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### Facing death on the Australian beach: examining fear and transcendence

#### Abstract

The Australian beach has often been considered in academic approaches as a place of binaries – focusing on either the mythic (Fiske, Hodge and Turner 1987) or the ordinary (Morris 1998). An edge to the Australian continent, the liminal space of the beach is one that has received some attention. Using Edward Soja's (1996) 'Thirdspace' concept allows the beach to challenge the space as a liminality and emerge as a more complex *beachspace*, both mythic and ordinary and more all at once. The Australian beach is a place of significant beauty, while simultaneously a place of risk and danger. Visitors to the space are immediately warned to only swim between the flags, and many beaches are patrolled for the majority of the day all throughout the year. Technology has been employed to identify risk despite the inherent unpredictability of the beach (such as shark sighting technology, weather predictions, and wave cameras), with an aim to provide a safe, everyday space available to all Australians to use. The potential risks of accidental death are high on the beach; however, many representations of death tend to include homicide or suicide. 'Facing death' is interested in examining how Australian writers of the beach portray death. Classic texts like Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* (1957) are discussed alongside more contemporary texts, including Fiona Capp's *Night Surfing* (1996), Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* (2001), and Romy Ash's *Floundering* (2012). These writers portray death as an inevitability or a continual threat. Films such as *Newcastle* (2008) represent accidental death in a tight knit local community; in comparison *Blackrock* (1997) deals with both murder and suicide. This paper illustrates how examining the beach as a more complex space by interrogating Australian writing on the subject allows for an interesting understanding of how death is represented on the Australian beach.

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## Introduction: the beach in Australia

Australia's beaches are known for their beautiful sand, gorgeous surf, and striking sun. Countless representations of the beach have perpetuated these images in both visual and written forms, and yet Australian national identity has long been associated with the iconic outback. Catriona Elder suggests, 'Representing bush life or country town as the centre of stories of Australia-ness is a long-standing habit' (2007: 312). Graeme Turner supports this concept by highlighting the ongoing opposition of country and city, noting many Australian texts present 'the country [as] preferred to the city as the authentic location for the distinctive Australian experience' (1993: 26). In national images, the outback or the rural centre has often been afforded a sense of majesty and mystery; perhaps because it is so sparsely populated. In comparison, the country's coastlines are densely populated – 2011 census data mapped by the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows clear clumping along the eastern coastline (2014).

Whereas the outback is so distant and therefore unfamiliar and somewhat alien to audiences, the beach is often a site of common experience. The beach acts as a lure for Australians to spend their holiday time in 'unspoilt' areas of the coast outside of their metropolitan lives (White 2005: 87). As such, the Australian beach plays an integral role in developing Australian culture. This article examines how Australian writers portray death on the Australian beach. An important reality of beach experiences is the beach's ability to invoke feelings of fear and uncertainty, as well as a constant threat of death. Utilising Edward Soja's 'thirding' technique, which he uses to define 'Thirdspaces' (1996), 'Facing death' will engage with the idea of a *beachspace* and investigate how the complexities of the beach landscape are captured by writers engaging with both fear and transcendence simultaneously.

## Definitions

In order to provide context for the textual analysis that will follow, it is important to firstly establish how certain necessary terms will be used. This section will outline how this article will engage with concepts of the Australian Gothic, transcendence, rejuvenation, and liminality.

Writing about landscape in Australia regularly intersects with concepts of the Gothic. The Australian Gothic has identifiable traits for both literature and film, as noted by a number of researchers. Gerry Turcotte clearly notes the role the landscape plays in creating a (colonial) Gothic aesthetic, in the way that it seemed to embody Freud's notion of the uncanny by being so distinct from the familiarity of Europe: 'Nature, it seemed to many, was out of kilter' (1998: 10). This Gothic sensibility, he argues, has imbued the national literature since, and it is certainly well-accepted that classic Australian films (the most notable being Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock*) also capture this alienating landscape. And yet, it is not only the landscape that so powerfully embodies notions of the Gothic. For instance, film scholar Jonathon Rayner suggests Australian Gothic cinema showcases an 'exploration of iniquitous authority and its repeated depiction of brutal and uncompromising masculinity' (2011: 92), and a 'scathing scrutiny of the establishment ... and their insistence on a return of repressed history and memory' (2011: 95). Overwhelmingly, however, the Australian Gothic can

be linked to the natural landscape and its 'horrors'. However, in Gothic discussions, the beach landscape is usually associated with the urban or suburban, as it is for Scott and Biron (2010: 312), who suggest the coastal fringe works in direct opposition to the menacing outback in *Wolf Creek* (McLean 2005).

