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Title:
Within the Liminal: The Derwent Estuary and Southeast Coast

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Summary:
Liminal space, that space of between, of transition, offers a way to approach the complexity of the Derwent Estuary of Tasmania. This article overlaps memory, history, reference to academic studies, and reflection on material artifacts. It tracks changes across time, with a focus on whales and whaling, and consideration of the wider ecosystem. Final emphasis is given to personal interaction and creation in processing loss.

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Ann-Marie Ezzy is a PhD Candidate in History at the University of Tasmania. She is fascinated by detritus left behind and how it prompts questions about interactions across a whole variety of spaces. This article is related to her PhD research, undertaken with the support of the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

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WITHIN THE LIMINAL:
THE DERWENT ESTUARY AND SOUTHEAST COAST

The Indian and Pacific Oceans clash through the Bass Strait, separating the island of Tasmania from the underside of the Australian mainland. Tasmania's variety of coastlines vary from the west, wild and open to the 'roaring forties' that surge unchecked across the ocean, to the more protected east coast, though this still faces out to open sea. To the south, a barely interrupted 2,500 kilometres away, is Antarctica. Along Tasmania's far southeast coast the edges are interrupted and pulled into isle and cove, isthmus and peninsula, with a large estuary between the land masses. This river mouth is fed by the Derwent River, running down from the central highlands into a deep tidal harbour, one of the deepest in the Southern Hemisphere, and it is here Tasmania's capital city, Hobart, is sited. Extended up and down the river, and along the coastal areas, suburbs and townships interconnect and stretch out, supporting ports and industry.

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My most visceral memories are of the many beaches that line the edges of the estuary. Lying on a scrap of towel, sun etching itself into skin and cloth, my front cool against the surface underneath. Sometimes there is a little wind to brush against me, and sound takes on a muted quality, as if there is a muffled barrier between me and the voices around. Only the water whooshing rhythmically adds cadence to a time that stretches and disappears. My fingers flex against the grains of sand, break against the oh so thin crust to the gritty softness under, to comb and pull and let trickle through. I open my eyes and an irregularity in the small sand ledge in front intrigues me. I gently excavate, smoothness unearthed as grains fall, sift, escape away. A single long bone, a bird bone, I think. Further in another emerges and more, and the fragility of a skull, elongated and perfect in its moulded transparency, gifts itself into my hand. I wonder how long they

have lain engulfed in sand, deep down from the grasses above, the water finally eating away the protective rim. Years, decades, maybe a century?

Image taken by author.

The area was inhabited by aboriginal people for thousands of years before European arrival two centuries ago. The palawa kani name for the site around Hobart is nipaluna, the river timtumili minanya, with other names along the estuary of kiwa, trumanyyapayna, and further south, kaparati *(1).* This is a reconstructed language, words reclaimed by Aboriginal Tasmanians whose lands were taken, and culture decimated by colonial impact. They are a people with deep connection to country, whose nomadic tracks along beaches were marked by fragile archives of shell middens.

Tasmania's coastlines of rocks and sand can be considered liminal space, caught between land and water. Arnold van Gennep first discussed the liminal as threshold rites, that mark separation from one world to the next *(2)*. Bjørn Thomassen describes liminality as moments and places of transition, 'betwixt and between', and argues that in the liminal one can engage with passage, experience, and emotion *(3)*. This space can also be where peoples and species cross boundaries to interact. The Derwent estuary itself may be considered liminal, connected to both the edge of land and the shelf of deeper ocean. My mother took us as children to play in the safe waters of Conningham, about a half hour drive out of Hobart. I remember the pleasure of swimming, and the anxiety when drifting out over the darkness of seaweed. These bays of the Derwent offer sanctuary, with their quiet waters, and though the sea around Tasmania carries the chill of Antarctica, these waters were maybe a degree or so more welcoming. This was a place my mother spent her holidays as a child. For her, it remained a place she felt peace and escaped to, and it is a place of returning for my family,

where each year we mark her death and life. These bays were also once a place for whales.

Illustration courtesy of author.

They were called bay whales by the early nineteenth century hunters who came to Tasmania, then named Van Diemen's Land. The southern right whales have variable narratives written about them, through history, scientific research, journalism, and wildlife documentaries. These slow migratory behemoths can weigh up to 80 tonnes and measure out to 17.5 metres *(4)*. There are two genetically distinct species in Australian waters, one to the southwest, and a much smaller population in the southeast *(5)*. They feed in the far southern cold waters and come to warmer areas between May and October to raise their young and breed, and the bays of Tasmania were part of their nursery area. Study shows the high-fidelity attachment of females to specific nursery sites, and this attachment is

handed down matrilineally *(6)*. This philopatry guaranteed the Derwent Estuary echoed with the sound of females returning to calve every three years.

