win-at-all-costs ethos, culminating in brazen cheating and causing apparent diplomatic embarrassment. More significant, however, were underlying strategies of self-confessedly brutal degradation of opponents. Strategic aggression and humiliation were abetted by governing bodies who demanded success, but neglected to uphold ethical standards. Moral hazards and regulatory gaps incentivised players to self-set 'the line' of acceptable conduct, enabling injurious tactics that included intimidation, emasculation, mockery, and mass invective. A complementary argument discusses populist posturing and moral hypocrisy that were emergent during the cheating scandal, for more worthy grievances languished amid the 'crisis in cricket'.
Tactics of the Ugly Australian: Morality, masculinity, nationalism, and governance amid a cheating controversy in sport

Cricket occupies an ambivalent place in the Australian cultural imaginary, caught between former colonial origins and current pluralist aspirations, and retaining conservative leanings that can veer into ‘ugly assimilationism’. Elite representatives are variably celebrated as national icons or uneasy sources of collective identity, given tendencies to become ‘Ugly Australians’. Within the Australian cricket team, this combustive mix of nationalism, moralism, masculinity, and instrumental deviance coalesced into a win-at-all-costs ethos, culminating in brazen cheating and causing apparent diplomatic embarrassment. More significant, however, were underlying strategies of self-confessedly brutal degradation of opponents. Strategic aggression and humiliation were abetted by governing bodies who demanded success, but neglected to uphold ethical standards. Moral hazards and regulatory gaps incentivised players to self-set ‘the line’ of acceptable conduct, enabling injurious tactics that included intimidation, emasculation, mockery, and mass invective. A complementary argument discusses populist posturing and moral hypocrisy that were emergent during the cheating scandal, for more worthy grievances languished amid the ‘crisis in cricket’.

Keywords: morality, masculinity, nationalism, deviance, governance, sport

Introduction: ‘Winning ugly’

There was an air of excitement prior to the 2017-18 ‘Ashes’ cricket series. This rivalry between England and Australia is the game’s oldest, dating back to 1882. Still, Cricket Australia (CA) – the national governing body – wanted to further stoke impassioned supporters through a promotional campaign, entitled ‘#BeatEngland’ (2017a). Advertisements featured supporters of all ages, along with well-known players and other noteworthy figures, urging Australia to ‘Beat England!’ One patriotic toddler struggled to even pronounce ‘Beat England’, but screamed with all his might.

The Australian men’s team won the series 4-0, yet the insistent beating continued. During the post-series celebrations, two giant hands adorned the presentation podium. One was emblazoned with the Australian flag, holding up four fingers. The other was a loose fist (signifying zero), in England’s colours. Fireworks fizzed from the four raised fingers. Many
saw this gaudy display as sorely lacking in grace and humility, revelling in ‘winning ugly’ in order to better capture attention in a crowded media market (Baum, 2018b). As this paper explores, various modes of ‘winning ugly’ – such as undermining respect for opponents, antagonistic on-field tactics, yet feigning moral superiority – became entrenched within the upper echelons of Australian cricket, reflecting a blinkered organisational ethos amid the ruthless pursuit of success.

The tawdry jingoism of the Ashes victory would prove the least of concerns in what became a notorious season. Four months later, the Australian team were caught blatantly cheating by committing ball tampering. The subsequent moral opprobrium was unprecedented. Media outlets worldwide covered the story, including *The Economist, The New York Times, Forbes, China Daily*, and *Channel News Asia*. *The Hindustan Times* (2018) declared the incident ‘heaped disgrace and humiliation on the country’, while *The Washington Post* (Chiu, 2018) reported it ‘managed to shake Australia to its core’. The UK’s *Sunday Times*, meanwhile, pulled no punches with the headline ‘CHEATS’, while *The Sun* went with ‘HYPOCRITES’ (Lemon, 2018b). Political leaders across the globe weighed in, signalling a loss of diplomatic ‘soft power’ (see below). This reputational damage culminated in lengthy suspensions of the captain, vice-captain, and a junior player, along with resignations from the coach, CA’s CEO, and Chairman (among other executives). Also resultant was an exodus of sponsors, revelations of other misconduct, loss of public standing, and further recriminations to come.

Surveying the damage, commentators would point to ‘a toxic, win-at-all-costs ethos at the heart of Australian cricket’ (Wilson, 2018). How this occurred demands further explanation. This paper explores the mutually reinforcing logics of morality, nationality, and masculinity, which coalesced into modes of tactical belligerence that can be described as ‘ugly instrumentality’. This interactional mode is wilfully injurious, yet resistant to regulation, strategically evading sanctions while simultaneously aligning itself with collective ideals.
(such as national pride). This tethering to admirable goals enables and obscures forms of
deviance intended to induce fear, dread, and disorder in the other. The employment of ugly
instrumentality within the Australian cricket team both exploited and – after its spectacular
collapse – undermined its culturally privileged position. Therefore, a complementary
argument explores the populist posturing, failed governance, and skewed moral calculus that
allowed professional cricket to become complicit in social harms.

Cricket in the Australian popular imaginary

But first, to better understand this heady brew of moralism, nationalism, masculinity, and
instrumental deviance, it merits highlighting cricket’s esteem within Australian popular
culture. Perhaps with some hyperbole, the Test captain is commonly said to hold comparable
symbolic importance to the Prime Minister. Three former Test captains have been awarded
Australian of the Year in recent decades, and elite cricketers prove among the most well-
known global ambassadors. Cricket is frequently tied to national identity and often exploited
for political ends, particularly through long associations between the office of Prime Minister
and the national team. Indeed, Australia’s first PM, Edmund Barton, was a cricket enthusiast,
who umpired the match that sparked the Sydney Riot of 1879. This association has typically
proven favourable to conservative worldviews (Hutchins, 2001). Former PM John Howard is
famously fond of the game, and idolized both Don Bradman – Australia’s greatest ever player
– and Australia’s longest-serving PM, Robert Menzies (himself an ardent admirer of cricket).
Brett Hutchins (2001, p.57) argues that, for Howard especially, cricket signified romantic
possibilities for the ‘reinvigoration of the social-conservative tradition’, upholding a personal
vision ‘underpinned by nostalgia for middle-class values consistent with a British-derived,
Anglo-Saxon, pro-imperial Australian past...’. Tellingly – in ways reflecting nostalgic and
heroic ideals of masculinity in sport (see Whannel, 2002, pp.161-168) – soon after the cheating incident news outlets began to longingly quote ‘Bradman’s Creed’ on the (lost) purity of cricket (Wilson, 2018).