Also of importance to this discussion of the beach and representations of death is the concept of transcendence. While linked to notions of the sublime, in this instance transcendence refers to an awareness of a possible higher plane of existence. This becomes apparent in some of the cultural texts analysed further, and notably this is not always framed within religious connotations. Beaches and shorelines have been considered places of liminality. As Sean Redmond states, 'In cinema, death at the beach and its shoreline may not always be the end but a new start beyond the life of the frame' (2013: 716). Redmond uses international film examples (such as *The 400 Blows*) to identify how the beach is by its own nature transformative: 'the beach questions existence but often finds in the death that takes place there something new, unstable and limitless – a life beyond death' (2013: 716). It is in this context that the ideas of transcendence and rebirth are used in this article – *not* specifically within religious contexts.

There is a history of the beach – or perhaps more notably, the seaside – as having a healing effect. According to Alain Corbin, the use of bathing in seawater as a medical therapy has existed from as early as the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century (1994: 69). There certainly was an English tradition of visiting the seaside for recuperation and rejuvenation and this was transported to Australian shores during the colonial period. However, as Leone Huntsman notes, the period of colonisation coincided with a shifting in English sensibilities to 'a moralistic disapproval of the mixing of the sexes and the sight of the naked human body' (2001: 32). Although this meant the beach never became a mainstream medical treatment as in England, it was certainly still accepted that a period of leisure at the beach was beneficial for personal health.

The early 2000s saw an increase in academic writing about the beach, with Leone Huntsman and Douglas Booth both questioning why it had appeared to not be significant enough for serious discussion. And yet, since then, the beach has lost currency in academic studies with few significant works being published. Prior to this, discussions revolved around ideas of the beach as two sides of a binary: as part of an Australian myth (Fiske, Hodge, and Turner 1987) or as an element of everyday Australian life (Morris 1998). This is perhaps understandable; after all, the beach is defined by its geography – it functions as a boundary, a coastline, a space where the land meets the sea. As such, the concept of liminality regularly features in beach discussions. It is possible to see the beach functioning as an 'in-between' space that is at once land and sea, the space of transition between the two. This, as Handyside suggests, can be reminiscent of 'the (fluid) line between the living and the dead' (2013: 665). She – like others before her – sees the beach as a place of binaries: 'a play of movement and stillness, presence and absence, life and death' (2013: 665). However, these binaries still need to be challenged, as they can be limiting ways of considering the complexities of this iconic Australian site.

A method of questioning these binaries is using Edward Soja's idea of 'Thirdspace' (1996). Soja suggests the process of 'thirthing' allows for the creation of Thirdspaces. This article suggests that the beach in Australia can be presented as a type of Thirdspace to create a *beachspace*.

### **The Australian *beachspace*: thirthing as a technique**

Soja introduced Thirdspace as a method for understanding space as something more complex than a dichotomy. There is some precedence for this: as mentioned, the beach as a space internationally is often considered a liminal space, as a border or in-between space that bridges the ocean and the land. Hosking, Hosking, Pannell and Bierbaum identify the beach as a littoral zone, 'a place of encounter, where new waves must reconcile with earlier waves, where things can flow in two directions at once' (2009: vii). This begins to provide some of the complexity necessary when examining this space. Yet there are still limitations to considering the beach as a liminal or littoral space, namely that it fluctuates between two distinct binaries or directions. In comparison, the technique of thirthing allows for an alternative interpretation of space that engages with a less rigid dichotomy.

To somewhat simplify Soja's theory, Thirdspace is a term that suggests a way of discussing space using a triangulated concept that challenges binaries. The Thirdspace is a space that is at once *both* the 'real' and 'imagined', or as Soja suggests, the 'real-and-imagined', where the Firstspace is the 'real', and the Secondspace is the 'imagined'. Founded in Soja's reading of Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (trans. 1991) and his conceptual triad (spatial practice; representations of space; and representational spaces), the technique of thirthing is one that has allowed Soja to articulate complexity in spatial understanding that pushes beyond the triads of Lefebvre (1991) and Foucault (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986). It is a technique that, considering the inherent complexity of the Australian beach as a national icon and site of everyday activity, is therefore useful to employ as a way of investigating representations of space.