An early colonial diary spoke of the river being full of whales and hearing them from Hobart Town *(7)*. In the nineteenth century Tasmania was a penal colony, and it was isolated far outside normal shipping routes. Ships would come from England and empty themselves of colonists and convicts and imperial representatives, but there was little to fill the hulls for the return journey in these first years, except for whale products. Whaling was an industry that boomed in the port of Hobart, becoming a stopover for not just Australian, but American, French, and British whalers too, who travelled for months searching for deep-sea whales *(8)*. In contrast to the animals far out in the ocean, the bay whales were easy targets. By the 1830s, many southeast Tasmanian coves were occupied by temporary whaling shore bases with small boats, waiting for the influx of bay whales in May *(9)*. These whales are gentle creatures, only raised to anger when their offspring are threatened. The men utilised this knowledge to spear the calf first to bring the mother to its aid *(10)*. There was great demand for the delicate mouth bones for corsets and umbrellas, the solid wax for candles, blubber for oil, and the intestinal ambergris prized for perfumes *(11)*. It was a messy, smelly business, cooking the blubber in large cauldrons, leaving the beach littered with skeletons. Then in the early 1840s, the watchers on the beach waited in vain as weeks passed before even one whale returned *(12)*.

This narrative is a complex interaction of scientific inquiry, history, and emotions. Research has considered whales within complex biological networks, and measured the impact of human interaction on them, direct and secondary, and whilst some investigation positions whales as primary focus, studies tend to be anthropocentric. Historically whales were a resource to be exploited, but after decades of a moratorium on whaling, we shiver at this monstrous past. The story is complicated by emotional response. The narrative details the whales' capacity for anger, protection, and love, and this prompts consideration of the human emotional response to whales. Humans tend to anthropomorphise these relatable mammals, and would consider the response of a mother to the distress of her calf through the lens of personal experience of human parental love. This formed connection makes it easy to empathise with their story, but connections are far more difficult with biota which do not elicit such emotional tugs.

Take this narrative of southern right whales and consider it from the perspective where humans are not in the dominant position in a perceived hierarchy. This would then be meetings within a web of connectedness of species. It could be considered and interpreted as an interface within liminal space, marked by emotion (on their terms, rather than an understanding framed by and through

human worlds), ritual and change. And importantly a space where species are not considered as *Other*. Val Plumwood discusses the need to re-orient our thinking, where worth is not valued in terms of sameness to the dominant culture, and this can be considered across the wider ecosystem whales are a part of. She writes "[t]he logic of Othering suggests that it is not the primitiveness and unworthiness of the Other but our own species' arrogance that is the main barrier to forming ethical and responsive relationships with earth others" *(13)*.

The ecosystem of the Derwent estuary and extended cove areas of eastern Tasmania are in a state of flux, and marked by human impact. The Derwent River has historic heavy metal contamination from industry and was once one of the most polluted rivers in the world. The last few decades have seen remedial work improve this dramatically, and much contaminated sediment is now sandwiched under new deposits, however studies have demonstrated continuing contamination in biota, and there is the possibility of movement of contamination due to the influence of recent salmon aquaculture and excess nutrients *(14)*. Close to Hobart, the introduced sea star, *Asterias amurensis*, has had an unprecedented impact on the native benthic organisms through explosive population growth *(15)*. This is currently being controlled by physical removal of the sea stars at specific times. In slightly deeper waters, there were once giant kelp forests, magnificent plants which grow up to sixty metres in height and are home to biodiverse communities, help store carbon, and, in John Ryan's words, 'act as biological engines' *(16)*. The recent rise in marine temperatures have led to a 95% loss of kelp, and an explosion of dark purple sea urchins which have dramatically overgrazed and produced barrens *(17)*. Studies show the increasing shift south of warmer waters and the related movement of nearly one hundred species *(18)*. In the area close to Triabunna, a little further up the southeast coast from Hobart, the EDPC Act Protected Matters Report lists multiple endangered, threatened and vulnerable communities, including birds, fish, frogs, mammals and plants *(19)*. Theses coastal areas are being affected by controversial Atlantic salmon farms , with intended large new leases. Recent research in kelp seeding has intended outcomes of planting in this same area for commercial harvest. This story reflects only a fraction of the influence of humanity within this liminal space but is indicative of the continuing conflicted relationship between commercial interests and conservation measures. Some interaction aligns with Plumwood's approach and consideration of worth of biotas, but much is not. All these futures, however, are contingent on the transformations of climate change.

It can be argued that the world is currently in liminal time. The biosphere is not the same as it was a few years ago, and we seem to be holding our breath to see what the future holds. The historic expectations of unlimited resources, which characterised many industrial societies, have collapsed. Thomassen argues

liminality is about transitional moments, and how humans respond to change, and this "involves a peculiar kind of unsettling situation in which nothing really matters, in which hierarchies and standing norms disappear… Nothing really matters and yet, deeply paradoxically, meaning often becomes over-determined" *(20)*. This is the time where transformation can occur, and will, whether we wish it to or not. The question is can humans reconsider how to relate to the complex messiness of this world.

