

Shacked: The ecology of surfing and the surfing of ecology

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A work of creativity glides and planes along a fluid roller; and writes on the wave, as its perilous roarings transform themselves into music, and the breaking of its wave will become volume uncoiled. (Serres 1995, p. 35)

Stormy Weather

Salt is their precious mineral. And seashells
are held to the ear during births and funerals.
The base of all inks and pigments is seawater.
(Heaney 1998, p. 300)

Walking along the water's edge, after several stormy days with high seas, it is not unusual to find puffer-fish beached. These sea creatures are also called porcupine fish for obvious reasons, covered in spikes for protection, which compensates somewhat for the small fins and pedestrian swimming capabilities. They puff-up by swallowing water to ward off predators when they sense danger: a mistaken strategy for turbulent conditions. One such fish I photograph early one morning, appears to have died with a smile on its face, perhaps belying a last-ditch struggle for life, caught in the rising tide and beached forlornly upon its ebb, the converse of drowning. Could it have been an ecstatic embrace of death?

Nevertheless, this wry grin strikes in sum as a life well-lived. The fully-grown fish in such health, from the vigour and the support, offered from a stimulating and dynamic environment. Offers comfort from more maudlin thoughts of death generated by



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mainstream media, as a quirky aside from which to initiate a roundabout discussion about home and home-place. It is an opportunity to continue my contemplation of the way people sense belonging (Satchell 2006, 2007). For me this is about constructing a form of belonging that is tentative and shared, predicated upon the limits of the human condition and life more broadly, beholden to the complexity of the more-than- human world in which it is embedded, entangled and inscribed.

‘The new ecology’ according to Deborah Bird Rose (2004),

starts with this fundamental assertion: that the unit of survival is not the individual or species, but is the organism-and-its-environment. It follows from this that an organism that deteriorates its environment commits suicide.

According to this logic the separations and divisions that structure human order as apart (particularly in western cultural traditions and modernisms) rather than as a part, are misleading and pernicious. This antagonistic relationship, predicated upon the notion of human domination of the world, is so engrained that it bears critical attention and discussion (Plumwood 1993). Amongst other concerns this calls for creative new mythologies and narratives that are responsive to the environment, relational to living organisms and emplaced in specific contexts.

I take my title ‘Shacked’ from surf culture, a vernacular term for the transitory habitation of a breaking wave; getting ‘tubed’ or ‘barrelled’. The term also has resonance in the cultural memory of the Indigenous cultures of Polynesia, the coastal people of Aboriginal Australia and twentieth-century settler Australian beach cultures; as a temporary dwelling, a beachside or holiday residence. Further to this, to shack-up has connotations of the conviviality shared amongst extended family or friends, as well as alluding to the tentative arrangements of a burgeoning sexual intimacy or liaison. These are thoughts I want to conflate, to discuss the intimacy and attachment, woven of spatiality, flowing in and



between the built and animate environment. Therefore for the purpose of this paper 'shacked' or 'getting shacked' is a heuristic device employed for an inquiry into imaginary and material geographies, enmeshed with the imaginative and material architectures which people inhabit in the more-than-human world. This matrix of relations and interactions becomes evident in the production of a 'vernacular ecology' or 'poetic geography', specific to the practice of surfing and the coast (Whatmore et al. 2003, p. 1; de Certeau 1984, p. 105). It draws upon the construct of home and home-place as a fluid assemblage, in which a sense of belonging may manifest or from which the sentience of place can be imbued.

This paper responds to Deborah Bird Rose's (2004) 'Invitation to the Eco-humanities' as a poetics to multiply ecological readings of place; to research and theorise human encounter with more-than-human complexity. I am interested in the space, place and everyday life of surfing and beach culture, as a site for the eco-humanities and eco-cultural studies, questioning notions of belonging and home, from critical and 'place-sensitive' perspectives (Mathews 2005, Offord 2003). This concerns creative knowledge production, working with memory, imagination and narrative to instantiate transformative pedagogical conversations with purchase in the academic and wider public sphere. The central argument underlying this paper, against the assumptions of human superiority and domination, recognises and calls for human participation in living systems becoming more attendant to more-than-human complexity. Therefore, day to day practices which engage (even inadvertently) in a relational ethics and a relational ontology, make possible moves towards a meaningful dialogue with the more-than-human world (Whatmore 2002; Macnaghten 2003).