It is worth noting that Soja's work is primarily grounded in urban locations: his major case study highlighted Los Angeles as a key example. And yet, the theory of Thirdspace is something that can be adapted and furthered when applied to the Australian beach. The reason for this is both the urbanisation of many Australian beaches (see, for instance, the popular beaches of Bondi Beach or the Gold Coast, which are built up locations with shops, cafes, and restaurants close to the water's edge), as well as the iconic nature of the landscape as part of the country's national identity. Perhaps most challenging, however, is this very concept of 'the Australian beach', when in fact the country is made up of a significant number of individual beaches with unique names, identities, and functions. The nature of this tension between the monolithic 'Australian beach' and the individual named beach locations around the continent creates a complex beach landscape that benefits from the use of the term *beachspace*. The *beachspace* – a term I have posited earlier (see Ellison and Hawkes 2016) – is a space that allows for an intertextual and multilayered reading of meaning in the space. Like the Thirdspace, the term *beachspace* is an expression that allows for discussion of and challenges to

both singular beach locations and the more homogenous concept of ‘the beach’ in Australia.

Of particular focus for this paper is the way that Australian authors capture the idea of the *beachspace* in their writing, capturing complexities in their beach representations that incorporate fear, danger, and death.

### Experiences of death in narrative texts

Considering the complexities of concepts that circle representations of beach landscapes in Australia, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is little consistency in the way death is portrayed in what can be classed as beach narratives. ‘Facing death’ examines a selection of texts that use death or the fear of death as a narrative feature in order to investigate how Australian authors are representing the beach landscape. Whether or not the characters die is not necessarily significant, and in fact few major characters in these texts do – but the fear of death permeates the narratives. While not an exhaustive study, these stories include variety in characters and geographic locations. Their publication dates range from 1957 through to 2012, which allows for some conclusions about how Australian writers have engaged with death on the beach over more than a half century. The six cultural texts examined here are: Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* (1957); Tim Winton’s *Dirt Music* (2001); Dan Castle’s feature film *Newcastle* (2008); the feature film *Blackrock* (dir. Steve Vidler 1997) based on Nick Enright’s play<sup>1</sup>; Fiona Capp’s *Night Surfing* (1993); and Romy Ash’s debut novel *Floundering* (2012). While some of the texts do not feature or deal with death directly, all have a fear or underlying tension around death that permeates through the narrative.

Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach* is an interesting speculative fiction narrative that positions the beach as a minimal component of the book until the final closing scene. The oldest of the texts examined in this article, *On the Beach* remains an enduring tale of impending doom and the challenge of maintaining normality in the face of certain death. The novel, which was adapted into film in 1959, describes a world in the aftermath of nuclear war, in which Melbourne is one of the last places on earth. The remaining population is waiting for an enormous radiation cloud, generated after significant numbers of nuclear weapons are deployed, to eventually destroy all life. The narrative is a haunting one, including chilling scenes. One particular scene sees a young family choosing to suicide in the face of their inevitable death, but only after killing their infant child. Throughout the novel, the natural landscape maintains its beauty, even as it is transformed into a menacing place of death as the very air becomes poisonous. In fact, one lengthy scene follows Dwight, an American navy officer, when he revisits what remains of the devastated United States. Ironically, Dwight must rely on the sanctuary of his submarine to stay alive despite the manmade (yet unseen) destruction of the natural landscape on the surface. Ultimately, the Australian beach is where Moira – perhaps the most iconic of the young protagonists thanks to what appears to be her carefree, fatalistic attitude – takes her own life. In the final scenes of the narrative she first farewells her almost-beau, Dwight (stationed in his submarine offshore) and, as radiation poisoning begins to overwhelm her, chooses to die quickly by swallowing poisonous pills. Interestingly, the beach in this narrative is the space that allows Moira

to visually connect with Dwight in her final moments; the nature of this landscape allowing for some comfort in the horror of her final moments. Moira is not afraid of death – instead she is searching for the closure she cannot get in life. Moira's story is so poignant because it describes the loss of possibility – she is young, unmarried, without children, and without a career to drive her. The frivolity that sustained her begins to feel meaningless. However, as she faces the ocean and prepares for her final moments, she appears somewhat peaceful. In this instance, the beach is liminal – representing the final breaths of Moira and in fact all of humanity. The end of the novel signals an end of the narrative and the inevitable end of humanity as it once was; victims of their own destruction. The constant movement of the beach is a symbol of reckoning; underscoring humanity's reliance on the natural landscape.

