

--- Feature Review ---

## LIQUID KNOTS

### Kate Judith's *Exploring Interstitiality with Mangroves: Semiotic Materialism and the Environmental Humanities* (Routledge/Earthscan, 2023)

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This engagement with Kate Judith's 2023 volume *Exploring Interstitiality with Mangroves* is deliberately a dialogic one. She describes her book as attempting to advance a "non-anthropocentric approach to thinking interstitiality" (p.1) premised on mangroves as a global eco-system and, more specifically, on the mangrove environments of the Georges and Cooks rivers in southern Sydney. Her perspectives are not *incidentally* reflective of the locales she describes but are, rather, *rooted* in them; *rooted in* the alternatively drying and moistened mud flats that are home to multiple estuarine species, including the iconic mangrove. The book's introduction frames her study as having an ontological focus in the opening section, an analysis of types of relationality in the second and a consideration of issues of power and politics in the third. Judith delivers on this schema and returns to assess the lessons learned in her conclusion. At this point she identifies her support for the "turn to fractally folded material semiotic ontologies, which do not deny but do not privilege human uniqueness" and asserts that by "embracing these ontologies, the key concern becomes considerations of how to interpret and respond into narrative coherences and their entangling obligations" (p. 205). This is indeed a key concern in the burgeoning field(s) of Blue and/or Environmental Humanities and those interested in those fields would do well to acquaint themselves with Judith's ruminations on these topics.

My interest in Judith's work is both general and specific. For the last four years I have lived on the Burns Bay arm of the Lane Cove River on Sydney's North Shore. Since relocating I have familiarised myself with area's variously embanked or mangrove clustered shores and used my perceptions of them as the basis for broader reflections.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, I have been attending to the locale as I read and re-read Judith's book and this essay reflects my attempts to think of both 'her' space and 'mine' within the discourses she offers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hayward (2021).

<sup>2</sup> I should add a note at this point – particularly given the laudatory nature of my review – that I have never met or had any professional association with Judith. Sydney is sprawling metropolis; she lives on the south side of the Harbour and I on the north and our paths have never crossed.

January 22<sup>nd</sup> 2024. Around 9am I am at the point where Tannery Creek runs into Burns Bay. The tide is low and the creek trickles across a paved riverbed before slipping over a concrete lip into the bay. I glance down and pause, surprised. On the edge of the paving stones is a Striated Heron (*Butorides striata*), a species I have never seen in the area before. The bird steps slowly and delicately on its long, yellowish legs, peering into the edge of the bay before darting its beak down into a small shoal of baitfish. It tips its head slightly as it straightens up, swallowing its catch. The bird, its successful fishing and the presence of the shoal, all indicate the vitality of life at the interstices of the creek and bay, a heavily engineered environment originally established to exclude mangroves but which is now increasingly being recolonised by them.<sup>3</sup> There's a sense that the mangroves are winning. I make some inquiries. This Striated Heron is shy and elusive and relatively rare around Sydney, so I'm pleased to have glimpsed her. But I am also concerned about the broader eco-ethics of my living around the Bay and of her visiting.

I had just been re-reading the second section of Judith's book, entitled 'Monstrous relations: exploring a hermeneutic account of relationality'. One of the most striking threads of this section is her application of relational ontologies to the bioprocesses through which she contracted Ross River Virus from a riverbank mosquito. Her attempts to understand, accommodate and relate to the virus's spread and replication in her body results in a rich discussion of trans-species relations. She identifies the need for attentiveness between species. Expanding on this, she asserts that eco-ethics requires "sensitivity to the obligations entangled within a semiotic materiality" (p. 94). Using the notion of entanglement, she provides the neat epigram that "every knot obligates its participants within an ethics that is made inside the tangle" (p.94). And on 'knottiness,' she emphasises that:

*Becoming committed to relations of mutual obligation with other entities... requires that obligations should be worried over, that they become matters of dedicated concern, and that they are checked against the obligations of numerous narratives at various scales. (p.94)*

