Shooting a Net at ‘Gilly’s Snag’

The Movement of Belonging among Commercial Fishermen at the Gippsland Lakes

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Abstract

This thesis argues that local ‘neighbourhoods’ of shared understanding are not conceived solely through reference to an imaginary ‘other’ but, instead, may inhere in and be rejuvenated by a tension between internally generated and contradictory ways of understanding collectivity. Among commercial fishermen of the Gippsland Lakes in Victoria (Australia), I show that social facts are generated by agents-acting-in-settings, and that aspects of fishermen’s collective practice and representation are informed by such local contingencies as ‘who you are, what you are up to, and with whom’.

The neighbourhood, I argue, is realised in performance, during everyday encounters in occupational contexts such as ‘on the lake’ or ‘down at the Co-op’. But fishermen also imagine togetherness, in different contexts, through the construction of conceptual boundaries, by identifying themselves as, for instance, ‘a fourth generation lake fisherman’. These two modes of conceiving how one belongs to a community – through performance or via recourse to structural ideals, produce remarkably different ways of viewing the world, relating to other people, and relating to one’s surrounds. On the one hand, a community constituted by social interaction relies on action in the present and a view towards ongoing future interactions between community members. This mode of belonging is dynamic and is characterised by movement, towards others and towards the future. On the other hand, a community constituted by discourses of tradition and genealogy presumes a person’s social identity is fixed at birth so that action in the present has no effect on a person’s ability to form, reform, or sever the social ties that implicate them in one group or another. When these two modes of conceiving community appear together, as they do at the Gippsland Lakes, a tension between movement and fixity emerges.

That tension, broadly conceived, is an example of ‘systemic flexibility’ – a key characteristic of living systems that persist. As I portray fishermen amid the day-to-day round of fishing concerns, I illustrate how the living system of the neighbourhood persists through the interplay of two modes of expressing togetherness. That interplay continually reveals, reiterates and recreates anew, relationships, local stories, names and places, while concealing other cosmological terrains. And, thus, in this way, the contours of the neighbourhood are continuously surpassed and redrawn.

I show that in fishing contexts, in responding to the burden of moral obligations entailed by kinship relationships, fishermen downplay those relationships to ensure that other more pro cessual modes of constituting relationships do not become overwhelmed by the fixed structures of family trees. When the apparent immutability of relationships between kin are backgrounded fishermen are able to create relationships with each other that are dynamic and responsive, allowing movement through water space, and, thus, the acquisition of new relationships and the implementation of new knowledge. In their actions, fishermen point out that dwelling on genealogy privileges some relationships over others, weakening men’s independence and, ultimately, their interdependence. On
the lake, then, belonging is understood as achieved; it is constituted by shared moments, and conversations, with others.

These conversational occasions ‘on the lake’ are also pedagogical. In these moments, fishermen attend to, and are orientated by other’s approaches to fishing. Through these encounters fishermen become ‘enskilled’ by the practice community and learn certain styles of environmental and inter-personal interpretation. Fishermen are guided in their fishing practice by the principles of *incomplete knowledge*, *being there* and *raw fishing*, modes of engaging with the environment that sets them apart from other groups such as recreational fishers who also use the lake. Further, I show that, through an attention to the ironic potential of inter-personal moments, in the context of the contingencies of everyday life on the lake, fishermen state and restate their style of being together – that they are in competition but in competition *together*. In this way fishermen emphasise that it is the movement away from family towards fraught, ambiguous encounters that enlivens the world.

The purposeful movements of ‘wandering’ in search of fish and ‘shooting’ a net are both expressions of a person’s particular history of enskilment, while at the same time they are possessive movements. Fishermen recognise that a person’s skill in, and knowledge of, a particular place gives them entitlement to that place. The performance of ownership is inherently a socially – and an ecologically – embedding institution, because it interweaves not only the dynamism and idiosyncrasies of memory, self and community but also those ecological processes of order and flux that trace out landscapes or lakescapes.