This opens possibilities for an 'eco-politics' deriving from a close analysis of the vicissitudes of belonging, the contested spaces of everyday life and the performance of care and creativity in an alternative teleology of emplaced encounters and returns (Conley 1997 ; Mathews 2005). It involves a quest for a complex of ecological sensibilities which nurture diverse ways of knowing in the context of everyday practices, to promote rapprochements within and between people, living organisms, the environment and the relationships upon



which they depend. It focuses not on a formerly achieved or futuristic state but rather on the dynamism of co-evolutions and co-fabrications that are open-ended and on-going in encounter, recognising these as valid processes and states on their own.

Calling these waves home

Know what? You can take your Bali Trips, you can take your Mentawis charters, you can take your European sojourns, you can take your J-Bay missions, you can take your North Shore heroics, you can take your Pacific Island-hopping, and for a few glorious months you can stick em where the sun don't shine, 'cos all you need is right here right now. ASL's Ryan Kenny knows, he's been up and down both coasts of Oz throughout the whole crackin' season. HOME. There's no bloody place like it. This ASL movie's a reminder just how lucky we are to call these waves home.

(Australian Surfing Life 2007)

This take-the-piss ocker challenge acts in a humorous way to reinscribe a familiar Aussie machismo, evident in the easy recourse to now familiar strains of strine when spoken and heard—particularly in the tag-line 'HOME: There's no bloody place like it' (Australian Surfing Life 2007). While I think Australian surf culture needs to be challenged within critical conversations around race, sex and gender issues (Evers 2004), it is the telling reminder of 'just how lucky we are to call these waves home' upon which I want to focus. At this point in the blurb, I think the tone changes and the guard drops slightly. However, the underlying confidence remains in the assertion of calling these waves home in a collective register, involving the interpellation of a surfing-subject whose assumed profile I will not bother recounting here.

There are several implications pertinent to this paper that I want to draw attention to in passing. Firstly, there is a vulnerability evident in the term 'lucky', which serves as a



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reminder of a culturally conditioned collective amnesia and, conversely, as a reminder of the necessity for renewed efforts for reconciliation between Aboriginal Australians and Non-Aboriginal Australians. Secondly, there is a creative possibility for theorising and researching protean relations between home and home-place that brings diverse ways of knowing into dialogue. Thirdly, drawing attention to the creative cultural work signified in the term 'call', recognises the richness of performative relations enunciating and layering the imaginary and material geographies and architectures of coastal beach culture (de Certeau 1984). Finally, 'to call these waves home' is suggestive of an interaction, as Thoreau (1975, p. 444) says, of 'the thread of whose history is interwoven with its own', where living organisms come into recursive relations which Rose (2004) says 'entails a mutual causality: organism and environment modify each other'. This calls for a more sophisticated understanding, richer vocabulary and language of belonging, based upon care and creativity which makes connections with the more-than-human world, as opposed to the inclusion and exclusion of strictly human associations and attachments.

Calling these waves home, therefore, does necessitate a critical analysis which would not seek, however, to demolish such claims, but perhaps, to continue with an architectural metaphor, renovate them and open them to a wider sphere of influence. Cultural Researcher Emily Potter was interviewed recently in relation to the anthology she co-edited, *Fresh Water: New Perspectives on Water*. I want to use Potter's off-the-cuff response to one of the questions, to bring tension to some of the assumptions inherent in the notion of being at home in the waves. The interviewer prompts Potter with the question, 'What is your fondest memory of water?' (Scott 2007). The question is of particular interest in relation to my research concerns. Potter comments,

I think that would be of the seashore along the beaches of Adelaide, where I grew up. As much as I loved the breaking waves and the smell of the ocean, I was awed by its vastness, and had such a strong feeling – which I still have—that we don't belong there. I think it's important for humans to



accept that there are some environments where we are just not designed to go. We should respect our vulnerabilities and the limits of our environmental belonging. (Potter, cited in Scott 2007)