In comparison to Moira's composure to the end, even in the face of radiation poisoning, Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* introduces a far more fragmented character in Luther Fox. A novel set along Winton's familiar Western Australian coastline, *Dirt Music*'s narrative oscillates between Georgie Jutland, wife of local successful businessman, and 'shamateur' Luther Fox. After an affair with Georgie, Luther is physically threatened by Georgie's husband, Jim Buckridge, forcing him north and into an isolated coastal island territory off the north-west coastline. Luther's journey is a dangerous and isolated one that sees him balancing on a knife's edge of health and sanity. Alone except for wildlife, he suffers from sunburn, heatstroke, blisters, and the threat of sharks. And yet, the beach brings a brief moment of joy (rather than fear) when Luther engages with the sharks in the bay – feeding them and attempting to stroke them in the water. There is a sense of instability to this joy – after all, sharks are animals to be feared rather than petted – but this is representative of Luther's dehumanising in the isolated wilderness. In this instance, Luther's mental state is questionable, and as such his perception of risk may be skewed. His behaviour shows an embracing of the wildness of his environment, with the ultimate result his loss of awareness as to his ongoing 'otherness' to the natural environment.

This is indicative of the inherent fear that can emerge on beach landscapes, and part of what makes the *beachspace* so complex – they are sites both idyllic and dangerous. It is worth considering the difference between actual and perceived risk on Australian beaches. There are two components to this: the high perception of unreasonable fears and the low perception of actual dangers. The *National Coastal Safety Report 2016* (Surf Live Saving Australia 2016b: 16) notes the discrepancies between real and perceived risks: most people are unable to identify rips correctly yet do not consider beach swimming to be particularly hazardous despite the danger they pose. In comparison, sharks are considered a significant threat, especially in the media representation that follows an attack. The beach can become a place of fear following a shark attack and a shark sighting will close a beach temporarily. Yet, shark attacks (especially fatal ones) are statistically very rare. Helen Tiffin argues:

Given that the actual danger to humans from shark attack is miniscule (on average nine fatalities per year worldwide), it is clear that it is the shark's *symbolic* freight, rather than its real depredations on humans, which most strongly influences popular imagery, (re)contributing in turn to the (re)formation of popular perceptions. (2009: 77, original emphasis)

The shark is a symbol of fear, made recognisable by stories that take advantage of the ‘malign, inscrutable force’ of sharks (Tiffin 2009: 77). Sharks are an example of a high-perceived risk of death on the beach, but with a very low actual risk. Of course, in the case of *Dirt Music*, Luther is lax with his personal safety and instead puts himself intentionally in the way of possible harm. For Luther, the isolated sanctuary of the beach is simultaneously dangerous because of these inherent natural risks (sharks, blistering sunburn, exposure, and so on) and a safe haven because of its distance from Jim Buckridge.

The narrative concludes with Georgie and her husband searching for Luther when their own plane crashes on the remote beach. Luther, despite his previous acceptance of death, rescues Georgie from the inside of the plane; but in his weakened state he soon falls unconscious. The novel ends with no sign of whether Luther survives; regardless, his decision to return to Georgie – and to thus actively reject death – was made. While the pristine beach landscape brought many dangers, it also allowed Luther to re-examine his complex relationship with life and humanity. Ultimately, he chose to live; however, it is unclear what in this instance living actually means. Winton’s work is often considered within the context of the sublime, and he regularly uses water imagery in his work. Bill Ashcroft suggests Winton uses water as a means of pushing the body to its physical limits and as a result, captures what he calls ‘that moment of rapture at the edge of death’ (2014: 37). This is apparent in many of Winton’s works (including his memoirs), and in *Dirt Music*, Luther seems to view the ocean as transcendent or sublime – a place where it is possible to skirt the edges of life in a physically removed location from his old life. Although clearly grounded in terms of liminality, it is possible to argue that Winton’s work represents a *beachspace* – to Luther, the beach sanctuary is a site blurred between and almost beyond life or death; where meaning is regained through the coalescing of Georgie’s return and the battle for her life and his potential death.