Another firmly conservative former PM, Tony Abbott, played cricket at Oxford, as did former Labour PM, Bob Hawke, where he would also set a world record in beer drinking. Hawke once regularly attended matches, always willing to skol a beer before an adoring crowd. Perhaps no other figure better embodies the froth of sporting fervour, hyper-masculinity, alcohol-fuelled patriotism, and populist appeal that reverberates throughout Australian culture. Combined with rapid commercialization, this combustive mix is of increasing scholarly concern (Palmer, 2014).

Cricket has also been politicised by those Ghassan Hage (2006) described as ‘ugly assimilationists’. Such persons insist others enthusiastically adopt cultural practices as markers of sincere integration, haranguing them to ‘go ahead, play cricket!… come on, love cricket… adopt cricketing values!’ Cricket is thus one path by which ‘multiculturalism’ remains filtered through colonial logics (Hage, 1998). Ironically, no one is immune, for even Pauline Hanson – an ugly assimilationist to surpass all others – was once criticized by Mark Latham (2006, p.79) for ‘promot[ing] herself as a politician espousing true Australian values’, and yet had confessed to the apparently heinous sin that ‘I don’t really care about the Melbourne Cup’. Hence, despite unifying aspirations, cricket (and Australian sport more broadly) remains a site of tensions between colonial pasts and pluralist futures (Beilharz, 2005).

Masculinity, morality, and instrumental deviance
An extensive literature has explored cricket through various sociocultural prisms, including: colonial legacies and representational inequalities (Malcolm, 2001); diaspora identities (Fletcher, 2012; Raman, 2015); national identity (Hutchins, 2005); postcolonial resistance (Appadurai, 2015; Beckles & Stoddart, 1995; James, 2005; Heenan & Dunstan, 2013); race and masculinity (Carrington, 1998); generational, gendered, and ethnic difference (Werbner, 1996); popular media and racial division (Farquharson & Majoribanks, 2006; Rowe, 2011); commodification of masculinity (Parry & Malcolm, 2004); and sporting celebrity (Nalapat & Parker, 2005).

More broadly, sport commonly serves as a conduit through which masculinities are imparted (Messner, 1992). Those aspiring to ‘orthodox masculinities’ (Anderson, 2008) learn how to comport their performative dispositions and avoid stigmatizing displays (Connell, 2000, pp.67-101). While arguably turning to more ‘inclusive’ masculinities (Anderson, 2010; Swain, 2006), professional sport’s multi-faceted and economically-motivated demands also generate complex forms of ‘pastiche hegemony’ (Atkinson, 2010), where athletes must navigate varying contexts of expected conduct. That is, if athletes must simultaneously be: traditional role models; fluid exemplars of progressive causes and social change; marketable commodities of consumer culture; and resilient outliers in extremely competitive settings, this can entrap them within conflicting interests. Also relevant are cultural expectations that male athletes, in particular, retain some anti-establishment ‘laddism’ (or ‘larrikinism’). Such confluences entail that sport appears emblematic of the debated ‘crisis in masculinity’ (Gee and Jackson, 2017).

Through these potent combinations sport proves useful for tracing ethical volitions under testing circumstances (Kavussanu, 2008). For example, athletes may be subject to pressures of ‘positive deviance’ or ‘overconformity’ (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). This emerges when athletes possess excessive acceptance of narrow overarching norms (eg. on-field success) in
ways conflicting with other ideals, such as adherence to fair play. In competitive settings that require ‘obsessive’ dedication, one outcome may be ‘instrumental aggression’ that pushes upon permissible bounds (Donahue, Rip, and Vallerand, 2009). Such practices subvert functional aspirations that sport might elicit tangible displays of praiseworthy qualities. Yet, such subversive deviance may also prove a source of pride, a skilled practice of ‘edgework’ (Lyng, 1990) that adds to athletes’ professional repertoires (despite undermining the institutional legitimacy of their vocation). Justifying such tactics thus requires oscillating between forms of ‘moral disengagement’ (Boardley and Kavussanu, 2011) – where standards of conduct are inhibited for tactical purposes – and logics of moral justification, where athletes rationalise behaviour through ‘higher goal’ aspirations (p.95).

Instrumentally Ugly

In unpacking these tensions, this study traces the tactical valorization of ‘ugliness’, where players adopted wilfully injurious modes of interaction, rationalised through ideals of patriotism and necessities of elite-level performance. This tactical hostility proves significant given the lengthy duration of cricket matches, which heightens players’ reliance on self-efficacy and emotional control (Barker & Slater, 2015). Also, unlike contact sports where physical aggression may be customary, cricket is non-contact, which further incentivises strategies of psychological domination. Cricket is also asymmetrical, with only two batsmen from one side and eleven fielders from the other competing at any time. This makes it easier for fielding sides to target the opposition through ‘sledging’, which generally refers to undermining opponents through verbal insults. In other sporting contexts this might be described as ‘trash talk’.
Hence, a kind of ‘meta-play’ emerges, where players’ mental reserves are eroded through various means; some permitted, some tolerated but edging towards deviance, and others contrary to shared norms (Parry & Kavanagh, 2013). While constantly under debate, players largely abide sledging as an acceptable tactic, cultivating self-talk techniques to minimise deleterious effects on their own performance (Joseph & Cramer, 2011; Davis et al., 2018).

Within the total institution-like settings of professional team sports, this variable meta-play is suffused with whatever variants of ‘moral atmosphere’ are dominant (Jones & McNamee, 2000). For the Australian team, this meta-play descended into ugly forms, including but not limited to intimidation, emasculation, mockery, ethnicity-based epithets, and inciting invective from supporters.

