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Rough and Tumblr: Blogging Newcastle

Abstract

This auto-ethnographic essay responds to the recent phenomenon of “place blogging” within the context of Newcastle, Australia. My ambivalence toward Newcastle off-line contrasts with my fascination with the way others aestheticise it online. In order to feel a sense of belonging in Newcastle, it seems I need to live vicariously through the viewing of others’ “spatial selves” on social media (Schwartz and Halegoua).

Keywords

Newcastle, place-blogging.

Like much writing about place, this essay springs from a sense of displacement. Yet to speak of it as such feels melodramatic, especially in our current world of global mobility (whether in the case of transnational elites or of refugees). I moved from Sydney to Newcastle at the end of 2006, two hours north on a good day down the then F3 (now M1); barely an act of migration. That said, perhaps this trip is quintessential of the contemporary experience of mobility no matter what the scale, with each increment registering ineffably on our internal GPS as it searches for ways to incorporate individual trajectories and make sense of a multi-local self over time. I’m using a technological metaphor here for the physical experience of the common upheaval of moving cities, and it is interesting to note that even in the off-line world, concepts of nearness and farness are seemingly impossible to resolve, becoming as malleable as the idea of “commutable” distance.

My relationship with Newcastle is now well beyond the seven-year itch; I moved here for work—my first permanent academic position in Creative Writing—and somehow knew that I was not just passing through, as getting a similar job back in Sydney could remain nigh impossible. Neither was I likely to be taking my first steps towards becoming a “rootless academic”, using the so-called “gumtree” University of Newcastle as a stepping-stone to compete in the current global tertiary education job market. As someone who did a PhD in “grunge poetics,” finding myself in the sweet-hereafter of Newcastle could seem almost fated. This is a town where the industrial is hidden in full public view, where the giant

meccano of the Kooragang Island coal terminal meets the glorious Art Deco pavilion of the city ocean baths in a form of Australian chiaroscuro.

The metaphor of light and dark seems appropriate to the geopoetics of both place and space in Newcastle, something palpable and inevitable in a post-colonial context. The harbour and foreshore was originally the home of the Awabakal clan of Muloobinba, though by the early decades of the nineteenth century the local Indigenous population increasingly struggled to maintain their communal structures due to expanding colonisation. The Coal River penal settlement, established in 1804, included Irish rebels from Australia's only major convict uprising at Castle Hill, who—in a form of redoubled punishment—were sent to work in Coal River's chain gangs and coal mines. The darkened skies of convict artist Joseph Lycett's early 1820s watercolour *Aborigines Resting by a Camp Fire near the Mouth of the Hunter River, Newcastle, NSW* depicts the rising moon over Aboriginal campfires in a way that is at once fittingly ominous, and overtly Romantic (Horne 10).

Contemporary Newcastle remains a city of stark communal and commercial contrasts. Australia's largest KFC restaurant was built on Hunter Street in 2010, despite the fact that the building's excavation uncovered more than 5700 stone tools and campsite remains dating back over 6500 years (Smee), and the current urban decline in the Newcastle CBD exists alongside one of the world's largest coal ports in the midst of privatisation. Notwithstanding the grassroots success of initiatives such as Renew Newcastle (see <http://renewnewcastle.org>) and Danish architect Jan Gehl's vision of a sustainable Newcastle re-invented to resemble contemporary Copenhagen (Bramley), the city's empty spaces and stalled developments continue to accrue. The bustling Hunter Street of Bob Hudson's 1975 *The Newcastle Song* has now clearly been usurped by shopping malls built out in the suburbs, though hotted up car culture still survives on weekends down at the Foreshore.