Fishermen implicate themselves in the lakescape as they skillfully use their nets and their charm to catch fish and constitute the neighbourhood. The lakescape emerges, in this way, as a region of named sites held in place by amiable conversations and fraught ownership negotiations. I show that ‘laconic’ place names conceal big context and index the importance placed upon contextualising knowledge. Thus, I argue that place names are pedagogical in themselves, because they invite fishermen to look beyond the surface of events. Place names express the principle of *incomplete knowledge*.

A change in emphasis, from processual to ascriptive practices of formulating the fishing community, place and knowledge, is now perceivable at the lake, however. In response to external intrusions from the nation state fishermen began to fix in text, contingent aspects of neighbourhood relationships, in the hope that this might enable them to continue to reproduce the neighbourhood. Yet, I argue, such a strategy has loosened the tension that drives the reconstitution of neighbourhood because such discursive articulations of performance are antithetical to the ‘ineffable’ essence of the actual practices they seek to represent. Thus, at the very moment fishermen meet the intrusions of the state on its own terms they become authors of a very different kind of neighbourhood.
Declaration

This is to certify that
(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,
(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
(iii) the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

_______________________________________         ___/___/___
Simone Larissa Blair
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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, Graeme, who died as I was coming to the end of my fieldwork. He was a quiet man who taught me how to watch and wonder.

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Chapter 1.
Introduction - Fishing in the Present

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Introduction

This thesis explores the lives of the commercial fishermen¹ who work the Gippsland Lakes in Victoria’s (Australia) southeast. I describe how the local lake neighbourhood unfolds in the ordinary moments of day-to-day fishing life by considering the performative, engaged and processual aspects of ‘world-making’ here. I argue that, in the context of fishing, fishermen deliberately emphasise the performative aspects of neighbourhood constitution while backgrounding other, contradictory, modes of formulating the neighbourhood.

Following Appadurai (1995:223 fn1) I use the term ‘neighbourhood’ to describe a social formation characterized by ‘sociality, immediacy and reproducibility’ and, at the same time, to avoid an implication of any particular designation of ‘scale, specific modes of connectivity, internal homogeneity or sharp boundaries’. I use this term in this way because Gippsland Lakes fishermen, as will be come clear, do not form a ‘community’ in any conventional sense.

¹ No woman held a licence to fish the Gippsland Lakes during the time of my fieldwork or, to my knowledge, prior to that time. Women sometimes worked as deckhands alongside a male relative but they never, to my knowledge, identified themselves as ‘fisherwomen’, ‘fishermen’, ‘fisherpersons’ or ‘fishers’. Instead, they tended to understand their efforts on fishing boats as those of a temporary (thus not entirely identified) helper. Men, in my experience, always referred to themselves as being ‘fishermen’ and never used the gender neutral terms ‘fisher’ or ‘fisherperson’. In this thesis I follow the fishermen’s usage partly in deference to them, and because the terms ‘fisher’ and ‘fisherperson’ are themselves not ‘neutral’ since fishermen associate these terms with the homogenizing and controlling language of government bureaucracies.
From the vantage point of the lake\(^2\), and in the context of their working lives, fishermen conceptualise their collectivity in terms of mundane, yet cherished, occasions of sociability on the water, at the fishermen’s cooperative, along the supermarket aisles or while walking the dog. In these moments fishermen quietly restate, reconfigure and renew the neighbourhood in relation to backgrounded prescriptive formulations of relationality that insist, in different contexts, that one can be identified only by who his relatives are, or by how much history he has in a place. By corollary I address the way that context affects how social formations are conceived of by social actors.

In positing this tension between different modes of constituting local worlds I suggest that a tension between movement and fixity has always been internal to neighbourhoods. In this account I explore in depth, and follow in detail, the way that this tension is maintained and reproduced within the local social formation. Significantly, however, because this thesis explores a particular aspect of fishermen’s total lifeworld – their working life rather than, for instance, their family life – this tension is viewed from a certain vantage point.