Gaston Bachelard (1969) discusses the potency of such formative experiences and memories, in *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language and the Cosmos*. He writes of the creative force embedded in lived experience, the impression made on the memory and released in the reliving of the experience as reverie. I am not personally convinced by the emphatic disavowal of oceanic mystique in relation to belonging, (of course Emily Potter has a right to her own opinion) and while this might seem to contradict any claims for becoming at 'home in the waves', I prefer instead to draw attention to the ambiguity, in-and-between, both Bachelard and Potter claim this introduces. The vastness I appreciate evokes a gamut of feelings, contrasted for me personally with the intricacies of the coast and sea, as if, after Thoreau (1975, p. 563), more-than-human complexity could only generate and 'support but one order of understanding'. It is not my purpose here to drift into a discussion of the existential or semantic difficulties some of these thoughts raise, such as our design for specific environments (or to what extent they were intended to rise) but to allow the sense of ambiguity inherent in these contrasting positions about belonging, home and by extension homeplace, to remain in play.

The vulnerabilities and limits to environmental belonging are worthwhile considerations, as an antidote for too confident and ill-considered assertions. In defence of Potter, Kate Rigby (2007pers. comm.) reads this through the lens of colonial impulses and the problematic of what constitutes human limits in the environment. The contested complicity of contemporary Non-Aboriginal Australians in the colonisation and degradation of Indigenous Australia consequently identifies and necessitates both focused attention and an ethical engagement. I might add, in contradistinction to a convenient elision of culpability in much Nationalistic



discourse both towards and about Aboriginal Australians and the ecology of the land and sea, the imagined rupture between the past and the present.

However, I would also argue that placed in the context of notions about the more-than-human world, there is a relational ontology enacted through emplaced connections between living organisms both on the land and sea, that validates meaningful contacts and articulates them with the new ecology. It is important to emphasise how these vulnerabilities and limits require a mutuality of relations between living organisms and the environment, as recognition of shared fates and futures. Consequently I have sympathy with Potter's concerns, but what I do thoroughly agree with Potter (cited in Scott 2007) about, surfaces later in the interview, where she says 'we do need to change our imaginative relationship with water for a sustainable future in this country'. For me this requires more broadly a relationship to more-than-human complexity and what this implies for homeplace.

The scale of my home-place

The next morning, eight o'clock in the morning 24th,
1962

I attempted to picture precisely the scale of my homeplace:

low buildings squashed or stretched beneath the swallowing sky.

(Robertson, 'Utopia' 2004, p. 31-32)

If you were to attempt to picture precisely the scale of your homeplace, where would you start? To what co-ordinates would you refer? How would you get your bearings? Would you refer to time, the seasons, geography, architecture, place, mobility, relationships, everyday practices, occupation, childhood, adolescence or contemporary contexts, the real, imagined or hoped for? What magical combinations of these would you attribute to homeplace? Robertson's (2004) poetic imagination throws up some delightful attempts, as these random quotes from her poem 'Utopia' indicates. For her



Women from a flat windswept settlement called Utopia focus
on the intricate life that exists there. (p. 22)
the shelter of houses groans (p. 32)
girls chat in trees about the mystical value of happiness (p. 33)
clouds are really beginning to exist for me (p. 27)
A style creeps up the hills, it is not true but it is made of local materials (p. 29)

The scale of homeplace, after pause for thought, is impoverished if strictly taken in a geometric sense or even an economic one, but takes on a richer significance in terms that are polymorphous, ambiguous and fluid, in both imaginative and material forms. Homeplace is more than the sum of all trajectories or the accumulation of all experiences. Homeplace is more than a place to grow up or a place to grow old. It is more than a place of your own, your family and friends. Homeplace offers a synergy of forces, elements and interactions to which one becomes accustomed and adapted, even in the inevitability of change, both gradual and irruptive. Homeplace offers a shared ontology predicated on the impetus of care and creativity, not of the belonging of ownership or even stewardship but a relational ontology to the more-than-human complexity of a sentient place.