Like the contested public railway line that separates Hunter Street from the Hunter River with its rail services now terminated, opinions about Newcastle and its future are also divided. While the raging debate about how to revitalise the city centre often descends into vitriol expressed in the online comments section of *The Newcastle Herald*, I've found, that the city's imaginary as depicted in non-commercial social media with user-generated content such as blogs is often more positive. While, to some extent, blogging may be considered a trivial distraction and form of retreat from political or socio-cultural engagement that is indicative of our pervasive contemporary preoccupation with our own everyday lives rather than civic dialogue, I'm interested in how Newcastle's amateur place-bloggers are creating an

expanded cultural public sphere for the city. Although as Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht and Swartz argue “[b]logging is sometimes viewed as a new, grassroots form of journalism and a way to shape democracy outside the mass media and conventional party politics” their focus is on the “vast majority of blogs ... written by ordinary people for much smaller audiences” (41). To what degree could this even be considered a participatory form of cultural infrastructure building, attenuated to the both the beauty and blight of the city as it stands, its immanent potential as well as the accumulated aftermath of the past?

On his Newcastle focused Tumblr “The View from King Street” (that’s King Street, Newcastle, not King Street, Newtown) a blogger who lives in both Sydney and Newcastle, Wayne Mullen, observes that he is “always amazed at how down outsiders can be about this city” while he has “a great time in Newcastle” where he can “eat well, live near the beach and have great friends”. While Mullen’s statement likely addresses the Sydney-centricity of a section of his peer group, it also points to an equal and opposite fierce sense of local pride that many “Novocastrians” (and adopted Novocastrians) have for their city. A pride that is exemplified in an advertising campaign I saw at Newcastle airport once, that seemed to shoot itself in the foot by showing a photo of the Merewether Ocean Baths with the by-line “Shhh don’t tell anybody”. Refuting both insular localism on the one hand and cosmopolitan dismissal on the other, as both an insider and an outsider when it comes to Newcastle, I have never been able to surrender either way. While I appreciate the city’s persistent mythology as a “rough diamond” and its post-industrial ambience (even though *post*-industrial seems something of a misnomer considering Orica’s hexavalent chromium leaks and the coal dust in the air) I still experience an underlying sense of displacement gliding, deep down, like a sting-ray along the ocean floor.

While I may never experience the same sense of *heimlich* living in Newcastle that I feel when I return to my hometown of Wagga Wagga (another regional city in New South Wales), I appreciate that other more recent arrivals to the city, such as England-born illustrator Trevor Dickinson, find a quirky comic humour in Newcastle’s—and indeed more broadly in Australia’s—suburbia (for examples see <https://www.flickr.com/photos/trevordickinson/albums/72157616524833761>). Dickinson’s elevation of Newcastle “icons” such as the circular architecture of the Newcastle City Council Office (also part of Dickinson’s tea-towel range), its Mr Whippy vans, and Council’s innovative solution to above ground electricity wires, remind me of Italo Calvino’s adage that suggests people “take delight not in a city’s seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer it

gives to a question” they possess (37-38). To some degree, we all share intrinsically subjective questions about the relationship between who we are and where we are, questions that in our contemporary, mobile lives, are often necessarily answerable only in mediated terms. I’m drawing here on Schwartz and Halegoua’s notion of “the spatial self” which refers to “a variety of instances (both online and off-line) where individuals document, archive and display their experience and/or mobility within space and place in order to represent or perform aspects of their identity to others” (1647). This is perhaps why I’ve been attracted to online representations of Newcastle and have found myself living vicariously through the romance of others. When it comes to Newcastle, I am, to use Charles Baudelaire’s phrase, a “passionate spectator” of others’ passionate spectatorship (9). I’ve found local place-blogging strikingly prevalent, despite Newcastle being neither a particularly cosmopolitan city nor overtly renowned for its natural ecology.

Place-blogging can be considered a sub-genre of blogging as well as an online connection-making activity that develops a sense of community built around place, where, as Tim Lindgren writes, “ordinary writers and readers participate in the transition to what Eric Gordon and Adriana De Souza e Silva call ‘network locality’, a condition in which the experience of place is increasingly mediated by networked technologies.” Lindgren’s Ph.D. thesis *Place Blogging: Local Economies of Attention in the Network* argues that:

because networked life creates an information saturated environment in which place must compete with everything else for an increasingly scarce resource—human attention—place bloggers redefine blogging as a way to more deliberately and regularly invest attention in place.