The descriptor of ‘ugly’ features as a thematic motif for two primary reasons. The first refers to the case study at hand – ie. the Australian cricket team – who, since the mid-1970s, have occasionally been pejoratively labelled ‘Ugly Australians’. Broadly speaking, the ‘Ugly Australian’ was first characterised by the British (and Australians who subscribed to the ‘cultural cringe’) as uncultured, uncouth, unbecoming, and all unrepentantly so (Fiske et al. pp. 130-136). Some Australians embraced this supposed ugliness, often in ways that reflexively satirised the assumed superiority of the British. Or, as with the Australian cricket team, ugliness manifested as in-your-face antagonism towards opposing teams, and a marker of patriotic pride. The Ugly Australian is therefore ambivalently enmeshed with prevailing national identities, for cricket has long held significant cachet in the myth-making of Australia’s ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 2006). The second, more conceptually significant reason is that ‘ugly’, etymologically, does not only denote aesthetic repulsion, sensory offence, or moral repugnance. Rather, its Norse origins also emphasise dread and fear. The Australian team expressly sought not just to blunt opposition confidence through superior play, nor unsettle them with distasteful sledging, but to instil dread that encountering
the Australians would ‘end careers’ and make adversaries ‘cry and go home’ (more on this
later).

Ugly instrumentality therefore knows its unpleasantness, rather than being inadvertently
wounding. It is a performance – a pantomime even – intended to induce disorder, or
retaliation in ugly kind. Importantly, ugly instrumentality is not simply a repackaging of
‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell, 2005), but rather an interactional mode selected with
acute awareness of its deviance under prevailing cultural mores. Nor do practitioners even
want to (re-)hegemonise it, for this would sacrifice strategic advantages it affords. Rather,
this selectivity, sensitivity, and strategic scarcity was understood by the Australian players,
who carefully avoided censure while still insistently calling out others for moral failings. By
also publicly aligning their abrasiveness as ‘part of being an Australian’ (see below), the team
edged towards a win-at-all-costs mentality. Exploring how this occurred among figures
traditionally valorised as ethical exemplars is a central concern in this paper.

A tour of acrimony, misogyny, and farce

First, a brief account of the acrimonious circumstances that prompted extraordinary outcries
and inquiries into the Australian team culture. The tour to South Africa comprised a four-
match series during March and April, 2018, and was marked by unusually high tensions
throughout. Five Code of Conduct violations were lodged in the first two matches alone
(among other matters not dealt with formally). During the first match, South African bowler
Kagiso Rabada was accused of making intimidatory contact with Australia’s captain, Steve
Smith. Rabada was initially sanctioned with a two-match ban, overturned on appeal. Smith
expressed dissatisfaction with the outcome, ominously noting that ‘the standard [of conduct]
has been set’ (Collins, 2018). The Australians’ distinctly aggressive style antagonized the
South Africans, with captain Faf du Plessis recounting in a press conference that, following the first match, his team ‘went from motivated, to motivated [and] angry’ (Forsaith, 2018a). Match referee Jeff Crowe observed that ‘Never in my 14 years of refereeing have I seen such animosity between two teams’.

Tensions were further raised by unsavoury tactics targeting Australian vice-captain David Warner. In years prior Warner had committed numerous indiscretions, but resolved to overcome these tendencies. In 2015, Warner married Candice Falzon – herself a former professional athlete – who was widely credited with improving Warner’s overall disposition. However, during this tour, Falzon was exploited for ugly ends. In 2007, prior to meeting Warner, Falzon had a brief tryst with professional rugby player Sonny Bill Williams in a Sydney nightclub. Eleven years later, during the second match in South Africa, home spectators wore masks of Williams’ face, presumably intended to ‘slut shame’ Falzon and aggravate Warner. Falzon and Warner’s two children were also in attendance, and mask-wearing spectators were even photographed with Cricket South Africa executives, sowing further rancour (Barrett, 2018b). This kind of toxically dyadic relationship between supporters and teams is common in settings of high personal identification (eg. national pride), creating dilemmas for governing bodies in maintaining loyalties while minimising harms (Wann, Carlson, & Schrader, 1999).

The masks were likely a response to an altercation during the first match, wherein Warner labelled South African player Quinton de Kock ‘a fucking sook’ after first calling him a ‘fat fucking bushpig’ (Lemon, 2018b) and engaging in ‘schoolboy mockery’ based on his surname (Baum, 2018a). In turn, de Kock reportedly made derogatory comments about Falzon, to which Warner reacted heatedly. Warner was also involved in a prolonged confrontation with a spectator, further heightening the tour’s relentlessly combative
atmosphere (Brettig, 2018c). Despite this, Australian coach Darren Lehmann remained steadfast:

'We're certainly supporting David. We want to play in a way that gets us success and for us we've just got to make sure we don't cross the line, that's the key.’

The discursive significance of this ‘line’ will be discussed later. The captain, Smith, also echoed what Lehmann codified as ‘the Australian way’ of ‘getting in a contest and ‘being in their faces’ (Haigh, 2018):

'We play our best cricket when we’re aggressive. We’re in the fight together, we’re hunting as a pack and we’re working for each other and backing our mates up on the field… That's part of being an Australian in my opinion.’ (Ferris, 2018)

By this stage, the tour of South Africa had reached such ill-feeling that even the Marylebone Cricket Club – original drafters of the Laws of Cricket – felt obliged to step in:

'The behaviour of some of the players in the current South Africa/Australia series… has fallen well below the standard required to inspire future generations of cricket-loving families.’ (Lofthouse, 2018)

Just five days later, Smith’s team were caught ball tampering. Though not without precedent, and beset by interpretational ambiguity (Fraser, 2005, pp.200-246), the brazenness of the cheating was compounded by the Australians’ prior insistent claims of ethical superiority. Warner had even previously stated that ‘We hold our heads high and I’ll be very disappointed if one of our team members did that [ball tampering]’ (Haigh, 2018). The subsequent revelations, perhaps unsurprisingly, stoked wholly unprecedented reactions.