This point is well made and is worth dwelling on. Let me take it a particular way. One of the acknowledged aspects of heavily polluted environments, and particularly those where humans rarely visit and/or fish, farm or gather in (such as, most famously, the area around the abandoned Chernobyl nuclear plant) is that non-human species benefit from the lack of humans and often increase their numbers. In the new world – which they will have had no intimation of – the range of places they can inhabit is almost unrestricted. There are no cars or hunters to endanger them, and fences, walls and other structures have often decayed sufficiently to let them pass through. That's the upside of the exclusion zone. There's a similar effect in micro in polluted waterways, where unwillingness and/or restrictions have let fish populations recover and has also attracted predatory birds (such as our previously discussed heron). Judith's text troubles me in that I have long wondered what the effects of river pollutants have on the fish in the water and the birds that feed on them. Should I be discouraging the heron from catching fish in the bay? Should I scare her into flying over to somewhere less polluted? Probably. But I didn't.

Surely, if the fish are too toxic for humans to eat, this must have an effect on the fishes' general health and vitality (and, perhaps, mental processes and cognitive skills). Should we, as humans, be obliged to fix the river pollution problem that we have caused and which we

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<sup>3</sup> See Hayward (2021) for discussion of this resurgence.

have inflicted on the species that dwell within and around it? That’s a rhetorical question. We obviously should if we acknowledge a mutual obligation with the world of non-human species. But how to achieve that? The cleansing of polluted bottom sediments in rivers is both costly and comes with marked disadvantages, most obviously that stirring up mud in the act of trying to Hoover it up has the effect of dispersing pollutants into the water. Then there is the trauma inflicted on a range of creatures that live on and in the mud. And then there is the issue of where and how you dispose of the toxic goo. This is a classic ‘wicked problem’ and I am stuck in the mud with it. This brings to mind another pertinent characterisation offered by Judith, namely that interstices are places “thick with complex happenings... where comfortable assumptions are not secure.” Precisely.

**January 14<sup>th</sup> 2024.** A trio of council workers have arrived, unannounced, and begun to mount small, rigid objects on part of the stone embankment that lines the northwest corner of the bay (Figures 1 & 2). There’s considerable local speculation as to what the structures are but I recognise them from their installation at other points around the harbour. They are often referred to as ‘marine panels’ and were designed by Sydney-based university researchers as complex, pitted features that can stimulate biodiversity on otherwise inhospitable embankments and sea walls (Molloy, 2021). Their installation is one type of remediation of such walls (removing them and allowing a softer, organic interface is another). Judith discusses walls at length in the third section of her volume. Entitled ‘Impossible differences’, this unfolds over three chapters, starting with a concise discussion of semiotic materiality. With regard to walls, she elaborates that:

*The word “wall” signifies something that performs as a hard-to-permeate barrier for something at some time (for water, wind, people, or mud, for example). Approaches informed by material semiotics recognise that a wall’s material meaningfulness as a barrier is a relation that emerges from numerous entangled material narratives. (p.146)*



Figure 1 – Marine panels delivered to Burns Bay foreshore (January 2024, author’s photo).



Figure 2 – Installation of marine panels on Burns Bay embankment (January 2024, author’s photo).

Walls are built by one agent (typically, by humans) but are open to interpretation by other entities who might find alternative uses for them. One of my favourite parts of the bayside is one where mangrove propagules<sup>4</sup> have floated in on the tide and found alternative uses for the wall, or, rather, for tiny crevices where sandstone blocks no longer fit as snugly as they once did (Figures 3 and 4). There are many similar opportunistic mangrove insertions around Sydney Harbour, where fledgling trees emerge from rock or concrete shores (including along the embankment adjacent to Circular Quay’s busy ferry terminals) but I hold my local ones in particular affection. There is an element of cross-species empathy and admiration on my part. While they are ‘only doing what mangroves do’, I admire the propagules’ pluck and tenacity.