Lindgren is interested in the remediation of antecedent or analogue ways of engaging with and writing about place, especially essayistic, diaristic and journalistic traditions borne out of both nature writing and urban studies. His thesis focuses on a period between 2003-2006 when blogging transitioned from predominantly a way for internet enthusiasts to filter content on the web to the popular short form journal format made accessible by blogging platforms such *Wordpress* (launched in 2003). While some of the Newcastle blogs I have followed clearly fit within these more textual modes, my attention has been drawn to the more recent visually dominated microblogging and social networking platform *Tumblr* (which was launched in February 2007 and as of July 1, 2016 had 302.6 million blogs). Since

I began this article in 2013, there has been a shift from Tumblr to the now more popular Instagram, but my focus for this article remains predominantly the local Tumblr blogs, many of which are no longer online, from around that time.

Despite ubiquitous anxieties about the potential for online media to erase “real world” local and *in situ* experiences of place that are perhaps most pronounced in late twentieth century fears around the endless extension of “cyberspace,” as Gordon and De Souza e Silva argue, “location awareness has become central to all aspects of digital media, from mobile phones to online maps to location-based social networks and games” in a world where “virtually everything is located or locatable” (2). While blogging may connect bloggers and their audiences to vast anonymous online networks, it also often ties them to specific physical places, as well as friends and peers. Tim Lindgren suggests that:

Residential mobility, environmental changes and technological developments all have conspired to change the ways in which we attempt to put our lives in context. What does it mean to be here, now? Who are our neighbours? What local information can we trust? What feels like home?

Indeed, it may be that it is the “affect” of blogging, the feeling that comes from everyday people collectively sharing local experience, images and information which I find seductive as I’m drawn towards the potential for a more utopian, online Newcastle, one which augments Newcastle’s overt reality. I am not so much interested in an escapist fantasy as I am in a deepening sense of the everyday, albeit one filtered through the kind of surface and depth dialectic that is peculiar to social media.

Social media’s oft-touted potential for users to selectively create a better world (or image) online is, of course, often reduced to digital narcissism, and Tumblr (and other similar platforms) could easily be written off as merely superficial domains for self-fashioning. More optimistically, however, networked social media can also enable a form of peer-to-peer “niche-building” and provide a platform for amateur cultural expression, that contrasts with the more nihilistic depictions that are typical of traditional media (and politics). While the kind of mass surveillance that digital location awareness has enabled has quickly become part of more sinister data-harvesting by corporations and governments alike, on a micro-level social media technologies are increasingly being deployed cartographically in a number of new ways. Newcastle place-blogging provides a local “do it yourself” example of how

bloggers are mapping constructions of place online across a range of blogging styles. This ranges from the more journalistic—I’ve often felt Wayne Mullen would make a great community mayor and the interviews on Siobhan Curren’s “The Novocastrian Files” make Newcastle seem irresistibly hip—through to the more image-based Tumblrs and Instagram feeds that provide a visual ethnography of the city, warts and all. This article offers a cursory survey of some of the blogs that, for me, captured a sense of Newcastle’s “poetics of space” in a Bachelardian sense and re-sensationalised “this untidy, smoky city” (to use Newcastle blogger Matthew Endacott’s terms). Many of these bloggers are clearly transfiguring stereotyped images of Newcastle as an industrial city in order to re-imagine them as aesthetically resonant.