Of course, not all beaches in Australia are as isolated or wild as the one portrayed in *Dirt Music*. After all, for many Australians the primary function of the beach is as a site of pleasure and relaxation. As Hodge and Mishra suggest, ‘For contemporary Australians, tourism and practices of leisure provide many opportunities to (re)create a national identity, compressed into week-ends and the four weeks of annual leave’ (1991: 144). The experience of the beach becomes a way of generating a sense of national identity. However, despite its beauty, the beach upon arrival is immediately positioned as a potentially dangerous location. Signs (see Fig. 1) are placed in strategic spots near beach entrances all around the country. These signs immediately establish the risks related to swimming in the surf, although these are somewhat mitigated by the deployment of Surf Lifesaving and Lifeguard services across the country. Yet the Surf Lifesaving Association (2016a) showcases significant statistics that highlight many beach deaths continue to occur; although many take place outside of the flagged or patrolled areas, the risk of beachgoers encountering some sort of hazard is quite high. After all, the sheer size of the Australian coastline means many areas are unpatrolled and quite isolated. Risks in the ocean are not the only dangers however; loss of life can occur on the sand as well as in the water. Consider the infamous case of the Beaumont

children who disappeared in 1966 from Glenelg beach in Adelaide and were never seen again (*The Canberra Times* 1966).



Fig. 1: Welcome to Kings Beach (photo provided by author).

And yet, there is a fascination with death in many beach narratives. As with Winton's work above, it is possible to consider the role of the physical body in these stories and the idea of pushing the body to its limits. Douglas Booth suggests this type of connection in surfing culture, noting the rise of 'soul surfing' (2001: 113) culture in the 1960s. He is quick to note this does not include a clear connection with organised religions, but instead suggests there is an awareness in surfing cultures of the power of the natural landscape and the possibility of transcendence when in this space. It is certainly possible to see surfing engaging with ideas of transcendence and death in narrative texts, such as *Newcastle* and *Blackrock*. These texts both deal with the unexpected death of young people, but do so in quite different ways. Dan Castle's film, *Newcastle*, is a slice of life story about a group of young surfers in the eponymous city of Newcastle, on the eastern coast of New South Wales. Protagonist Jesse is a promising young surfer with noticeable anger problems, and the narrative centres on him and his friends as they attempt to escape the routine of their everyday life on a trip away during the summer. His brother, Vince, is a previous surfing champion but now works to support his young family. In the film, Newcastle is a claustrophobic beach city, filled with people who have not managed to 'escape'. There is a familiarity to the characters in the story – the downtrodden mother, the young boy wanting more from his life, the gay youth – and overall, the narrative is not especially compelling. The narrative crux comes when Jesse and his friends go on a camping holiday to a pristine, isolated area of the coastline as a way to escape the monotony of their everyday existence. The trip ends in disaster – Jesse's older brother Vince and his friends arrive unexpectedly, and in a brief burst of competitive surfing, Vince is killed after being struck by a surfboard. Although the incident is accidental it is clearly positioned as being provoked by Vince's rage and competitiveness.

This is a stark contrast to Vidler's *Blackrock* (1997), the film loosely based on a true story – the gruesome gang-rape and murder of a teenage girl in a coastal town<sup>2</sup>. Although wanting to maintain distance from the real case of Leigh Leigh's death, *Blackrock* was filmed in the real locations of her life and death in Newcastle. Focusing on the film version (which does have some narrative changes from the play script), the crime happens early in the narrative, with the thrust of the story about the uncomfortable

aftermath in the town as the police attempt to identify the killer from amongst the main protagonist, Jared, and his close friends. Ricko, the murderer, suicides as he is being chased by the police – he has just confessed to the crime and chooses to kill himself rather than face prison. The film portrays the male teenage surfing community of the town as sexist, ignorant, and ultimately violent. While Ricko performs the final killing blow, many of the young men are either explicitly or implicitly involved as rapists or bystanders who never spoke up. Despite the horrific circumstances of the crime, Ricko is still afforded a ‘proper’ burial at sea – a surfer’s funeral. The film appears to suggest that the ocean is non-judgemental and provides him some form of closure regardless of his clearly ambiguous morals. Felicity Holland and Jane O’Sullivan suggest a number of reasons why *Blackrock* is a problematic narrative – including the near complete omission of Tracy, the victim; instead, the story focusing on ‘the exploration of them [the male offenders] as “victims” of class, masculinity, and mateship’ (1999: para 12). Most worrying, Holland and O’Sullivan believe, is the tendency of the film to show the incident as normal behaviour that has gone too far:

What remains of great concern is the sense that everything on the beach was going along swimmingly until, quite unexpectedly, there was a slip-up, and someone got hurt. When events are viewed in such a light, the violent crime becomes extraordinary, while the various social and misogynist dimensions of this brand of mateship receive the seal of complacency afforded the everyday. (1999: para 12)

Where the narrative can be a damning tale of the danger of masculine bravado, peer pressure, and victim-blaming, the film certainly and perhaps unwittingly allows the men of the narrative – with the one exception of Ricko – with a pass and an opportunity to return to their ordinary lives and start again. It certainly is clear that Tracy and Ricko’s deaths are treated quite differently, although both take place on nearly the same stretch of sand. Both are violent, one homicide and one suicide, and while one forms a catalyst for the narrative, it is Ricko’s death that forms part of an uncomfortable and ultimately unsatisfying conclusion.

Both *Newcastle* and *Blackrock* feature funeral scenes for surfing characters, and both scenes take place in the water, with friends on surfboards. An ocean burial is considered appropriate for these characters – both young, troubled (but flawed) men – because their lives are intrinsically tied to the water and the waves. Rather than an organised religion, the surfing community in these films believe in the power of the ocean and the spiritual experience and comfort it provides. These scenes become an example of what Lyn McCredden’s calls the ‘contemporary sacred’ (2010: x) emerging in popular culture. McCredden believes that the sacred can (and perhaps must) be read into contemporary, modern texts – despite the postmodernist (or less ‘traditional’) notions of spirituality found within. McCredden sees this as removed from religion (xix-xx), something mirrored in Karen Klima’s discussion of Australian writing and death in which she notes ‘a persistent general perception of the Australian national character as being anti-religious’ (2016: 4). In these films, while the characters certainly are not grounded in religious conversations, they clearly question and challenge ideas of transcendence and what is sacred: Ricko and Vince’s surfboards are symbols of loss and grief in the funeral circles. In both *Blackrock* and *Newcastle*, death is portrayed as inevitable, a necessary narrative conclusion and also as a lesson for the troubled young men left in their wake

(Jared and Jesse, respectively). Ricko and Vince are both unlikeable characters and their deaths are implied as essential to atone for their sins. Yet, regardless of the complications of their deaths, the spiritual experience of the ocean funeral provides an opportunity for those left behind to feel a connection with something higher than themselves as they grieve their fallen friends.

It is worth noting that these two films share more just their onscreen locations and surfing themes: both are very masculine in tone and reinforce Australian myths of mateship and the Australian bloke as theorised in Russel Ward's influential (but now outdated) *The Australian Legend* (1958). Notably, female voices are minimal, if not completely silenced. Perhaps as a result of this lack of narrative depth, both films also struggle to show complexity in the beach landscape. It could be argued that this is because of the visual medium of film that relies on performance to portray emotional nuance. Fear – of death, of imprisonment, of the unknown – in these characters tends to emerge as anger instead. While this speaks to tropes of masculine representation<sup>3</sup>, it also perhaps speaks to the limitations of their narratives and the 'coming-of-age' tropes they are mired in. *Blackrock*, for instance, was poorly received commercially and critically. Brien highlights its lack of international success and suggests: 'It seems that, without the poignant and powerful narrative support of Leigh's tragedy, the film was judged as shallow and clichéd' (2009: para 25).

It is not surprising that many stories of beach landscapes include surfing as a major component of the narrative. One that shares little with either *Newcastle* or *Blackrock* is Fiona Capp's novel *Night Surfing* (1996). From a similar era to *Blackrock*, the novel shares the type of small-town claustrophobia now somewhat familiar to Australian audiences, thanks to the portrayal of the beach landscape in this text as an extension of the suburbs. This is indicative of more contemporary representations of Australia, which saw an emergence of everyday, suburban stories. Elder argues that the suburban life in Australia can be somewhat contested: 'The suburbs have been vilified, lampooned, eulogised and idealised' (2007: 298). And beaches are not removed from that, as suburban beachside locations are regularly represented in cultural texts. In *Home and Away*, the television soap, the beach is 'a homely place filled with locals, in particular young people, who enjoy the freedom and ease of beach life' (Elder 2007: 303). However, more nuanced stories of suburban beach locations also exist – see, for instance, Gillian Armstrong's *High Tide* (from 1987), or the popular television show *SeaChange* (Andrew Knight and Deborah Cox 1998 – 2000). It is possible to consider that this type of suburban beach site is perhaps more effective as a *beachspace* with less focus on a monolithic, national iconography of the idyllic beach.