How does one begin to describe the complex processes of 'mutual causality' where one senses becoming adapted to an environment and the environment itself adaptive in an accommodating way, that is taken as scant evidence of a reciprocity of action and interaction between actors ontologically connected. In the Hawaiian tradition, not unlike Aboriginal ontology, 'Kumulipo' is a cosmogonic genealogy, a story/chant which provides metaphors for familial relationships with the islands in the homeplace of the ocean. As University of Hawaii Professor Carlos Andrade (cited in Medeiros 2004, p. 66) explains,



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The islands are our elder siblings and we humans are the youngest in the family that binds together natural phenomena, all sentient beings and those that dwell in the realm that some call supernatural.

For those in Western cultural traditions, displaced by colonisation and implicated as the colonisers of settler cultures, and for people from a whole range of disparate and hybrid cultural backgrounds, coming into relationship with homeplace is therefore fraught with all sorts of challenges. As I have already indicated, coming into relationship with homeplace involves and can often be facilitated by everyday practices, which in turn become the performance of care and creativity in regard to a specific place. I would argue the reciprocation of such care and creativity by the sentience of place draws people into its nurture, and consequently a synergy with more-than-creative processes ensues, including a general sense of well-being.

Two days off the plane, I am finally home ... The kids fall to digging and damming and sculpting. They wet the knees of their trousers. They sniff back the gunk of their head colds and go quiet with concentration over moats and walls while I stand there in the water with my feet going numb and my mind drifting in a kind of fugue state that only comes to me here ... Call it jet lag, cabin fever, but I am almost in tears. There is nowhere else I'd rather be, nothing else I would prefer doing. I am at the beach looking west with the continent behind me as the sun tracks down to the sea. I have my bearings. (Winton, cited in Beilhartz & Hogan 2007, p. 6)

The impressive precision and scale of Tim Winton's homeplace description is expansive in so many respects, particularly in the clarity with which he locates himself. However I am particularly drawn to this, as an amplification of the intimacy of his sense of belonging, nurtured in everyday practice and synchronised with the intricacy of more-than-human complexity. The value of this is twofold: firstly the vitality of his expression evokes the affect of a multi-sensual experience, and secondly, Winton has managed to write something emblematic of what many experience in varied ways but find ineffable.



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How and where to live?

What good is living if nobody ever enchants the world? How and where to live if there is no enchanted place to live in the middle of these destructions. (Serres 1997, p. 160)

The imaginative and the material are implicated in each other in ways which deserve attention and articulation. Enchanting worlds implicitly involves being enchanted in ways that are visceral and corporeal. The illumined relationship this suggests involves embodied encounters within the dynamism of what I have been calling more-than-human complexity. Such experience is common but often misunderstood, discarded, poorly replicated or put down to mere chance; consigned to childhood, naïve musing or strange coincidence.

Once in his life a man [sic]... ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it.

(Momaday, cited in Stone & Barlow 2005, p. 96)

I cannot put a specific time, date or event, when the impetus of what Momaday's (in Stone & Barlow 2005) call describes took a hold of me, but I do ascribe to its logic; not just to remember but to dwell in both senses, and therefore to make preparations for the sustained reverie of writing a place-sensitive account of everyday life (Bachelard 1969, 1994). Having stumbled upon these thoughtful concerns, I recognise them. They give voice to forces that otherwise compelled me from a more-than-human perspective (Whatmore 2002). This includes the presence of non-human inhabitants with whose lives people become entangled in the mutuality of wandering paths and shared haunts, and the possibility of shacking-up together. I speak and write from the premise that attention to place has so much to imbue would-be inhabitants, with an affirmation of a tenuous grip on



life and preparations for death. The reminders and the recollections are therefore suggestive of ways to both live and die. The stories lives tell and the narratives they follow, the spaces they embody, are critical to the condition of everyday life. Such contemplation therefore can be conceptualised as a culturally creative act that seeks to understand, nurture and sustain the auto-choreographies of living in mutuality.

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