A good local example of the form of WordPress place-blogging (of the ilk that Lindgren’s thesis engages with) is Mark MacLean’s “Hamilton North” [Figure 1]. Born in England, MacLean situates his blog as part of a lineage that includes the eighteenth English country parson (and amateur naturalist and ornithologist) Gilbert White, who wrote about the world of “bearded orchids” and “ripening crab apples” in and around his parish (vii). This is intentionally ironic, however, as MacLean’s observations come from “the world inside Clyde Street, Chatham Road, Broadmeadow Road and Styx Creek,” a landscape of contaminated gas works and drains clogged with infinite assemblages of litter. In the introduction to his self-published, and locally bestselling book, *A year down the drain: Walking in Styx Creek, January to December* (which draws upon his blog), MacLean writes that walking his dog Jambo in Styx Creek is the one walk he has never tired of as it was there he “got to let Jambo off the lead” and “see a part of the suburb that’s rarely visited by anyone who isn’t a kid, or at least a kid with a spray can and bottle bong” (viii). Writing about the format of the blog, MacLean draws an analogy between it and the rubbish and discarded objects he observes on his walks, where “blog entries are like the tennis balls and drink bottles: they appear, they gather on a page, and then they get flushed away” (xii). MacLean is not so much an “eco-blogger”, as someone who Walter Benjamin might term a botanist of the asphalt (or, in this case, the concrete banks of storm water drains) (36).