In exploring these aspects of neighbourhood formation, this thesis makes a second and related point that, while local social formations exist within wider contexts, they remain, to some degree, for themselves and of themselves. The neighbourhood, and therefore notions of belonging, are not only, nor entirely, constituted by oppositional identifications at symbolic boundaries despite recent anthropological attentions which suggest otherwise (Bohlin 1998; Cohen 2000). This is because the ‘things that go on’ in one’s local neighbourhood are never entirely reducible to the other or the state. Indeed, as I will show, at the Gippsland Lakes, the way fishermen perceive the environment in which they work, their relationships to others, the names they give to fishing places and the meanings they find therein cannot be attributed to the state any more than they can be attributed to ‘Nature’. Instead, I will show that these aspects of fishermen’s collective practice and

\(^2\) The terms, ‘the lake’, ‘the lakes’ and ‘The Gippsland Lakes’ all refer to the same body of water. The Gippsland Lakes is the official name for this geological feature. It can be thought of as one continuous body of water or as a series of interconnected lakes. Fishermen tend to speak of ‘the lake’ because they understand it to be a continuous whole. Throughout the thesis I refer to this body of water in a variety of ways according to context.
representation are informed by such local contingencies as – who you are, what you are up to, and with whom.

I explore the lake neighbourhood, by taking what Ingold (2000:153) has called, a ‘dwelling perspective’ a methodology that assumes social facts are generated by agents-acting-in-settings. In this perspective, local worlds are understood to come into being around agents pursuing activities in peculiarly local social, technological and ecological surrounds. In taking this approach, I have shifted focus from a current interpretive preoccupation which regards discourse and text as the primary media through which people constitute, and express, meaning.

Fishing in the Present

Driving into the busy fishing port and tourist resort town of Lakes Entrance (where I lived throughout my fieldwork), the visitor is met with a sign proclaiming: ‘Lakes Entrance – Historical Fishing Village’. On crossing over an arm of the Gippsland Lakes to arrive at the town proper one passes the fishermen’s Cooperative on the right and, on the left, a complex that houses the visitor’s centre, the Lakes Entrance Family History Resource Centre and the local history society. While the latter building complex is not as large as the building that houses the fishermen’s Cooperative, its prominence is notable and suggests that, here, history looms large.

It is not surprising that ‘the Heritage Industry’ is flourishing in the east Gippsland region, and that, like other so-called pioneering industries, fishing is now the focus for memorialisation and commemoration by local tourism initiatives and local historical societies. Indeed, through the past twenty years anthropologists have paid much attention to the ways in which narratives of heritage or tradition can be deployed to inspire sentiments of togetherness within, or of allegiance to, particular groups in relation to others whose narratives are different. Along the Scottish coast, for instance, Nadel-Klein (2003:171) writes that small fishing communities are ‘now being permeated by the
burgeoning “heritage industry”, in which fisherpeople’s social recollections become a contested resource’.

Within anthropology there has long been debate concerning how to define, discuss, and recognise in ‘real life’, the ‘community’ (Amit 2002; Barth 1969, 2000; Cohn 1985, 2000, Kohn 2002; Olwig and Hastrup 1996; Amit and Rapport 2002). Are communities to be recognised by their location in space or their changelessness in time, or both? Are they to be recognised by the common symbols their members flag to express togetherness? Or are they to be understood as diachronic entities held together by people’s common modes of engaging with each other and the world?

When I first began research with the Gippsland Lakes commercial fishermen I had assumed that narratives of tradition and family history would play a significant role in both the conceptualization and practice of community. For this reason, I set about exploring present ways of fishing, relating to others, and conceptualising the environment in terms of family history. I wanted to know how the past had informed the present. And how who these men were, and what they knew, was influenced by who their antecedents had been. I had then planned to explore attachments to places and relationships to others, in the light of family history. Gippsland lakes fishermen are highly inter-related by ties of filiation and affinity (see Chapter 2), and so my initial research plan was not entirely misplaced. And yet, when I began to speak to fishermen about fishing, and to accompany them on fishing trips, family history, and the past in general, was the furthest thing from their minds. This fact suggested that although heritage narratives may be an important aspect of notions of collectivity it is important not to lose sight of equally pertinent aspects of belonging that Amit (in, Amit and Rapport 2002:4-5) identified as ‘mundane daily opportunities for consociation’. She has commented that these are forms of consociation [that are] often partial, ephemeral, specific to and dependent on particular contexts and activities. And in many cases, they will not be marked with strong symbolic markers of categorical identity. They are therefore not forms of collectivity that can be accounted for in the oppositional terms of ethnicized identity (Amit in, Amit and Rapport 2002:5).
Arguably, then, communities are produced and reproduced using a combination of concepts and strategies and, according to context, members may highlight or downplay different modes of expressing togetherness (Amit and Rapport 2002). In this way, communities can be said to be realised through the interplay of competing (Kohn 2002) or complementary (Astuti 2000) discourses and practices.

