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The sea in our bodies: writing in/with/from the intertidal zone

Abstract:

Rachel Carson, in *The Sea Around Us*, wrote that we carry the sea in our bodies (1951). Our bodily engagements with the sea can engender a sense of oneness; literature about the sea, and about surfing, often reflects this. Yet, even when we are in the sea, we might struggle to see beyond ourselves: the sun gets in our eyes; our image is reflected on the surface of the water; in the case of surfers, we only have eyes for the next wave. As Kanaka Hawaiian scholar Karin Amimoto Ingersoll, herself a surfer, notes: ‘Despite our perceived identities as organic beings, surfers are neither innocent nor benign voyagers, and our experiences and our practices often escape our intentions and philosophies’ (2016, p. 4). Embracing a materially-immersed subjectivity that is both embodied and porous, which Stacy Alaimo calls *trans-corporeality*, my essay seeks to emulate the sea’s energy in content and form, riding a wave of embodied creative-critical writing-thinking. I will contemplate the interrelationships between surfing, writing and practice-led research and in doing so demonstrate how surfing has influenced both my writing and thinking, while exploring how trans-corporeality offers an ethical and methodological basis for writing in/with/from the intertidal zone.

Biographical note:

Melissa Fagan is an Australian writer, surfer and PhD scholar within the Aberdeen-Curtin Alliance program. Her short fiction and nonfiction have won awards and been widely published in Australian literary journals. Her memoir *What Will Be Worn* (Transit Lounge, 2018) explores themes of emotional and material inheritance across five generations of women. Her PhD project, a collection of critical travel essays, seeks to position surfing and other forms of immersion in the intertidal zone as ways of seeing, experiencing, and bearing witness to coastal environments and cultures.

Keywords: creative writing, surfing, sea, body, trans-corporeality, intertidal zone

In mid-February 2020, on a night that oozed with a torpid, subtropical heat, I woke and walked to the bathroom to pee. Afterwards, standing at the sink, I opened the bathroom cabinet and prised an earbud out from the container where it sat, sardined with a hundred others just like it. Not quite awake, I rammed the earbud a little more forcefully than I had intended into my left ear, pushing the seawater that had pooled in the auditory canal of my outer ear deeper, towards my eardrum. I heard a popping sound. Then nothing. My ear was blocked, my hearing gone.

I had surfed that day – twice – at Kirra, the best day of wave-riding I had had in months. By the afternoon the wind had come up, and it was low tide, so the waves dredged along the sandbank, making them harder to catch. But in the morning, I had ridden glassy two-foot gliders, chasing the rising tide all the way to shore, staying on the wave for as long as I could, feeling the energy beneath me, adjusting my feet and weight when I needed to, crouching into a squat when I felt the power wane. Cyclone Uesi had been and gone, so the water was clearer and cleaner than it had been in days. The sand was soft underfoot, but the banks were in decent shape – much better than they had been in the weeks after Cyclone Oma. A pod of about six or seven dolphins sat just beyond the take-off zone, ten or so metres out. We all looked on in wonder.

I was surrounded, I soon realised, by beginners, who as often as not left waves or paddled for them and didn't make them, so after my first wave, I was able to paddle back out and catch another two, equally as long, in quick succession. I detected a subtle shift in the vibe then, well maybe not a shift, more a repositioning of myself, and my status in the line-up – surfers on my inside not even attempting to drop in, instead leaving waves for me. This is how it happens, I thought, and said to Ben later, how you become a surfer, how you make a claim to the space: surfing well, or at least better than those around you, has an exponential effect to the waves that you get to catch.

Later, I briefly and half-heartedly searched for pippies with Lili, my partner's eight-year-old daughter, showing her how to dig into the sand with your feet, the way my grandmother had showed me. We wandered together along the shoreline, noticing how the exposed rocks were covered not only in limpets but newly-shooting kelp – glistening green. The day before, I had come in from the surf with a piece of it in my hair. Lili and I decided that the larger rocks were sea cities with rooftop rock pools, the shells and limpets that clung to the walls the city's citizens. I kept looking up and out at the surf, at the waves rolling, always, in towards the shore. It was a party wave kind of day: I watched wave after wave ridden by three or four people at a time, which made me think of *he'e nalu*, traditional Hawaiian wave sliding, or one of the old photographs lining the walls in the arcade behind the Coolangatta Sands Hotel, taken at Kirra in the 1960s, before the shortboard revolution.