For context, during the third match South Africa were dominant, and (according to most accounts) Warner urged teammate Cameron Bancroft to use sandpaper to illegally alter the
ball’s condition. Smith’s role is unclear, though it appears he tacitly assented in confessed ‘desperation’ (Brettig, 2018b). Why Bancroft was given this task is also not clear, though aforementioned pressures of ‘overconformity’ appear likely (Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

Bancroft later pointed to such an explanation:

‘At the time did I know any better? No. Because I valued this thing called fitting in, fitting in with the team. Fitting in with my mates, earning respect from, you know, senior players and, I guess, umm … yeah, it led to a really destructive situation.’ (CA, 2018)

Bancroft was an inexperienced player, without guaranteed selection and hoping to secure his place. Hence, the vice-captain’s authority may have overwhelmed any hesitancy, resulting in deviance aligned with team goals, but undermining the game’s integrity. Soon enough, broadcast cameras caught Bancroft rubbing the ball with sandpaper. Bancroft, becoming aware of suspicions, attempted to surreptitiously hide the sandpaper in his underwear, though cameras also captured this. The umpires were duly informed and queried Bancroft, who initially feigned innocence.

However, the jig was up, and Bancroft and Smith were ushered into a press conference at the end of play. Responses to questions indicated both arrogance and overconformity, evident in their initial attempts at deception through Bancroft substituting ‘sticky tape’ for ‘sandpaper’ in his partial confession. Later, Bancroft would admit that ‘Yes, I lied. I lied… and I panicked’ (Brettig, 2018b). Smith, meanwhile, confessed prior knowledge, admitting it a ‘poor choice and deeply regrettable’. However, he flatly rejected suggestions that he relinquish the captaincy. This reinforced perceptions that Smith’s team did not recognize bounds of ethical conduct, and this, combined with their deliberate obfuscation, were acknowledged by CA CEO James Sutherland as necessitating especially punitive action.
However, before further exploring some wider ramifications, it merits cataloguing governance problems within Cricket Australia, which likely contributed to parlous conduct.

**Governing by ‘Smashing the Boundaries’**

As elaborated earlier, cricket is deeply enmeshed with political office, populism, machismo, and patriotism. Only within this context can we understand the hyper-moralised hand-wringing responses to the tampering incident. Prime Minister at the time, Malcolm Turnbull, seemed positively apoplectic:

‘We all woke up shocked and bitterly disappointed by the news... It seemed completely beyond belief that the Australian cricket team had been involved in cheating… But I have to say that the whole nation, who holds those who wear the “Baggy Green” up on a pedestal about as high as you can get in Australia – certainly higher than any politician, that’s for sure – that this is a shocking disappointment.’

(SNTV, 2017)

Foreign Minister Julie Bishop confirmed the incident ‘has been raised with me on numerous occasions by foreign diplomats and ambassadors… who are astounded that Australian cricketers would act in this way’ (Yaxley, 2018). UK Prime Minister Theresa May was ‘shocked and bitterly disappointed’ (Marks, 2018), while Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand PM, echoed ‘it’s no wonder the public are outraged by it’ (Collins, 2018). John Howard declared he ‘shares the intense disappointment of millions of cricket fans’ (Lalor, 2018a), and another former PM, Kevin Rudd, claimed the impact is ‘larger than many back home may think’, causing a loss of ‘soft power’ (Holmes, 2018). Rudd also lambasted CA Chairman David Peever, accusing him of ‘highest-level corporate thuggery’.
Concerns with the governing body had certainly grown over preceding years (Aston, 2018b). Former coach Mickey Arthur (2018) lamented that despite ‘too many behavioural spotfires to list’, Cricket Australia ‘had demonstrated no real willingness or desire to improve the culture within their organisation’. Meanwhile, internal research concluded that the ‘likeability’ of the men’s team was in steady decline among Australians (Haigh, 2018), while it was also widely known that ‘Australian teams had the worst [global] reputation and were the most broadly disliked’ (Lemon, 2018b). Also reflective of ethically lax approaches were CA media executive Ben Amarfio’s comments in 2013, where he posited that controversy may add value to a brand:

‘…the NRL has had players assault women, players assault policemen, they’ve had drug, corruption and match fixing issues… yet they’ve just signed a TV deal for over $1bn… despite the noise that’s been created in the media, even though it’s negative, it actually creates a lot more interest in your brand… It’s not always such a bad thing to get negative press.’ (Hicks, 2013)

Here was a tacit admission that reputational harm was tolerable if it might enhance the bottom line. A few years later, Cricket Australia – a non-profit organisation mandated to deliver social benefit to the Australian people – negotiated a broadcasting deal in excess of $1bn. This was achieved despite bitter negotiations in which Peever referred to Channel Ten as ‘bottom-feeders’, and where the deal’s terms resulted in less matches featuring the men’s team available on free-to-air coverage.

A willingness to risk reputational harm was also reflected in the latitude afforded to players in the pursuit of success. For example, the 2011 Argus Review included vague aspirations for more ‘adult conversations’ with players, ‘spelling out how they are perceived and… agreeing required changes to behaviour’ (CA, 2011, p.22). The requisite mindset demanded, however,
was simply ‘a hunger to play, a hunger to improve, a hunger to win and a hunger to be the best in the world’. Remuneration was calibrated to reflect on-field outcomes, with no consideration as to whether pay-for-win incentives might create moral hazards. While there was brief mention that senior players must ‘role model the desired behaviours’, there was little indication of what, precisely, these behaviours should comprise, at least not in any ethical sense. Ultimately, only outcomes mattered, with means left vague, determined by the coach and newly installed ‘High Performance Manager’. Hence, espoused behaviour change was only shallowly conceived, creating an ethical vacuum and insistence on success that invited positive deviance.