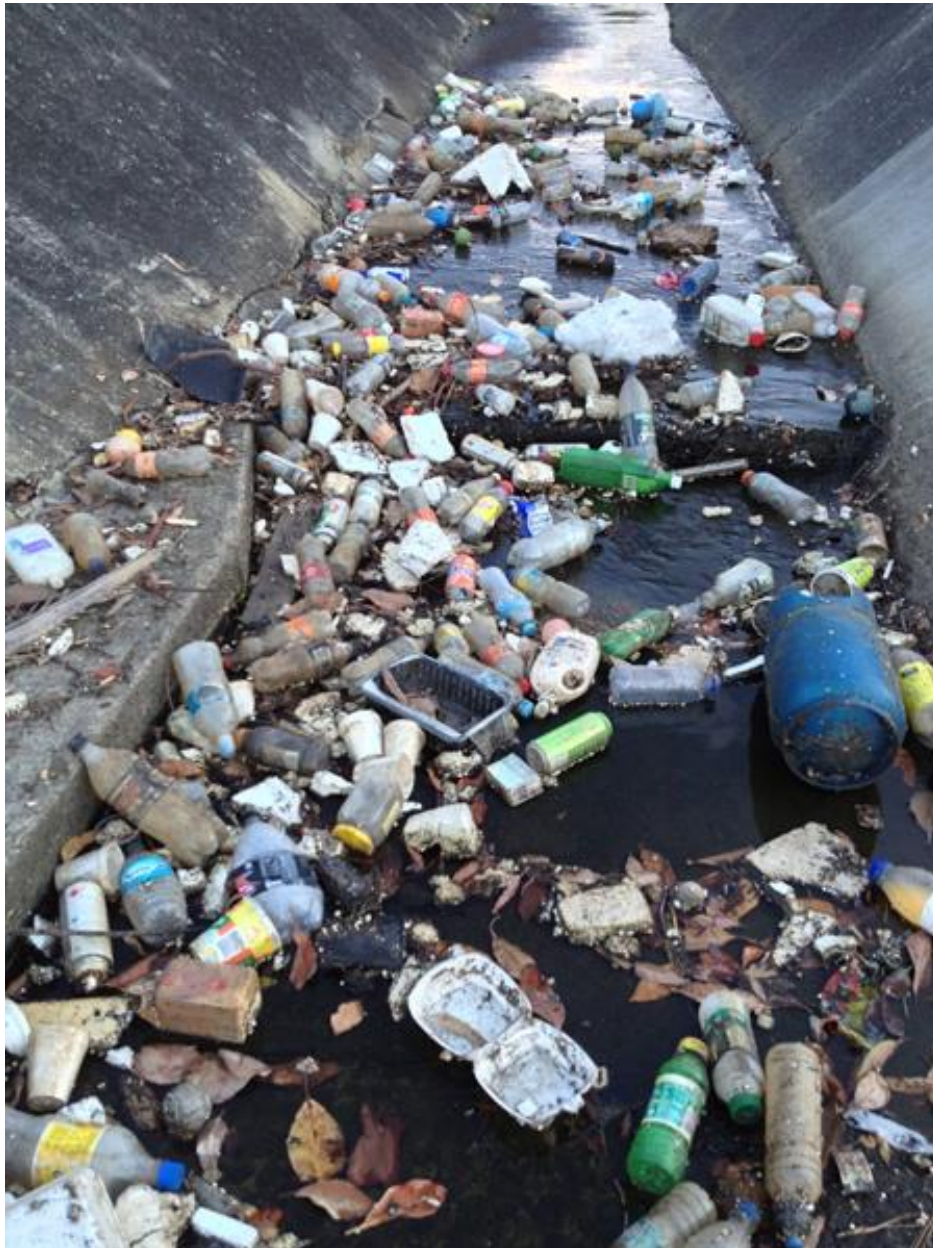


Figure 1, Mark MacLean

Another Newcastle blog that focuses on profane illuminations of Newcastle (or perhaps illuminating profanity) is “Tabitha Tempers Trash,” a Tumblr that posts photos of local graffiti (from street art through to street wangs). In one image on the blog, “Kellz done this” has been scrawled into wet cement, in a poor advertisement for Novocastrian grammar. “Tabitha Tempers Trash” often captures Newcastle’s lower socio-economic “lingua-franca,” a riposte to the increasingly wealthy image Newcastle projects as a result of the mining boom. The simple theme also develops a digital archive of otherwise transitory local inscriptions, which remind me that while Newcastle may not be Luc Sante’s New York (see his essay “My Lost City”), it is a city that is yet to comprehensively gentrify.