I had been back in the country for twelve days, surfing once or twice a day most days and feeling feeling feeling – warm air, warm water, scalding sunlight, the drench of humidity, sweat and salt on my skin. Making the most of being here, of everything, because in three-and-a-half weeks, or so I thought, I would be flying back to Scotland.

My ear stayed blocked for another day and night. It didn't stop me from surfing. I had surfed in Scotland a handful of times, or attempted to; but while cold water surfing has a certain appeal – especially the part where you thaw out afterwards drinking drams of whisky by a fire – the reality of surfing in the North Sea is decidedly less romantic. The surf is fickle, the winds are often onshore, and during winter, water temperatures drop to a heart-stopping five or six degrees Celsius. By comparison, summer water temperatures on the Gold Coast hover around twenty-six degrees. I was keen to surf as much as I could, despite my blocked ear.

On the second morning, still partially deaf, I rang my local surgery and made an appointment to see the first available doctor. Dr Wilde was tall, balding, in his fifties and, I was told, knew a lot about ears. After a brief chat he ushered me into another room that housed a machine that sucks water and wax from the ears – I had seen it advertised on an A-frame sign on my way in. He was unable to get the tube into my left ear, the one that was blocked. It was too inflamed, he said, and he was worried about agitating a blood blister that had formed there, so he wrote out a script for eardrops containing both a steroid and an antibiotic, told me to fill it at the pharmacy next door and come back.

Doctor Wilde administered the eardrops via a tiny sponge, which he slid into my left ear with tweezers, the end butting up against my ear drum, then applied the drops through the sponge. I was to leave the sponge in my ear and put the drops in myself; the sponge would fall out when the inflammation subsided, or else be removed with tweezers. My partner and I were heading away the next day, on a five-day surf trip. For some reason I asked Dr Wilde whether I could still surf, even though I knew he would advise me not to, even though I knew I would object. At the very least, he said, I should clog up my ears with Blu-tac. It was another week or so before my hearing returned, and it took another session with the suction machine, and another two courses of eardrops, before my ear recovered. I was left with tinnitus, which has never quite abated, though I am less aware of it than at first. I try to wear earplugs when I surf, especially when there's a cold wind or the water temperature dips below twenty degrees; but I often forget, sometimes on purpose. I don't hear as well with them in, and as a result feel less present, less connected to my surroundings.

I have a condition known as surfers' ear, which I developed long before I was a surfer. So named because it is believed to be caused by repeated immersion in cold water, surfers' ear, or external auditory exostosis, is a progressive condition in which new bone grows on top of existing bones in the ear canal. The exact cause remains unclear; however, it is thought that exposure to cold water and wind may induce vasodilation, with the bone growth a response to an increase in vascular tension. In all likelihood I developed surfers' ear as a result of a childhood spent swimming – competitively, in our backyard pool and on holidays at the beach – sometimes for hours at a time, and often at night. It was diagnosed during a routine hearing exam fourteen years ago. I had told Dr Wilde that I had surfers' ear, but either he didn't hear

me or he hadn't listened, because when he "discovered" it during his examination, he sounded surprised.

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This essay is the evolution of a paper that I presented at the 25th Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) Conference in November 2020. Its central concerns arise from my current creative practice: specifically *Intertidal*, a creative nonfiction work-in-progress. My research methodology is embodied and experiential; it involves a literal, corporeal immersion in the intertidal zone – primarily as a surfer – as a way of being in, and bearing witness to, coastal environments and cultures. I have always loved the sea, have always been drawn to it in a way that is as powerful as it is inexplicable. Like Philip Hoare, 'I worry that something will stop me from reaching it, or that one day it won't be there... It is the only place I feel at home, because it is so far away from home' (2018, p. 13).

However, like many Australian women of my generation, I did not surf when I was younger, so despite a long-held desire to surf, I am relatively new to surfing. As such, there is an autoethnographic component to my research: in addition to unpacking the many reasons I did not surf (despite wanting to and being physically able to) I want to understand, and document, how my sense of self, my sense of place, and ultimately my sense of self-in-place, shifts as a result of being a surfer. The ideas that are threaded through this essay are drawn from, supplement, and feed back into that practice in a process that is akin to a spiral or tornado – as per Nicola Boyd's depiction, via Hofstadter's strange loop theory, which occurs 'whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started' (2009, p. 10). Although in my case, it might be more apt to liken the process to a tidal flow, or wave, of creative-critical writing-thinking.