The eventual consequences were laid bare by the ‘cultural review’ conducted by The Ethics Centre and led by Dr Simon Longstaff (2018). Still, even the Longstaff Review could not resist a touch of melodrama in diagnosing public responses to the tampering incident:

‘The grief (and for many people it was grief) was linked to a sense of shame […] a shame that our society’s ethical malaise had moved from politics, to business, to the churches… an ever-spreading stain that had finally tainted the wearers of the hallowed ‘baggy green’. Australians looked up and asked, anew, is that whom we have become?’ (p.5)

This patriotic inflection extended into the review’s recommendations, one of which was that ‘Cricket connects the concept of “noble failure” to national myths – such as that of ANZAC Day’ (p.115). More pertinently, the review identified that players operated within a ‘gilded bubble’, which largely consisted of ‘a machine that is fine-tuned for the sole purpose of winning’ (p.9) and ‘neither invests in nor values emotional maturity’ (p.41). Rather, within this bubble, ‘players are called upon to “play the mongrel”’ (p.9). Journalists noted these somewhat forced displays, with players adopting antagonistic personas not of their usual
disposition. One (anonymous) player even noted ‘The guys in the team actually don’t have those sort of personalities, and they’re not equipped to handle the ramifications when inevitably it goes wrong’ (Haigh, 2018). The resulting overall perception was ‘the normalisation of verbal abuse in Australian men’s cricket’, along with ‘a culture of disrespect for the opposition… to a degree not practiced by other nations’ (p.38). The review also raised concern that CA’s guiding philosophy of ‘Smashing the Boundaries’ was too readily adopted without consideration of ‘attendant harms’ (p.39).

Across the stakeholder groups surveyed there was agreement that, when measured against their own values, the one CA best upheld was ‘Be Relentless… Play to Win’ (p.43). Alternatively, the value perceived as upheld the least was CA’s willingness to ‘Listen’. The CA Executive were most commonly described as ‘arrogant’ and ‘controlling’ (p.11) within an organisation fuelled by ‘ego’ and ‘alpha male culture’ (p.84). Instead of abiding by declared principles, CA adhered to ‘shadow values’ which prioritised winning and bottom line outcomes above all else (p.93). Partial blame was placed upon the 2011 Argus Review, which modelled ‘accountability’ only in narrow terms (ie. trophies and corporate strength), and so invited ugly instrumentalism to take hold.

In an ironic postscript, and further confirming perceptions of arrogance, David Peever saw fit to have himself re-elected as Chairman before the Longstaff Review was released publicly. Indeed, the report was ready for release prior to the election, and already disseminated among the CA Board. However, for reasons unknown, it was withheld from the state executives who would vote on the CA Board. When the damning findings were made available less than two hours after Peever’s re-election the state bodies were less than impressed, and Peever was compelled to resign (Brettig, 2018a).
On moral posturing and grievability

After Smith’s tearful public appearance following the handing down of a 12-month suspension some earnestly claimed that ‘Australia cried with Steve Smith’ (AAP, 2018a). Peter FitzSimons (2018) cranked up the moralism, arguing that giving the tampering task to the rookie ‘was the equivalent of a Sergeant, being told by a General, to breach the rules of the Geneva Convention’. Other responses echoed this tone-deafness, including suggestions this was cricket’s ‘#MeToo moment’ (Knox, 2018). Many found such reactions grossly overblown. To witness such agonizing over smuggled sandpaper does, undeniably, have an element of farce and bathos. However, in a sport in which 1.4 million Australians participate, and watched by millions more, citizens are entitled to be concerned with how their elite representatives conduct themselves.

Also, in a discursively comparative sense, there are collective psychic wounds felt in observing such confected outrage while, for example, asylum seekers languish in detention (Peterie, 2017). These contrasts reveal grotesque skews regarding what lives we deem ‘grievable’ (Butler, 2006). For contemporaneous comparison, four days before the tampering incident, reports emerged that a 10-year old boy detained at the Nauru detention centre had ‘made repeated attempts to kill himself’ and was ‘at imminent risk of dying’ without medical attention on the Australian mainland (Doherty, 2018). This injunction was contested by the Home Affairs department, yet there was comparatively far less coverage of this struggle, where the stakes were nothing less than life itself.

The reader might object to such comparisons as a tu quoque fallacy, for there are almost always matters of greater moral significance than to what we give our attention. However, such tensions between moral posturing against simultaneous denials of need are worth highlighting, particularly given cricket has historically proven a tool by which such divisions
of moral recognition are enacted. For example, it merits recalling that Robert Menzies infamously refused to enforce a boycott of teams travelling to South Africa in protest against Apartheid. Hutchins (2001, p.63) suggests that Menzies’ refusal was compounded by his dumbfounding claim that South African President John Vorster was ‘no racist’, effectively rendering Menzies an apologist. Australian cricket has also long struggled with indigenous inclusion (Gemmell, 2007). Despite the first touring team of 1868 comprising indigenous players there remains little representation among professional ranks. Of the 452 men who have played Test cricket, only one – Jason Gillespie – has been of indigenous heritage. This conspicuous absence is discomfiting given cricket’s influence in shaping dominant cultural identities, with its impact among indigenous communities sometimes overstated in ways favouring hegemonic self-regard (Whimpress, 1999). This ongoing lack of diversity and accommodation of difference may have contributed to the hubris evident in psychologically harmful tactics.

‘We know where the line is’

Enacting instrumental aggression requires inducing within oneself the necessary mindset to perform such displays. David Warner was explicit in emphasising these forms of ‘deep acting’ (Hochschild, 2012):

‘As soon as you step on that line it's war. You try and get into a battle as quick as you can. I try and look in the opposition's eyes and try and work out, “How can I dislike this player?”... You have to delve and dig deep into yourself to actually get some hatred about them.’ (CA, 2017b)

Dig deep for ‘hatred’? Typically, idioms of ‘digging deep’ evoke discovering unknown capacities of admirable qualities. Love and empathy – even if limited to kin and kind – can
have such depths, but ‘hatred’ remains shallow, an unreflective rejection of the other (Ahmed, 2004, pp.122-143). Also, while ‘putting on a game face’ is common across many sports, stoking ‘hatred’ remains unusual within cricket, not typically associated with such antagonism.