Unlike *High Tide* and *SeaChange*, *Night Surfing* strongly engages with the fear of death held by a number of the character ensemble. Capp's two main protagonists, Jake and Hannah, are both struggling with personal demons that are stripped away once in the water. Both seem to find surfing or swimming in the ocean to be a healing, therapeutic experience because of the necessary removal from the motions of everyday activity. However, the ocean becomes more ambiguous for the pair of them as the narrative progresses. Jake spends the novel planning to complete a night surf; however, he suffers a realisation of his own insignificance in the ocean. Night surfing is a hazardous practice, when the water becomes less knowable in the darkness. Jake and his friend

Anton have persisted despite the warnings of those around them, and Jake ultimately is punished for his arrogance in this final scene. His lack of understanding of the ocean, despite his confidence in his own knowledge and expertise as a surfer, catches him by surprise as he realises it is not something he can wield power over. It is a wild, untameable space and Capp expresses this in the final pages of the novel when Jake is separated from his friend, adrift and caught in the rip:

How could this have happened after all their careful plans? Months of talk and mapping the tide patterns, waiting for the right wind and swell. They had it down to the smallest detail. All day they'd worn dark glasses to keep their night vision sharp. The forecast hadn't predicted a gale, but there was more to it than the wind. There was something about the current that they hadn't struck before. What had happened to slack water, the lull between the tides? (Capp 1996: 210)

Jake's father, Marcus, is haunted by the nightmare of a tsunami throughout the novel in what appears to be ironic foresight. Marcus is a beachcomber by trade: he cleans the beach every day. After he discovers the body of a missing boy, he begins to suffer from a recurring dream in which a giant wave builds momentum: 'Like a deep inhalation before a thunderous sneeze, the water is sucked back from the Long Beach ... For a brief moment, the sea holds its breath. Then the water returns' (31). This vision continues throughout the novel, and the brute force of the ocean terrifies Marcus. He says, 'The wave is more than water. It carries a whole universe inside it' (155). The dream is explicitly presented as representative of his fears of losing his son just like he lost his wife (she died of cancer). The ocean is more than nature in this text: rather it has the power to transcend the earth in these instances – something more immense and beyond the scope of humanity. For Marcus, it represents something *more* than death: it is a vastness that he cannot hope to map; another aspect of his life that he has no control over. Ultimately, during Jake's dangerous and risky night surfing expedition, Marcus again witnesses the dream – but this time 'A tiny figure is paddling out to catch it' (206).

The beach in Capp's text is more sophisticated and more complex than the earlier examples discussed, an example of a successful *beachspace*. The beach here is both an ordinary part of Hannah's life, yet it also represents a mythic challenge for Jake to overcome by taking on the iconic event of the title: night surfing. Simultaneously, the beach for Marcus transcends his plane of understanding, becoming something both bigger than us, and a metaphor for his fear. By using the rotating point of views of the main characters, Capp has managed to represent a complex *beachspace*, one that is a combined, 'thirded' space of the mythic and ordinary.

There is a symmetry in Capp's work with Romy Ash's debut novel *Floundering*, published in 2012. While only using one narrative voice, Ash's choice to position her story through the eyes of a young boy creates an opportunity for an insightful and complex portrayal of a *beachspace* in the work. Tom and his older brother Jordy are two boys left almost to their own devices in *Floundering*. The novel opens with their mother picking them up from school one day, after years of living with their grandparents. Loretta appears incapable of providing appropriate care (she drinks, perhaps uses drugs), and she takes the boys to a beachside caravan park and refuses to

tell their grandparents where they are. Tom's perspective throughout the novel is frequently underlined with uncertainty and fear – he seems simultaneously afraid and in awe of the beach. This at times seems strongly intertwined with death. For instance, one scene involves Tom imagining walking behind a fisherman and getting caught on the line:

I wonder if I stand behind a fisherman when he's flicking the line behind him...if the hook could catch right into my face, through my cheek. I'd be too heavy to be flung like the lure is, into the sea. I'd just be caught on the beach. (Ash 2012: 100)