It was this process that led to my starting this essay with a long anecdote based on notes from the writer's journal, or more accurately surfer's journal, which forms the core of my creative practice. The journal is an attempt to capture, in real time – or as close to real time as is possible, given that I cannot surf and write simultaneously – the experience of surfing and the observations that arise from that experience. When I set out to write the paper that preceded this essay, it did not occur to me to turn to my journal for inspiration, nor that writing about my surfers' ear would allow me to contemplate, and demonstrate, how Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality has been absorbed into my thinking, and how it might offer an ethical and methodological basis for writing in/with/from the intertidal zone. I came to that realisation gradually, and a little elliptically; after multiple false starts and digressions, eventually finding my scholarly voice in the fictocritical mode, a mode that Mueke and King insist evokes Jameson's comment 'that theory can't exist without telling little narrative stories' (Flavell, 2009, p. 9), and Gibbs has described as a 'meta-discourse in which strategies of the telling are part of the point of the tale' (1997, para. 3).

Of course, it is more accurate to say I *re*-found my voice, in that I rediscovered it. Sometimes (often/always), when tackling the more scholarly aspects of my research I am so overcome by

fear that I forget what it means to be a life writer. I forget that my way into scholarship is, always, through life, that fictocriticism is itself a form of life writing, a pluralistic, experimental mode that a writer can adopt, and adapt, according to their own style and preoccupations. Fictocriticism is, after all, a natural mode for a creative writer, as Watkins and Krauth observe, in that ‘it offers a means to employ and play with the skill set of the writer, and that employment and play is ironically directed at understanding the act of creativity itself’ (2016, p. 12). And I would be ashamed to admit all of this except that in this case, this forgetting and remembering is ultimately productive, uncovering new channels that I was not aware of at the outset, new ways to narrate, describe and perform the ways in which we carry the sea in our bodies.

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The phrase ‘the sea in our bodies’, which inspired the title for this essay, comes from Rachel Carson’s *The Sea Around Us*, published in 1951:

When they went ashore the animals that took up a land life carried with them a part of the sea in their bodies, a heritage which they passed on to their children and which even today links each land animal with its origin in the ancient sea. Fish, amphibian, and reptile, warm blooded bird and mammal – each of us carries in our veins a salty stream in which the elements sodium, potassium, and calcium are combined in almost the same proportions as in sea water. (p. 13)

Prior to writing *Silent Spring*, the work for which she is best known, Carson wrote three books about the sea. Growing up in western Pennsylvania, far from the Atlantic Ocean, the sea had been an imaginary place. ‘I used to imagine what it would look like, and what the surf sounded like’ (Lepore, 2018, para. 5). As an undergraduate, at the Pennsylvania College for Women, Carson initially majored in English, switching to biology after joining her biology professor for a summer research project at Cape Cod – her first experience of the ocean. She went on to complete a Masters and PhD in zoology at Johns Hopkins and wrote her first book *Under the Sea-Wind* while working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Baltimore. A substantial part of *The Sea Around Us*, her second book, was originally published in the *New Yorker* in 1951 as a three-part series. Titled ‘A Profile of the Sea’, it was the magazine’s first ever profile of a non-human subject. The book went on to win the National Book Award in 1952. One chapter was also awarded a science writing prize from the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Strange then, that in the ongoing stoush within the international science and anthropological communities as to the true “nature” of human origins, Carson’s work is more or less overlooked. It is British marine zoologist Professor Alister Hardy who is most often credited as being the original proponent of the aquatic ape hypothesis – the theory that humans evolved not (or not only) from tree-living primates, but from genetic descendants who lived, at least in part, in the sea. In an article published in the *New Scientist* in March 1960, he wrote of his hypothesis that a branch of apes had been forced by competition to begin hunting for food in shallow coastal waters, and eventually venturing further out to sea ‘diving for shell fish,

prising out worms, burrowing crabs and bivalves from the sands at the bottom of shallow seas' (p. 642). He contended that this explained the 'exceptional ability of Man [sic] to swim', our subcutaneous layer of fat, and the relatively hair-free, streamlined human body, which has the 'beauty of a well-designed boat'. He posited that humans learned to walk upright in water, then 'as his balance improved, he found he became better equipped for standing up on the shore when he came out'. The hypothesis, which was later expanded upon by writer and feminist Elaine Morgan, among others, has been widely discredited by anthropologists.