However, there had long been concerns that the Australian team were devolving into ‘graceless bullies’ (McGregor, 2012). A decade before Warner’s ‘hatred’ statement, Andrew Symonds acknowledged that ‘one of his roles’ was to find ‘[psychological] weakness in the opposition’ and ‘gang up on someone’ (Brettig, 2015). Players also resisted efforts to tone down their combative on-field demeanour, with captain Ricky Ponting warning that ‘If you keep toning us down, you’ll make us the same as everybody else… Do you want us to win, keep winning games and be the best cricket team in the world, or do you want us just to be like everybody else?’ (Brettig, 2015).

More recently, Mickey Arthur (2018), former coach, described the Australian conduct as ‘boorish and arrogant’, and criticized their lack of cross-cultural reflexivity in appointing themselves arbiters of ‘the line’. This apparent ‘line’ of ethical conduct was a recurring issue, with the Australians claiming to always play ‘hard but fair’. However, their inability to articulate precisely where this line lay – while nonetheless insisting they exploit its full range – revealed edgework laden with hubris. In 2015, after Warner was fined for telling an Indian player to ‘speak English’, Lehmann would frankly admit that ‘We’re always going to teeter pretty close to [the line], that’s just the way we play’ (Coverdale, 2015). Nathan Lyon, similarly, claimed ‘We know where the line is. We headbutt it probably, but we don’t go over it’ (Barrett, 2018a). Warner’s own rationale was that ‘There are some times you do nudge that line a fair bit, and the odd occasion you might step over, but you do have to realise that we’re out there to win’ (Moonda, 2014). Pat Cummins was far more reflective,
acknowledging that ‘pre-planned bullying’ was ‘certainly over the line’, and of which ‘we’ve all been guilty’ (Lemon, 2018b).

Questions about particular incidents were often met with rejoinders that worse had been committed previously, without sanction. When former captain Michael Clarke, for example, told an opponent to ‘Get ready for a broken fucking arm’, Lehmann defended him, stating ‘I like our boys being aggressive as long as they don't cross the line – I certainly like to play hard cricket. I've no problems with that at all’ (BBC, 2013b). Shane Warne even suggested this was the moment where the public ‘accepted [Clarke] as an Australian hero’ (Haigh, 2018). For his part, Clarke framed his conduct as ‘banter’, placating that ‘the England players know we certainly respect them. I’ve heard a lot worse said on a cricket field’ and ‘I cop as much as I give, that's for sure.’ This rationale of reciprocal harm is invoked frequently, where exchanging hostilities becomes a perverted measure of ‘respect’ (for one would only bother threatening a worthy opponent). Nonetheless, observers expressed frustration with the Australians’ self-appointed role as keepers of ‘the line’:

‘They're saying they didn't cross the line… But where is the line? Who sets the line? Where does the line come from?… Who does the line belong to?… We don't have a line because we try to just play cricket.’ – Ottis Gibson, South African Coach (Forsaith, 2018b)

‘I think their line and our line are slightly different things – let’s leave it at that.’ – Joe Root, England Captain (Hoult, 2017)

‘As apprehended by the rest of the cricket world, the answer is that the line is not fixed, but floats a millimetre ahead of wherever Australia chooses to stop.’ (Baum, 2018a)
As coach, Lehmann sometimes even instigated conflict himself. In 2013, he targeted England’s Stuart Broad – who Lehmann accused of poor sportsmanship – declaring that ‘I hope he cries and goes home’ (BBC, 2013a). Lehmann added ‘Our players haven't forgotten [Broad’s alleged misconduct], they’re calling him everything under the sun as they go past, so I would hope the Australian public are the same.’ The Courier Mail enthusiastically took up the call, headlining Broad as a ‘Smug Pommie Cheat’ (Wilson, 2013). Suffice to say, not only legitimizing, but urging ‘everything under the sun’ constitutes grossly irresponsible conduct, and Lehmann was duly fined by the International Cricket Council (ICC). Broad would only dryly remark that after Lehmann’s crowd-baiting he was ‘pleased my mum wasn’t in the stadium’ during the following match (ibid.).

Lehmann also appeared to lack recognition of inclusive masculinity or sensitivity to ethnicity, and was the first player charged by the ICC for racial vilification (Farquharson & Majoribanks, 2006). Joe Aston (2018a) reported Lehmann once called him a ‘shirtlifter’ (a homophobic slur) and referred to Usman Khawaja – the first Muslim player in a team that has always lacked diversity – as a ‘shoe-bomber’. Khawaja (2017) himself argued that deep-seated structural racism effectively shut out a generation of talent, along with expressing frustrations he felt growing up in trying to identify with teams featuring ‘the same type of men who would sledge me about my heritage’. England player Moeen Ali, also a Muslim, similarly recounted that an Australian player once called him ‘Osama’ (Wu, 2018). After the tampering incident, where Warner was identified as the instigating figure, Gideon Haigh (in Holmes, 2018) noted ‘every time Warner has transgressed on the field, Lehmann has been his defender and enabler.’ It was therefore disingenuous, Haigh argued, to claim this merely the work of a ‘few bad apples’, but rather was nurtured team culture. Haigh pointedly observed:

‘[Warner] has picked out vulnerable players… the weak, or the young, or the inexperienced… and I think his coach has encouraged him to do that… There is a
belief that this is the Aussie way to do it: you get in their faces, you get under their
skin, you make it unpleasant to play against you… that’s a very recent bastardization
of how we play the game.’