At the Gippsland Lakes the neighbourhood is realised in different ways according to context. Social interaction between fishermen, particularly on the lake and at the fishermen’s Co-operative, is an especially important, and highly valued, community-constituting process. It is during everyday encounters in these places that the fishing community takes shape; for example, in an encounter between two men arguing about who has the right to fish where or between two allies furtively sharing information about their catches. In each situation, fishermen’s common purposes, and ways of conceptualising relationships, are reiterated and strengthened. In each case, community is not so much symbolically represented, as enacted.

In different contexts, however, when fishermen deal with outsiders or family – away from the lake – the way in which they conceptualise and articulate both belonging and community changes dramatically. In these contexts fishermen use the past to inform community identity in the present. This is apparent when fishermen preface discussions with outsiders by stating ‘I am a fourth generation lake fishermen...’ or when fishermen memorialise family relationships in the sepia photos that adorn their homes. By flagging their genealogical identity among outsiders fishermen seek to differentiate themselves from fisheries scientists, fisheries managers, conservationists and other outsiders by drawing attention to the fact that their knowledge of the lake is derived from long term, contextualised experience, while outsider’s knowledge is drawn from brief encounters, uncontextualized theories or deficient practice that render that knowledge inadequate or inauthentic. In expressing themselves in this manner fishermen attempt to gain some control over political and bureaucratic decision-making processes that affect their livelihood. Both representations of family – photographic and discursive – reveal a very
different conceptualisation of relationship informed by a structural logic common to Euro-American societies (see Chapter 2).

The two modes of conceiving how one belongs to a community, through performance, on the one hand, or via recourse to structural ideals, on the other, produce remarkably different ways of viewing the world, relating to other people, and relating to one’s surrounds. A community constituted by social interaction relies on action in the present and a view towards ongoing future interactions between community members. This mode of belonging is dynamic and is characterised by movement, towards others and towards the future. A community constituted by discourses of tradition and genealogy presumes a person’s social identity is fixed at birth so that action in the present has no effect on a person’s ability to form, reform, or sever the social ties that implicate them in one group or another. When these two modes of conceiving community appear together, as they do at the Gippsland Lakes, a tension between movement and fixity emerges.

Carsten’s (1995) revealing discussion about the practice of ‘forgetting’ one’s past in the Malaysian village of Pulau Langkawi is illustrative of the ‘telling’ way in which the kind of tension, described above, is played-out within a community. At Pulau Langkawi, unexpectedly, new migrants forego genealogical and place-centred identity narratives that connect them to their villages of origin and, instead, work to develop new relationships within the village. Carsten argues that by letting their former ties to places and people fade – that is, by intentionally backgrounding genealogical identities – people create a community disposed to cohesion. The practices of these Malay villagers highlights the potential divisiveness of memorialising past relationships at the expense of current ones (cf. Harrison 2004). Carsten’s (1995) study reveals the significance of the interplay between the two modes of conceiving of community at the Gippsland Lakes by demonstrating how, in some contexts, the past can place a burden upon a community. At Palau Langkawi the tension that exists between static past relationships of descent and present relationships achieved by participation is overcome by ‘forgetting’ ties to those left behind. ‘Forgetting’ is not possible, or even desirable, among fishermen at the Gippsland Lakes, however. What is desirable, as I will show in the chapters to follow, is
to maintain a balance, so as to ensure that relationships do not become stunted and calcified by too much descent, by too much ‘History’\(^3\).