Changes to, and losses within, the marine environment are inevitable, and loss can be paralysing at the scale of the macro. A way through the incapacitation of loss, to acknowledge the grief at what has passed and is passing, is to think about the micro, the intimate and personal. Artist Chris Jordan believes grief is an expression of love, and in his film, *Albatross,* he addresses the effect of plastics on the albatross population on a remote island. Within the multiple carcasses he finds, there is a particular individual death he struggles with emotionally, and he uses ritual to manage that response by creating a mandala, a circle, around the body *(21)*. It is with this personal ritual that he finds a way to contemplate how he feels about the larger population. Thinking in terms of cycles offers an alternative to the concept of linear progression: circles and cycles incorporate not just death but also birth and renewal. Through small personal rites, emotions can be given a space when words are not enough, a liminal pause to allow breath before looking forward.

Illustration courtesy of author.

The beaches I wander track the flow of change. I have at times gathered bones from these places of erosion and erasure. Bones echo with narrative possibilities, from the small spare beauty of a bird's whitened remains to the magnitude of a whale's skeleton. Their physical nature carries a loveliness, but they are also poignant, sharp reminders of loss and death. Sometime past, I sat at home and felt the weightless fragility against my fingers of a small vertebra, some undulations gentled by time, some shapes still sharp with purpose, and I placed them, watched them, as their shadows moved and elongated against the page. These bones I arranged into circles, some interlocking, sometimes one inside another, but open to allow entry into that internal, liminal space, an enactment of my own rituals. And I drew them, to recognize their wordless story, and bound them into a book. Vegetation was combined with recycled paper from past drawings to make more pages in-between, an interconnected overlapping of ritual, memory, history. This detritus from the past, re-imagined, offers alternative narratives to dominant dialogues. Intimate, personal makings helped me acknowledge the loss along our coast, but also, through cycles of renewal, identify the importance of hope. And it is hope I feel when I think of the critically endangered southeast right whales, suspected population of maybe three hundred individuals, who have been seen returning to Tasmanian coastal areas, into coves where they have not been seen in over a century.

Illustration courtesy of author.

Footnotes

1. pulingina to lutruwita (Tasmanian) Place Names Map, Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, http://tacinc.com.au/pk/GIS/index.html#10/-43.3946/147.7077, accessed 22.02.2022.

2. Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (University of Chicago Press, 1960), Non-fiction, p.21.

3. Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern : Living through the in-Between* (Ashgate, 2014), p.7.

4. Social-Ecological Systems Meta-Analysis Database, "Gabmp (Commonwealth Waters) Southern Right Whale," (2016), https://web.archive.org/web/20160306033223/https://sesmad.dartmouth.edu/components/190.

5. Ibid.

6. Emma L. Carroll et al., "Paternity Assignment and Demographic Closure in the New Zealand Southern Right Whale," *Molecular Ecology* 21, no. 16 (2012): p.3961-70.

7. Rev. Robert Knopwood, "The Diary of the Rev. Robert Knopwood, 1805-1808," (Royal Society Collection: Papers & Proceedings of the Royal Society of Tasmania, 1805-1808), 2nd and 28th July 1805.

8. Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance : How Distance Shaped Australia's History*, Rev. ed. Macmillan, (1982), p.110.

9. Ibid., p.111.

10. Kylli Firth, *"Bound for South Australia" : 19th Century Van Diemen's Land Whaling Ships and Entrepreneurs*, Flinders University Maritime Archaeology Monograph Series: No.9. Department of Archaeology, Flinders University, (2006), p.3.

11. Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance : How Distance Shaped Australia's History*, p.99.

12. Ibid., p.113.

13. Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture : The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, Environmental Philosophies Series, Routledge, (2002), p.167.

14. Catriona Macleod and Christine Coughanowr, "Heavy Metal Pollution in the Derwent Estuary: History, Science and Management," *Regional Studies in Marine Science* 32 (2019), p.9. : L. D. Einoder, C. K. MacLeod, and C. Coughanowr, *Metal and Isotope Analysis of Bird Feathers in a Contaminated Estuary Reveals Bioaccumulation, Biomagnification, and Potential Toxic Effects* (Springer-Verlag, 2018), p.96-7.

15. S. D. Ling et al., *Hotspots of Exotic Free-Spawning Sex: Man-Made Environment Facilitates Success of an Invasive Seastar* (2012), p.734.

16. John Charles Ryan, "Kelp," in *Living with the Anthropocene*, ed. Cameron Muir, Kirsten Wehner, and Jenny Newell (New South Wales: NewSouth Publishing, 2020), p.187.

17. Ibid., p.188.

18. Macleod and Coughanowr, "Heavy Metal Pollution in the Derwent Estuary: History, Science and Management," p.10.

19. "Epbc Act Protected Matters Report," ed. Department of the Environment, Canberra (2016).

20. Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern : Living through the in-Between*, p.1.

21. Stef Craps and Ida Marie Olsen, "Grief as a Doorway to Love: An Interview with Chris Jordan," *American Imago: Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2020); Chris Jordan, *Albatross, (*2017).

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