Strategic humiliation

The falling action of this tactical ‘bastardization’ can be traced to 2016. After five
consecutive losses the team were excoriated by CEO James Sutherland and High
Performance Manager Pat Howard, and team selections changed dramatically (Wilson,
2018). Smith stated ‘I need some players willing to get in the contest and get in the battle’,
urging they embrace ‘the old Australian way of puffing your chest out and making your
presence felt’ (Brettig, 2016). Players began highlighting their ‘smarter’ sledging (Brettig,
2018c), with Cameron Bancroft observing that aggressive sledging was so tactically
normalized it became ‘Who can hurt someone’s feelings the most’ (Brettig, 2018e). Through
forms of ‘moral disengagement’ (Boardley and Kavussanu, 2011), players would readily,
even flippantly, acknowledge their sledging was ‘brutal’, yet aligned it with orthodox
Australian identities:

‘Generally it's just what the Aussie way is, it's pretty brutal... if you can get that 1%
edge over an opposition, you'd be silly not to [sledge]. If there’s a moment we can
exploit someone’s mental capabilities well then yeah, we’re going to go about it.’ –
Peter Handscomb (Brettig, 2018d)

But is it ‘silly’ to consider that employing personal abuse for a ‘1% edge’ is perhaps not
worth pursuing? Few things are more dangerous than being unthinking and ruthless.

However, when queried on this, responsibility for ensuring sound conduct was deferred to
umpires. Close observers were scathing towards such evasions, labelling it the ‘scoundrel’s refuge’ (Baum, 2018a).

Nevertheless, with blithe ‘you’d be silly not to’ conviction, the aggression continued. England players Jimmy Anderson (2017) and James Taylor (BBC, 2018) respectively described the Australians as ‘bullies’, ‘brutal’, and ‘without doubt’ the worst offenders in world cricket. Moeen Ali stated they were ‘the only team I’ve played against my whole life that I’ve actually disliked’ (Atherton, 2018). Mickey Arthur (2018) acknowledged that ‘some of the things said to the English players… was scandalous’, while the South Africans recalled encountering the Australians as ‘definitely the most abuse we’ve got on the cricket field’ (CA, 2016). England coach Trevor Bayliss requested stump microphones be tuned less sensitively when playing Australia, so viewers would not hear abusive exchanges (BBC, 2017). Prior to the fateful South Africa series, the Australians themselves requested on-field microphones be faded. When this was refused, the players protested by audibly promoting competitors of the match sponsors during on-field discussion (Barrett, 2018a).

Nevertheless, the Australians stubbornly asserted their high standing. After the altercation between Warner and de Kock, Smith insisted his team would not change:

‘It’s about continuing to play a good, hard aggressive brand but knowing we don’t want to cross the line… in the last two years I think we’re the team with the least indiscretions – code of conduct or anything.’ (Lalor, 2018)

On any available measure this claim was simply not true. Moreover, incessant antagonism even extended to off-field meta-play. Warner, for example, once publicly described a visiting English team as having ‘scared eyes, and the way Trotty [Jonathan Trott] got out was pretty poor and weak’ (BBC, 2013b). A few days later, suffering from acute anxiety, Trott would depart the tour. Trott (2016) recounted crippling fears during this time: ‘I felt I was being
questioned as a man. I felt my dignity was being stripped away… It was agony.’ Warner was
subsequently criticized for seeking to ‘humiliate a fellow cricketer’ (BBC, 2013b). Still,
others followed in the manner established. Nathan Lyon voiced hopes to ‘end some careers’,
even targeting specific players:

‘I know Joe Root got dropped [from the team] last time he was here so it would be
good to get him dropped again… We knew Matt Prior wanted to fly home before the
game started and he was one of the senior players. He was scared.’ (AAP, 2017)

Arguably, this gamesmanship originates with former captain Steve Waugh’s philosophy of
‘mental disintegration’. However, in Waugh’s view (2005), rather than advocating for
personal abuse, this strategy was about ‘own[ing] the headspace’ of an opposing player,
exercising such tactical dominance and skilful execution that the opposition would fall into
defeatist mindsets. Of course, mental disintegration proved easier to realise between 1999-
2009, when the Australian team were utterly dominant. Later years saw progressively weaker
squads while expectations remained high, further incentivising deviant practices.

The specific content of sledging is rarely revealed, in part for supposedly honour-based
rationales of ‘what happens on the field stays on the field’, but also because it may cause
further harm to the aggrieved party (Fraser, 2005, pp.61-63). A pertinent example of this
occurred during the 2017-18 Ashes series, where it was widely acknowledged that England’s
Johnny Bairstow was subjected to acutely personal abuse, though no specifics were ever
given. As Geoff Lemon (2018b) explained, ‘The England camp didn’t want drama, the
Australian camp didn’t want publication’ and journalists were also reluctant to go ‘kicking a
wasp’s nest’. Bairstow himself would only acknowledge that things were said that must never
be said again (ibid.). Unfortunately, this silencing bind leaves itself open to exploitation.

Former South African captain AB de Villiers confirmed that Australian sledging typically

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involved ‘lots of personal stuff’ (AAP, 2014), and Peter Lalor (ABC, 2018) noted this hostility was unique to the Australians:

‘I think the “Ugly Australian” tag is, unfortunately, justified… you don’t actually need to hear what’s being said on the stump mics, but I can tell you that at times it would make your hair curl. It can get pretty gruesome out there, can get pretty ugly, and they don’t have many friends in world cricket – the Australians – over the way they play, because they play too hard.’

Altogether, these psychological techniques devolved into wilfully ugly kinds, where Australian players ‘set out to make [conflicts] happen, strategically, calculatedly, as a matter of declared policy’ (Baum, 2018a). Perhaps unsurprisingly, after the cheating was uncovered and players dragged through confessions, there was little sympathy outside Australia. Widespread schadenfreude prevailed, for moral hypocrisy had finally been exposed.