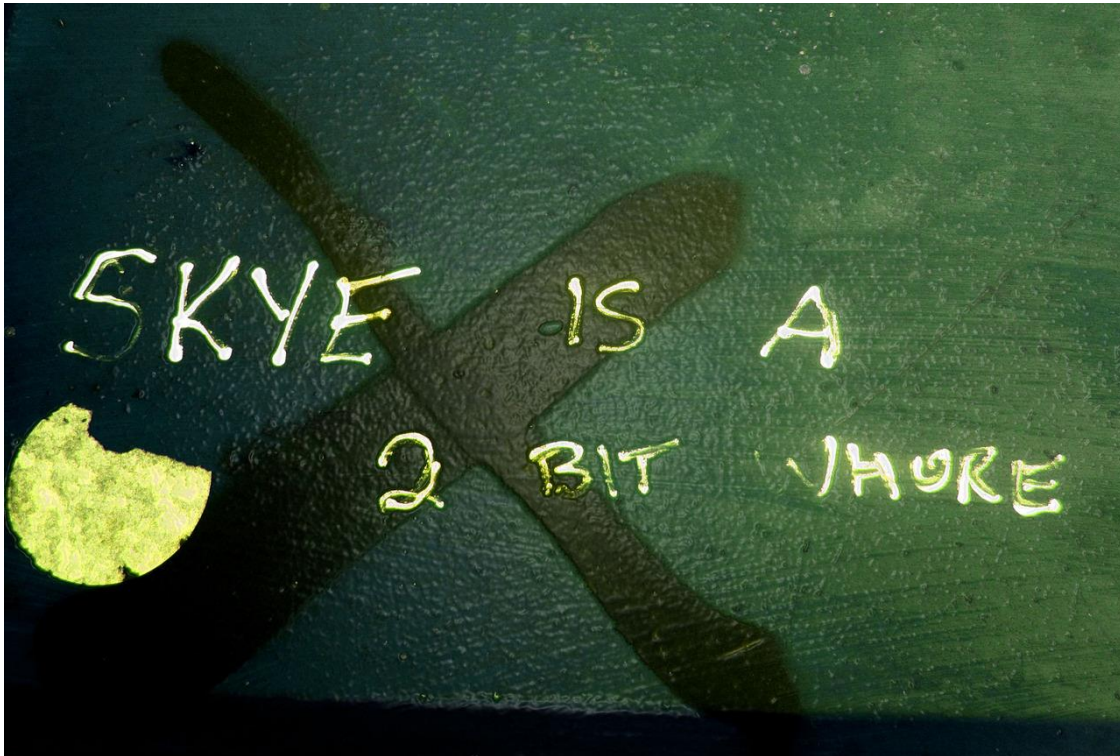


Figure 2, Fiona Whitton

One of the first Newcastle Tumblrs that I followed was “I Will Never Forgive Myself”, by Ian Ewin, a straight edge punk with a facial tattoo and the open jaws of a black panther on his neck [Figure 3]. The blog is, unfortunately, no longer online. It provided a portal into a beguilingly “other” and yet compellingly banal Newcastle, often including photographs of his morning eggs benedict, coffee chain snacks and pet rats. There was something about his melancholic self-hatred that fascinated me, along with his penchant for using his phone to take photos of an abandoned, nocturnal Newcastle as he walked the city during his many bouts of insomnia. Ewin hadn’t always lived in Newcastle, but the city was the one thing he remained positive about. One day I was startled to see him with his dad in an up-market bakery in New Lambton. It almost felt like spotting a celebrity, and I think part of the satisfaction of reading blogs is not just having intimate windows into other people’s lives, but realising the potential to inhabit the same city in such a myriad of different ways. Ewin’s current Tumblr (as of August, 2016) is called “Faking a life”, and his profile statement says “26. Male. Newcastle, Australia. 9yrs sober”.