Thus, around the neighbourhood where everyone is related to someone there is always work to be done to background static modes of thinking about family and place. As I discuss, in turn, fishermen’s ways of conceptualising their sociality, tenurial arrangements, environmental theories, spatial practices and experiences of loss, I will show how preferences for the processual, and experiential, interplay and contrast with genealogical and other determinative modes of understanding fishing life worlds. However, because my fieldwork focused upon daily vicissitudes of fishermen’s working lives and was therefore concerned with interactions between fishermen ‘on the lake’ or ‘down at the Co-op’, I found that participatory – or performative – modes of formulating community tended to be foregrounded, while historico-traditionalist modes of formulating community tended to be intentionally backgrounded.

For the Gippsland Lakes fishing community memorialisation was a subdued affair, because genealogy and heritage can engender divisions that are ultimately, if foregrounded, antithetical to the constitution of the lake neighbourhood and the values that exist therein. The lake neighbourhood, I contend, subsists within a tension between these two modes of conceptualising collectivity. And I will argue, taking my cue from Weiner (2001), that there is an inherent value to be found in the work of backgrounding genealogy because of the way in which the reproduction of this tension invites the limits of the neighbourhood to be continuously surpassed and redrawn in a shifting play that reveals, reiterates, and recreates anew, relationships, local stories, names and places while concealing other cosmological terrains.

Despite fishermen’s preoccupations and concerns, ‘the context producing drives of more complex hierarchical organizations, especially those of the modern nation-state’ (Appadurai 1995: 222) are beginning to change fishermen’s own understandings of their

\(^3\) By ‘History’, with a capital ‘H’, I am referring to totalising accounts of ‘the past’ that, for reasons of interest and power, represent the past as if only one version of historical events existed.
place in the world and their relationships within it. For lake fishermen, like commercial fishermen across the world, dwindling fish stocks and resource sharing problems, among other things, have meant that, increasingly, outsiders are intervening in many aspects of fishery production (Bestor 2003; McGoodwin 1990; Nadel-Klein 2003; Pálsson 1998).

Gippsland Lakes fishermen now find themselves spending time organising political campaigns against further regulations or fisheries closures, engaging with environmental NGOs and recording their memories of days gone by for historians and anthropologists. They do this all in an effort to maintain their place in the fishery. In the context of resource sharing issues where only economic power or authenticity claims carry sway in political negotiations, fishermen, who have little control over the former, can accomplish much by claiming rights to resources through descent. Thus, as I will explore more fully in Chapter 8, where once having family history was somewhat of a burden among insiders because it misrepresented the contingency of neighbourhood relationships, it is now given full voice in local textual representations of the neighbourhood.

As anthropologists of modernity have noted, the world beyond the neighbourhood can coerce, persuade and encourage the reification of particular traditions or narratives (invented or not) and, as a result, transform local concepts and practices (Appadurai 1995; Hornborg 1998; Keesing 1989; Thomas 1992). In so doing, these forces can begin to subsume neighbourhoods within the processes and concerns of the nation state. The opening-up of more and more arenas in which fishermen are encouraged or forced to vocally proclaim their ‘roots’ in the industry has put greater pressure upon an already existing tension in the fishery concerning the nature of relationships to people and places. It is clear that such engagements will inevitably cause fishermen to reconceptualise their own sense of self, engendering new ways of being in the world. Thus, in positing a neighbourhood this thesis also foreshadows its passing because ‘the memories and attachments that local subjects have to their shop-signs and street-names … to their times and places for congregating and escaping, are often at odds with the needs of nation states for regulated public life’ (Appadurai 1995:215).
A Dwelling Perspective

I found out early on that fishermen at the Gippsland Lakes do not use diaries. If they are home then you can pop over and see them; if they are just leaving then it is best to try again later. On entering a fisherman’s home I often found that the interior remained in perpetual twilight with curtains drawn against the daylight so that those who had been fishing the night before could sleep. Fishing families tended to live this way, suspended between light and dark, wakefulness and sleep. These were all signs that pointed to the fact that Gippsland Lakes fishermen lived a slightly different life to the small business operators, service providers, co-op workers, tourists and retirees they lived alongside in the small towns on the shores of the lake. As I began to accompany fishermen on fishing trips I too began to live in this social twilight – unplugging the phone, drawing the curtains, and sleeping during the day, to awaken after midnight, well before dawn, ready to begin the day’s fishing.