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For those of us who spend any time in the sea, or prefer swimming to walking or running, the aquatic ape hypothesis possesses a feeling of truth. Our bodily engagements with the sea can engender a sense of oneness; literature about the sea, and about surfing, often reflects this. Writing for *The Conversation*, feminist cultural studies researcher Dr Rebecca Olive, who is also a surfer and ocean swimmer, suggests that immersive activities like wild swimming and surfing have the potential to be beneficial both for our personal wellbeing, and the environment (2020). She notes that the therapeutic properties of spending time in so-called blue spaces is now widely accepted within the humanities and scientific disciplines, and that the benefits are accretive; regular immersion can enhance mental health and build resilience.

However, surfing as a pursuit can be supremely selfish. Even when we are in the sea, we might struggle to see beyond ourselves: the sun gets in our eyes; our image is reflected on the surface of the water; in the case of surfers, we only have eyes for the next wave. Even though modern surfing is in some ways wildly heterogenous, just as all contemporary cultures are, its evolution and development has occurred within colonial structures that are also deeply patriarchal, severed from the activity's traditional Polynesian roots. In Australia, the surf culture of the 1980s and 90s in particular was often openly misogynistic, racist and homophobic. In an interview with Tim Baker, for his book *High Surf*, Australian author and surfer Tim Winton said of the period: 'The dominant mode was aggressive, misogynistic, localised, greedy. Surfers became jocks, morons who trashed beaches and beat the crap out of each other. For anyone whose idea of surfing was different there was nowhere to go' (2010, p. 38). Things have evolved since then, and surfing is much more inclusive than it was, but it still has some way to go. In the lead-up to Easter 2020, when COVID-19 prevention measures limited beach access to those who lived there, surfer and writer Nick Carroll voiced fears that violent 1970s-style localism, 'always a lot darker than many older Australian surfers like to pretend', might rear its head (2020, para. 16). In an Aotearoa/New Zealand context, Wheaton et al. also reported increased tensions during this period, some surfers claiming 'greater "rights" – even "needs" – to access their "local" beaches than more casual water users' (2021, p. 14).

As Kanaka Hawaiian scholar Karin Amimoto Ingersoll, herself a surfer, notes in *Waves of Knowing*: 'Despite our perceived identities as organic beings, surfers are neither innocent nor benign voyagers, and our experiences and our practices often escape our intentions and philosophies' (2016, p. 4). I was drawn to Ingersoll's work early in my research and had hoped that her philosophy, what she calls a 'seascape epistemology', might provide a framework for

my own thinking – which it did, although not in the way I had expected. Ingersoll's epistemology is, in essence, a decolonising project, designed to assist Kanaka Hawaiians to reclaim traditional ways of knowing. In the introduction to the inaugural edition of the journal *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, & Society*, Tuck and Yang warn against the 'too-easy adoption of the decolonizing [sic] discourse' (2012, p. 3). In their view this is simply another form of settler appropriation, making a metaphor of decolonisation, and recentring whiteness in the process (p. 3). As a settler Australian with Anglo-Celtic heritage, I was wary of co-opting an epistemology that I empathised with but did not fully understand.

My relationship with Ingersoll's work remains unsettled and unreconciled – as it should. Yet, her ideas have undoubtedly influenced my own, and seem also to be in confluence with Carson's. In the Epilogue to *Waves of Knowing*, Ingersoll states that humanity is found in the sea, leading her to ponder whether the seascape is also human. 'It is at least as complex and alive, and it affects our souls, creating states of wonder that we call being "human"'. She concludes that the sea 'is also a body that can only be intuited through the poetic' (p. 183).

And so I waited, and waded through the theory, eventually finding my way to Stacy Alaimo, who has called for a materially-immersed subjectivity, which she calls *trans-corporeality*, 'a new materialist and posthumanist sense of the human as substantially and perpetually interconnected with the flows of substances and the agencies of environments'. As Alaimo writes, 'to dramatize oneself in place in this way is to critique the rational, disembodied Western subject's presumption of mastery or at least objectivity that is, supposedly, granted by detachment from the world' (2016, p. 5).