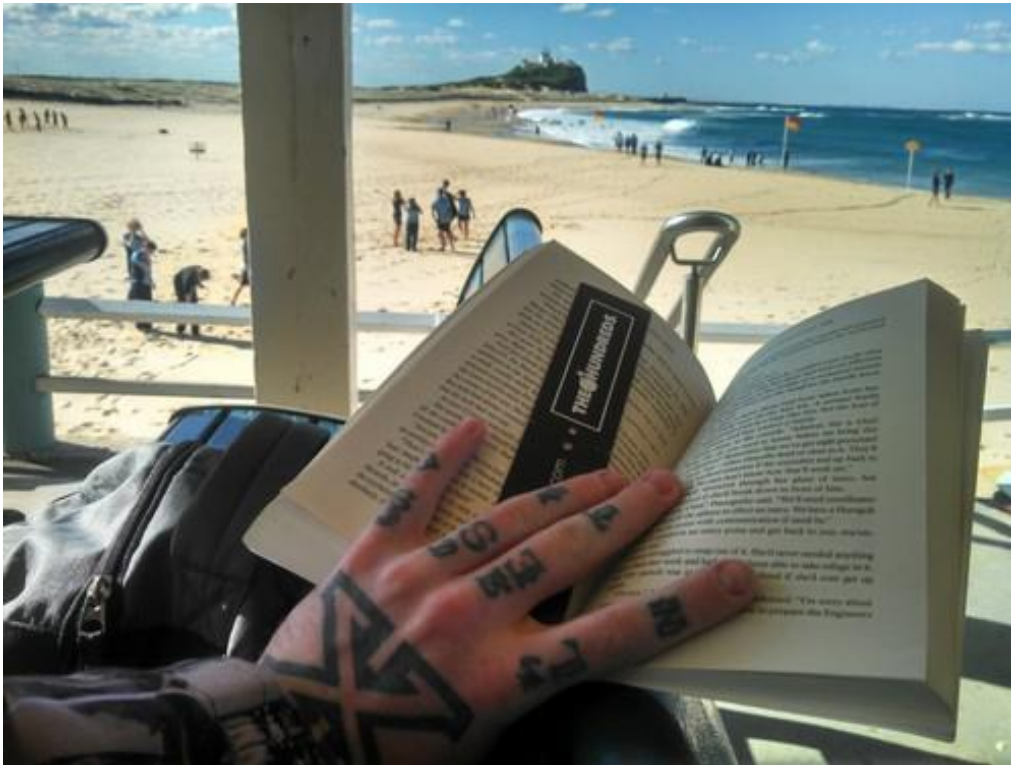


Figure 3, Ian Ewin

If “I Will Never Forgive Myself” was my antithesis, then stumbling across “The Copper Influence” usurped my assumptions in the opposite direction. Also “defunct” (a term that can be used about bands, so why not blogs), Christopher May’s blog, “The Copper Influence”, offered compelling insights into the aesthetics of Newcastle, including suburbs like Mayfield and Waratah, and a queer perspective where I least expected it. May’s lens captures something of the neon camp, for example, of Waratah Village shopping centre—an elevation of low to high culture offset by the tiny “Cheesecake Shop” sign—as well as the eerily absent naked male bodies in his photographs of the men’s change sheds at both the city and Merewether ocean baths.

When I contacted May to see if I could get access to “The Copper Influence” for research purposes, he replied that it is completely irretrievable, responding that he has “created (and destroyed) nearly 10 blogs since 2006.” On another more recently defunct blog “The New Thylacines” he posted a photograph of the Waratah Philadelphia Cream Cheese factory [Figure 4], with the following narrative:

The first guy I ever had a crush on was a chain-smoker named Brett who used to listen to The Smiths and work night shifts at the Cream Cheese factory in Waratah. We used to lie on his bed in the early afternoon talking about the films of Kieslowski and

wanting to touch each other but holding back. When he got fired from the cream cheese factory he decided to leave town, but apparently he visited my house to profess his love to me before he went... I wasn't there, though. I was at the library studying for my HSC. When my folks told me about it I felt like I had been punched in the guts. I found out in 2007 when I joined facebook that he had died in a car accident in 2001 and was buried with his family plot near Cundletown. I visited last year and left a bottle of cream cheese and a 7" of "How Soon is Now?" on his grave.

#Okay so I made that up #None of that happened



Figure 4, Christopher May

May began blogging after returning to Newcastle after failing to re-locate to Sydney as a way “to re-vision Newcastle suburbia, to find its diversity, its fauna, its innovation, its intricacy. I wanted to reject my old inherited dream of metropolis” (personal email, March 2013). May’s queering of suburban Newcastle is a way of re-thinking assumptions about the parochial and the cosmopolitan, as May writes:

The internet has especially changed the whole landscape—it has given us all an additional sense so that we can communicate and observe spaces differently. So ‘The Copper Influence’ was very much about destroying my own boganphobic anti-suburban prejudices (personal email, March 2013).

Every day since the first of January in 2012, Michael Newton has uploaded a photograph to his Tumblr “Showbag” often with a pithy tag line posted beneath. His photograph of the (now that you mention it) chess-piece-like tower on The Hill, is captioned “Rook Takes Bishop”. While I often think I’ve stumbled across the definitive photograph of the Newcastle Ocean Baths on Tumblr, only to see it supplanted by another one and yet another, I think that Newton’s photograph of a container ship named “Fiction” in Newcastle harbour, captioned “Not as strange as *Truth*,” will remain seared in my memory. I immediately emailed it around to a number of writers with a by-line of my own, proposing that “Fiction, your ship has finally come in.”



Figure Five, Michael Newton

Brett Piva’s *Newcastle Depths* consists of images, which, in the spirit of Frank O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems* (poems written during the poet’s lunch hour in New York in the early 1960s), includes photographs taken during Piva’s walks around Newcastle during his lunch hour. He suggests that he does “this to try to see a different view of something that other

passers by may forsee as ugly, eroded or lifeless and try and bring new colour and life to that object, building or subject.” His images of things such as pebblecrete poles speak to the “historicist melancholy” of contemporary youth culture, as it now seeks to re-fashion the aesthetics of earlier generations (‘Punk Archaeology’).