An era bookended by tears

Following his suspension, Steve Smith delivered a full mea culpa, through tears. Cameron Bancroft also fought back tears as he expressed regret. Two days later, David Warner broke down in confessional display, Darren Lehmann resigned, and Cricket Australia commissioned the cultural review. The captain, vice-captain, coach, the most junior player, each in evident states of mental fragility, had all been publicly purged, but continued to profess their love for the sport and for the nation. Also to soon depart were the CEO, Chairman, two Board Members, the High Performance Manager, the Head of Integrity, and the chief Media Executive. Concerns were raised whether the players’ ‘rituals of self-abasement’ were distractions from addressing more endemic issues (Gideon in Holmes, 2018). Michael Clarke likewise chastised those who – particularly in their treatment of
Warner – assumed that ‘He’s a tough guy; you can bruise him but you’ll never break him’ (De Silva, 2018). Certainly, such callousness merely re-imposes the hyper-masculinities that need dismantling. Moreover, it highlights popular media as partially responsible for fostering anti-hero archetypes like Warner, who are held aloft when winning, but later used as targets of cleansing vitriol. Warner himself acknowledged his casting as the ‘pantomime villain’, to which he acquiesced, thinking the role necessary for the team’s benefit (Lemon, 2018a).

Hence, in ways both pantomime and parable-like, a team that prided itself on sending opponents home crying were now themselves in tears. To see the Australian captain shedding tears recalled similar scenes in 1984, when Kim Hughes announced he was resigning the Test captaincy. Hughes suffered much derision, his tears thought to signify failed masculinity. Hughes’ fate was to be remembered as ‘the crybaby, the effeminate cricketer’, the one fathers warned their sons not to become (Ryan, 2017, p.362). This cruelly unsympathetic legacy persisted for many years. One writer suggested it ‘might have impressed psychologists who admire men getting in touch with their feminine side’ but, ultimately, Hughes made ‘a complete clown of himself’ (Mitchell, 2002). Another even argued that ‘the backlash was so severe that it helped kick-start the last 25 years of Australian success… [bringing] a new spirit of toughness to the team’ (Bull, 2008). If recent behaviour was to be the price for success, perhaps better to have foregone it entirely. Still, if Hughes’ tears marked the beginning of one era, it is fitting that Smith’s tears mark its end, and perhaps the reimagining of Australian cricket in ways that undo entrenched ugliness. Indeed, we might start by undoing the stigma attached to tears, achieved in other settings once stereotypically associated with orthodox masculinities (Underwood & Olson, 2018).

Conclusion: Beyond mocking ‘niceness’ and ‘raining epithets’
This paper has explored the blend of moralism, nationalism, masculinity, and instrumental deviance that coalesced into a win-at-all-costs ethos within the Australian cricket team.

Forms of positive deviance descended into self-confessedly ‘brutal’ and personally injurious tactics. Close observers concur on the intimidating, emasculatory, invasive, and even ethnically prejudiced lengths to which ‘sledging’ was taken. Such strategies exploited both regulatory gaps – by letting players self-set ‘the line’ of acceptable conduct – and cricket’s esteemed cultural position, by aligning aggression as ‘part of being an Australian’. This patriotic moral posturing was then mirrored in reactions to the tampering incident, where seeming national indignity overwhelmed far more worthy sources of shame and grieving.

But finally, prior to his resignation, Darren Lehmann conceded it was time the Australian team rethink their approach, identifying New Zealand as worth emulating ‘in the way they play and respect the opposition’ (Barrett, 2018c). No small irony here, for former Australian player Brad Haddin – in comically hyper-masculinist fashion – had previously mocked the New Zealanders’ friendliness:

‘They were that nice to us in New Zealand and we were that uncomfortable… I said in the team meeting: “I can't stand for this anymore. We're going at them as hard as we can.”… All they were was nice to us for seven days.' (Fairfax, 2015)

It was also not long before debates about ‘how Australians win’ undermined the recommendations of the Longstaff Review. Michael Clarke led the charge, suggesting we must

‘Play tough, Australian cricket because – whether we like it or not – that is in our blood… If you try and walk away from it, yeah, we might be the most liked team in the world, [but] we're not gonna win shit. We won't win a game.’ (Healy, 2018)
Likewise, when one player was asked during the Longstaff Review about New Zealand’s more genial approach, he responded with ‘and how are they going?’, implying that sledging was ‘an essential part of the kit they need to win’ (Longstaff, 2018, p.90). But for now, at least, these dissenting voices appear to be in the minority. Hope remains that the Australian team have finally dispensed with ‘this lousy fiction that if you’re not raining down epithets and curses on your opponents, you are not showing sufficient passion for your team and country’ (Baum, 2018a). Time will tell whether they retain the courage to be kind.

References


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Some might suggest that the #BeatEngland campaign and presentation ceremony were consistent with longstanding rivalries and marketing strategies. However, they reflected a tone not previously seen. Typically, promotional rhetoric for the Ashes focuses more on inward-looking appeals, such as: the praiseworthy qualities of the players; valorizing the ‘spirit of cricket’; nationalistic sentiments; and deference to history. Any antagonism towards the opposition is subsumed under these themes, rather than being the central appeal. Compare, for example, Cricket Australia’s #BeatEngland campaign with the ‘It’s not just cricket’ campaign of the previous series, developed by the England & Wales Cricket Board (2015). While there are certainly parallels – primarily the overwrought drama – the ethical inflection is clearly different. One is inward-looking, and valorises patriotism only if it produces laudable conduct. The other is outward-looking, jingoistic, and antagonistic. As for the presentation ceremony, there emerged consensus that the staging was unbefitting of the occasion. Mike Carlton labelled it ‘insulting triumphalism’, while others described the display as ‘classless’, ‘gross’, ‘gauche’, ‘childish’, ‘unsportsmanlike’, ‘garish’, ‘horrendous’, and ‘reinforces the view that Australian cricket is full of boorish bogans’ (see Morgan, 2018; Fasso-Opie, 2018; Scroll, 2018).

Making unlawful changes to the ball’s material condition, for strategic advantage.

Australia was far from the lowest accumulator of sanctions for unsporting conduct. A sound measure of overall team discipline can be found in the number of ‘demerit points’ issued to players by the ICC. In the 18 months from when the demerit system was first introduced, Australia fared average-to-poor, with five players receiving demerit points. New Zealand, for comparison, had zero players incur demerits (ICC, 2018). The Longstaff Review (2018, p.52) similarly confirmed that ‘since 2013, and including the South Africa incident, David Warner is the Australian player who has been found guilty of the most international match Code of Conduct infringements, followed by Steve Smith’.