I was first exposed to new materialist philosophies – and indeed the term new materialism – at an embodied methodologies workshop in the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences at Griffith University in August 2019. My fellow participants, and all the presenters, were working within various social science disciplines: sociology, media studies, geography, gender studies. The approach to the day was creative and – of course – embodied. In addition to scholarly presentations, we played soccer, and paired off in order to trace the outlines of our bodies onto butcher's paper, so that we might "map" our life stories through our bodies. I wrote pages of notes, including a quote from Erin Manning: 'There is never a body as such: what we know are edgings and contourings, forces and intensities: a body is its movement' (2014, p. 163). I kept hearing the names Karen Barad and Donna Haraway. I wasn't quite sure how I could map these philosophies onto the discipline of creative writing, but I left the workshop feeling I would like to try.

Ultimately it was Stacy Alaimo's work in her books *Bodily Natures* and *Exposed* that seemed to offer a set of ideas that were not only accessible and engaging, but thematically relevant to my work. Professor of English at the University of Oregon, Alaimo's research and writing extends across the environmental humanities, ecocultural theory, American literature, science studies and new materialism, with a particular focus on blue ecologies. In the introduction to *Exposed*, Alaimo reveals that her conception of trans-corporeality was influenced by both Haraway's 'feminist epistemology' (2016, p. 7) and Barad's 'ethico- onto- epistem- ology' (p. 8), the work of artists and activists, and her own embodied experiences. In a 2020 interview

published in *Ecozon@*, the European Journal of Literature, Culture and the Environment, Alaimo was asked about the history of trans-corporeality. She traced it back to her participation in a mercury testing project with Greenpeace. She was asked to cut off a piece of her hair and send it to them in an envelope. The piece of hair was returned to her with a number indicating how much mercury was in her body.

Thinking through that, and then how that mercury got there – was it through air pollution, or eating tuna fish when I was a child, what did that mean – was an unsettling experience that made me think of my own body/self as unraveled across space and time. Greenpeace sent back a report with information about the health effects of mercury and ways to minimize exposure through everyday practices, as well as various political actions, and it was that sense of how science and your body and the political organization are all interconnected across vast distances that led to my conception of *transcorporeality*. (p. 139)

For Alaimo, new materialisms maintain that ‘the substance of what was once called “nature” acts, interacts, and even intra-acts within, through, and around human bodies and practices’ (2016, p. 1). Contemplating Mary Oliver’s poem *Wild Geese*, Alaimo writes:

If we begin with our first mode of inhabiting, that of inhabiting our own bodies and then experience those bodies as permeable, as open to surrounding human and nonhuman bodies, we can conceive of a corporeal ethics: an ethics that is always “in place” and never a disembodied or free-floating Cartesian affair. This ethics-in-place counters the unsustainable romance of wilderness fantasies. (p. 30)

Employing a trans-corporeal subject position in order to write about place can therefore be seen as an attempt to avoid excessive narcissism, or for a writer, excessive aestheticism. It is this, an ethics that is always “in place”, that I am reaching for.

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While attempting to establish whether there was a scientific basis for Carson’s assertion that we carry the sea in our bodies, I was led, initially, to a paper published in *Nature* in 2017 about the discovery of *Saccorhytus*, a 535 million-year-old fossil, in Shaanxi province in China. Belonging to a group of animals called deuterostomes, which include species as diverse as starfish, sea urchins and vertebrates such as humans, the *Saccorhytus* has been described as a tiny animal with a large mouth and no anus, that moved by wriggling, and lived among grains of sand in the sea bed.

As I understand it, the discovery of the *Saccorhytus* does not support or reject the aquatic ape hypothesis – neither the scientific paper, nor the news reports about it, mention a connection. The hypothesis remains contentious. In 2016, following the airing of a two-part radio series *The Waterside Ape* hosted by David Attenborough, a co-authored article in *The Conversation* dismissed the theory as being both too extravagant and too simple (Roberts and Maslin, para. 13–15). I find the authors’ certainty disconcerting. As Stacy Alaimo writes, ‘The

Anthropocene is no time for transcendent, definitive mappings, transparent knowledge systems, or confident epistemologies' (2016, p. 3).