Figure 3 – A tenacious young mangrove lodged in the embankment at Burns Bay (February 2024, author’s photo)

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<sup>4</sup> Rather than seeds, propagules are mature plants that are ready to root.



Figure 4 – A mature mangrove stretching out from the embankment into Burns Bay  
(February 2024, author’s photo)

The mangrove propagule’s ability to float into place underlines the manner in which mangrove interstices are – perhaps above all – tidal interzones, and Judith characterises this aspect in an inventive manner:

*Tidal flow asks questions of the shore: “how about this, and this, and this? What can you become with endless rhythm, sea bodies, and salt?” The shore becomes in response and asks it in return: “What can you become with nutrients, shallows, porous mud, and roots?” (p. 23).*

While her volume doesn’t engage with recent work asserting the *personhood* of rivers (particularly in legal contexts – see Tanasescu, 2017), she gets close in her characterisation of relations between tidal flow and shore. Indeed, the exchange I reproduce above reads like a courtship conversation to me, one where each partner is interested but wary of what the other might be able offer. I can also hear it in my head as a sung interchange, with different vocal timbres sliding against each other.

Coming at the tidal-shore relationship from another angle, Judith contends that:

*Here, in the tidal swash among the mangroves, meanings and materialities bring each other to bear together through affective, responsive intra-action. (p. 25)*

“Affective, responsive intra-action” is a fitting characterisation of what Judith is striving for in this volume and, indeed, she often gets there. It is to her credit that she achieves this through carefully researched and communicated characterisations of complex processes – an approach exemplified by Chapter 9 on mangrove “walls” (and their value as coastal

defences), mangroves as multi-species hosts and the nature of mud within this eco-system. This is rich and well-thought-through argument and analysis.

Overall, the volume illustrates the value of *thinking with* particular phenomena and considering issues of cross-species kinship in order to understand broader issues and, thereby, represents a successful contribution to the vein of *syn-poiesic* discourse opened by Haraway (2016). Indeed, Judith's book is one that can comfortably slot alongside the works of Haraway and Tsing as recommended reading for any researcher keen to approach topics such as (but not confined to) mangrove environments from a non-anthropocentric perspective. It is also a great contribution to the emergent field of Australian Cultural Ecology, best represented by the journal *Swamphen*,<sup>5</sup> in which Judith (2020) first explored some of the ideas presented in her current volume.

As has long been customary, the enthusiastic reviewer tends to keep their gripes to the end of a review. My gripe is singular and reflects my visual orientation. The heron lingered with me as I wrote this essay. I have been frustrated in that the photos I took of her were too low contrast to use. I wanted to share her with you. The other images that I *have* included are there to add to the story fragments I offer (and I trust they do this). I am also aware that readers who are not familiar with mangroves can gain much from seeing what they look like. As you may have noticed, I managed to include four such photos in a 2470 word review. Unfortunately, there are zero amongst what I guesstimate to be the 70,000 words in Judith's book. I would have appreciated shots of the Cook and Georges rivers (at least) to help set their scene and story in my mind's eye. It would be my bet that this was a publisher's decision (correct me if I am wrong, Routledge) but it was an unfortunate one. As if in tacit acknowledgement, Judith ends her conclusion by painting an effective word picture of visiting the mangrove colony at Lime Kiln Bay under dark clouds and revelling in its sensory impressions. She relates that she was greeted by the silver flash of a fish leaping out the water and dropping back into it. In its brief ascension to the aerial realm the fish breaks the "wall" of the surface and explores a new interstice, albeit fleetingly, before returning to its aquatic realm. Who knows what it learns in these brief moments and what sense it makes of the "above"? As Judith's book contends, such questions require us to be attentive and to try and understand other species' experiences in ways that can enhance our comprehension of the broader environment.

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<sup>5</sup> Fittingly named after the colloquial Australian term for the *Porphyrio melanotus*, a type of large rail found around marshes and freshwater streams.

Hayward: Feature Review – Judith *Exploring Interstitiality with Mangroves* (2023).

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