Figure Six, Brett Piva

These blogs are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of Newcastle place-blogging and I began to wonder if this phenomenon was also occurring in Sydney. After all, if Sydney is still the sleeping giant in my life, perhaps I should have been looking at Sydney place-blogs to get my fix. A quick trawl came up with a few interesting examples such as “Pool Lady”, a Tumblr documenting one woman’s mission to swim in every ocean and inland public pool in Sydney; Vanessa Berry’s blogs “Biblioburbia: The Library Files”, which documents her explorations of Sydney’s public libraries, and “Mirror Sydney”, which details her excursions around Sydney’s suburbs more generally; Lucas Ihlein’s archived project “The ‘Sham’” where the author remained entirely within the postcode of his home suburb of Petersham in April and May of 2006; “Penultimo”, a place blog about Ultimo; and finally “Past/Lives:

Revealing traces of a former Sydney”, a blog by Michael Wayne which details Sydney’s hidden past:

Past/Lives seeks to uncover the secrets, reveal the hidden sides and tell the forgotten stories of Sydney using the clues that have been left behind through the years.

Past/Lives chronicles those instances of poorly reconstituted Pizza Huts, lazily retooled milk bars and forgotten former points of significance we pass by or even notice every day, but never really stop to look at (About).

Indeed, “Past/Lives” typifies the recent emergence of active Facebook groups such as “Lost Sydney,” “Lost Newcastle” and “Lost Gay Sydney” and “Lost Gay Newcastle,” that harness social media’s potential to engage with collective memory and nostalgia, drawing from personal archives. There are also similar “Lost Townsville” (the regional city where *LiNQ* is published) and “Lost Wagga Wagga” Facebook pages.

The ease of switching between Newcastle and Sydney online is much simpler than finding somewhere affordable to stay in Sydney for the weekend on Airbnb. Rather than becoming an active blogger myself—my displacement in Newcastle has not prompted me to set up a blog of my own—I have instead become a serial viewer and voyeur. Looking at the place-blogs of others is one way for me to construct a multi-local self and social network, grounded in specific localities but also extending beyond any static notion of place. I would feel claustrophobic solely defined by or identified with Newcastle and require the “open field” of the internet to make it seem like I’m browsing Newcastle from a necessary distance. As Ulises Mejias notes:

Reapproaching the local through the network is not simply a case of arriving right back where we started after a process of dislocation and re-location. It’s not simply reaching our nose around the back of our head. The mediated near that the network delivers is a slightly different near, familiar and unfamiliar at the same time (26).

Digital psychology may term this “dissociative imagination” and there’s no doubt that social media skirts the fine boundary between solipsistic introjection and collective engagement, in a way that, I would argue, is not so different to the space of “creativity” more conventionally. Here, I am reminded again of Christopher May’s statement that the internet has “given us all an additional sense so that we can communicate and observe spaces differently”. Perhaps, for

me, however, as someone who observes the observers, this is not so much a matter of paying attention to place, but a symptom of the fact that contemporary attention is as much distracted as attracted, that my presence here is also still partly absent (in our technologically mediated times this can be something as common as talking on a mobile phone while walking down a street). In order to feel “located” at all in Newcastle, it appears that I need to surf the somewhat disembodied creativity of others, that in this case direct experience is not always better than its mediated equivalent; actualised repeatedly online in unique and creative ways. As Mejjias may suggest I seek neither the “uniform distancelessness” that the network alone appears to provide, nor solely the “uniform nearness” of the off-line world, in order to experience the here-and-now of being in Newcastle (including that which can never be entirely encompassed by the virtual). The portal of place-blogging provides me with a way of engaging with place with both the requisite proximity and distance, a way to maintain, at least the illusion, of being a transient local.

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