One of Attenborough's interviewees, Ear, Nose and Throat specialist Peter Rhys-Evans, subsequently authored a book, *The Waterside Ape: An Alternative Account of Human Evolution*, published in 2019. In Chapter 11, 'Surfer's Ear', Rhys-Evans proposes that the bony overgrowths that had evolved in order to protect the eardrum during swimming and diving, that were present in other semi-aquatic mammals but not those that were primarily terrestrial, if identified in early hominin skulls, would 'provide the vital fossil evidence of man's aquatic past' (p. 113). To support his claim, he cites a recent study on nearly two dozen Neanderthal skulls: almost half had exostoses. According to research published in the *Australian Family Physician* between 38% and 80% of surfers have surfers' ear (2016, p. 644).

Which is hardly surprising. As a surfer, I sometimes spend four hours a day immersed, at least partially, in the sea. Although surfers can be selfish and hypocritical, and surfing as an activity is embedded within, and often propagates, exclusionary cultures, I have also experienced surfing as a way of being both in my body, and in the world. For Lisahunter, bodily engagement with the sea enables 'elemental chronospatial assemblages' (2015, p. 49) which 'raise the question of something that undoes subject positions, where entry into the sublime hints at how our humanness has created blind spots in our perceptions that structure our world' (p. 49). Framing surfing in this way, invokes another of Alaimo's terms, *dwelling in the dissolve*: 'a dangerous pleasure, a paradoxical ecodeleic expansion and dissolution of the human, an aesthetic incitement to extend and connect with vulnerable creaturely life and with the inhuman, unfathomable expanses of the seas' (2016, p. 168).

Writers also dwell in the dissolve. In her chapter on play in *The Thinking Woman*, Julienne van Loon calls imaginative writing an 'inherently playful practice ... dynamic, lively and transformative' (2019, p. 41). For me, surfing and writing have become symbiotic practices. As van Loon writes, 'In and through the doing, my practice moves – paradoxically – both towards and away from knowledge' (p. 41). But surfing and writing have their inherent challenges, and the relationship between them can be fraught. Within the pages of my journal, I am attempting to capture, as much as is possible, what Virginia Woolf called 'moments of being'. I aim to write about my thoughts, feelings and experiences as close to real time as I can. However, surfing, in a way, undoes this. I cannot write and surf simultaneously, or readily take time out during a surfing session to take notes. And surfing is exhausting; after hours in the water, under a blazing sun, paddling against and with the force of the waves, and sometimes being tossed about underwater, my brain turns to mush. Afterwards, all I want to do is lie around. But as Bacon, has observed, via Tomlinson (cited in Colyar 2009):

... the writing process involves 'holding' ideas. In generating text as written in a journal I am 'holding' ideas. Later, I may access connected ideas and polish them, associate them with learning, with forming, with finding answers to research questions. (p.426)

Woolf contends that it is only through putting experience into words that it becomes whole, envisioning what she tentatively calls a philosophy: ‘that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art ... we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself’ (1976, p. 72). While she freely admits that the concept is entirely intuitive in its basis, she claims that it proves ‘one’s life is not confined to one’s body and what one says and does’ (p. 73), that we are living at all times in relation to what is outside ourselves: places, people, things, and other texts. What we witness, and how we feel about the experiences we have, inform both who we are, and what we create.

In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger writes: ‘It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain the world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled’ (1972, p. 7). Surfing is its own way of seeing and experiencing the environment – or at least has the potential to be. But this doesn’t mean that one needs to surf, or scuba, or snorkel or indeed swim in order to embody a trans-corporeal ethos. Rachel Carson couldn’t swim. Yet her writing about the sea demonstrates the way in which trans-corporeality might help us to understand what would otherwise seem fathomless. While it may not be possible to dwell in the dissolve to the point where the “I” disappears, neither is it desirable. Trans-corporeality embraces the idea of a subjectivity that is both embodied and porous, advancing life writing’s move away from the discrete human subject, while also recognising its limits. As Vanessa Berry wrote in the most recent issue of the journal *Life Writing*: ‘A posthuman understanding of vitality and intertwined agency can destabilise the anthropocentrism of life writing, but not completely erase it’ (2020, p. 594).

Oceans divide us and connect us; as spaces they have long been sites of dispute, but as shared resources they foster cooperation. Embracing a fluid or trans-corporeal subjectivity seems like an appropriate position for writing about human interactions with the hydrosphere, especially now. We carry the sea in our bodies. Or as Astrida Neimanis more recently put it, we are bodies of water: ‘For us humans, the flow and flush of waters sustain our own bodies, but also connect them to other bodies, to other worlds beyond our human selves’ (2017, p. 2).

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