Other moments include Nev, their neighbour, who seems reluctant to help when Loretta vanishes to the local pub. Nev is initially very isolated, and is revealed to be a deeply flawed character – Tom witnesses him molesting Jordy in a critical scene in the novel. One scene showcases Nev's cruel streak – having just caught a puffer fish, Nev fills the still alive fish with cigarette smoke until it bursts: 'It makes a popping sound. A little bit of gut gets on my knee. Shiny and slimy. There are flappy bits like burst balloon around the fish. Smoke comes out of the holes. He laughs' (2012: 101-102). This ongoing, uncomfortable closeness to death resonates throughout the novel, and culminates in a scene in which Tom catches a shark that lives in the local billabong and immediately regrets it. He tries to drag it back into the ocean but with no luck: 'We fall into the water and Jordy pulls the shark in after us. Blood seeps from the shark's mouth. I wash the sand off its rough, grey skin ... I hug the shark to me. It doesn't move' (2012: 144). By this stage, Loretta has abandoned the boys once more, and Tom carries the dead carcass with him through the remainder of the novel – into the caravan and into Nev's ute when they leave the park, until Nev forces it out of the truck and the boys bury it.

*Floundering* is a chilling story that showcases the unsettling balancing point between life and death at the beach. In the narrative, the beach is a location for that complexity – a place of refuge, a place of isolation, and also a place of lost innocence, fear, and death. The boys ultimately end the narrative making a phone call to their grandparents, suggesting they are close to finding a path out of the wilderness Loretta has left them in. Like Capp's final scene in *Night Surfing*, there is an unsettling ambiguity that ends the narrative.

## Conclusion

The Australian beach – sometimes considered a place of rebirth – in these texts becomes representative of a journey into death. The connections to nature imply a transcendent capacity of the land that allows for some sort of acceptance despite the inherent sense of fear that death brings. Allowing for complexity of spirituality and transcendence brings nuance into the space, which encourages complexity beyond a focus on either rebirth and regeneration, or fear. This is perhaps indicative of the inherent risks of the beach landscape (many hazards face beachgoers, as noted by the Surf Life Saving Association – rips, drowning, bites or stings, and so on).

Although these concepts and portrayals of death are not unique to Australian beach stories, the setting of the beach and its ability to bridge the urban and the natural allows

for it to generate complexity in representations of death and impending death in a way that other landscapes, such as the outback, cannot. The inevitability of the knowledge of death, combined with this place of intrinsic fear and danger combines to create a tension that is not present in many other locations in Australia. In fact, the deceptive beauty and power of the *beachspace* heightens the fear, danger and death present in these narratives. The real dangers of this space assists in developing this as well. The beach allows some characters to emerge beyond a fear of death into an almost ‘more than death’ experience. Moira, in *On the Beach*, transitions into death willingly on the beach, as does Ricko in *Blackrock*. In comparison, the threat or fear of death is uncomfortably apparent in both Jake’s final moments in *Night Surfing* and Luther Fox’s in *Dirt Music*. Only Jesse, from *Newcastle*, ends his narrative with a more positive and less fearful experience of the ocean. Tellingly, *Floundering* ends with the boys presumably leaving their beachside terror behind. By examining these texts using a thirding technique it is possible to see authors that embrace this complexity (Capp, Winton, and Ash) create more complex interpretations of the beach landscape – a *beachspace* – and produce narratives that resonate more strongly.

## Endnotes

1. The story of *Blackrock* has evolved from Nick Enright’s early play, titled *Property of the Clan* (1992), a later feature-length script titled *Blackrock* (1995) and Enright’s screenplay for the feature film (titled *Blackrock*), released in 1997.
2. The complicated blurring of fact and fiction in the *Blackrock* narrative has been documented by Donna Lee Brien in her article ‘Urban shocks and local scandals: *Blackrock* and the problem of Australian true-crime fiction’ (1999). The real story of the rape and murder of Leigh Leigh somewhat informed Enright’s creative process, although the author maintained it to be fiction. As Brien notes, however, ‘the connection to reality was given new momentum... when the film was largely shot on location in the very places where Leigh had lived and died: Caves Beach, the Stockton ferry and Newcastle city’ (119).
3. See, for example, Margaret Henderson’s investigation of *Tracks* surfing magazine in 2001, and her feminist reading of the ‘hypermasculine’ publication.

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