It was the practice of fishing that set Gippsland Lakes fishermen somewhat apart from the rest of the lake-side community. Their purposes meant that they were orientated in their surrounds just a little differently to their neighbours. What was salient to them because of these purposes brought them together despite the huge differences among them in skill, style of fishing operation, age, family background, financial status, educational background, political opinion, interests and personality. It was the lake that formed the focus of fishermen’s lives and formed the basis of their neighbourhood.

In order to understand the constitution and reproduction of this local subjectivity – that is, the local collective mode of attending to the social and ecological world – I take a subject-centred, contextually grounded, approach to ethnographic writing, or a ‘dwelling perspective’. That perspective begins with an assumption that the ‘immersion of the organism-person in an environment or lifeworld [is] an inescapable condition of existence’ (Ingold 2000:153). In this view the world is understood to be ‘continually coming into being around the inhabitant … its manifold constituents tak[ing] on significance through their incorporation into a regular pattern of life activity’ (Ingold
2000:153). Our ability to access the world, pre-objectively, is particularly pertinent to this thesis because this perspective allows that our ecological, technical and social surrounds shape our understandings of the world around us, as we engage with, and move through, that world.

Ingold contrasts the ‘dwelling perspective’ with what he calls the ‘building perspective’. In this latter perspective, the world must be constructed ‘in consciousness, before [people] can act in it’ (Ingold 2000:153). In the ‘building perspective’ it is assumed that people inhabit a world in which knowledge of one’s surrounds – social, technical and ecological – is received from a collective stock of knowledge and transmitted in the form of conceptual representations from one individual mind to another, without recourse to context. This perspective, which resonates with past anthropological formulations such as Durkheim’s ‘conscience collective’, continues to be retained within social constructionist understandings of how individuals gain cultural, and social, competency (Ingold 2000; Milton 1996).

Environmental anthropologists, for instance, have struggled to accept the social constructionist perspective which posits that we find ourselves in a world which, prior to representation, exists as a chaos of shifting forms (Ingold 2000, Milton 1996). This latter perspective, which assumes that we are cut-off from the world, can ultimately lead to the conclusion that we can alter material realities through thought alone (Little 1999, Milton 1996). As one theorist has written, ultimately and inevitably these arguments lead to ‘moments of metaphorical extravagance [in which] the material ‘reality’ of the landscape disappears altogether’ (Demeritt 1994:172).

The crucial difference between the two perspectives is that while the ‘building perspective’ assumes that knowledge of surrounds can, and often does, precede engagement with those surrounds, the ‘dwelling perspective’ does not. Ethnographies of ‘communities of practice’ (Keller and Keller 1996; Lave 1993; Pálsson 1994), of which this thesis is one, must be particularly sensitive to the differences between these two analytical standpoints because, unlike more literary approaches to the study of culture, it
cannot be assumed, when working with crafts-people (Keller and Keller 1996), children with learning disabilities (McDermott 1993), naval navigators (Hutchins 1995) or fishermen (Pálsson 1994), that knowledge production proceeds solely by reference to prescriptive social representations or cultural texts. This is because non-representational aspects of a person’s surrounds such as the environment, technology and non-discursive social practices form a crucial part of the contexts within which learning and knowledge production take place.

Implicit to the ‘dwelling perspective’, then, is the view that a person who dwells in the world will discover meaning in that world through direct engagement with their surrounds. We do not learn about or understand the world primarily through the application of objectively rendered theories or representations. Instead, much of what we know and have learnt about the world has come to our attention through directed action in the world, usually action directed by others. The fact that the world is given directly is important because it allows for the repetitious particularities and intricacies of everyday experience to become understood and incorporated into our plans and purposes without lessons, sometimes without words.

Thus, we do not encounter the world primarily, or usually, in our everyday lives, with a set of disinterested or objective concepts. Instead, it is through intentional and purposive movements in our surrounds that a life-world of significance emerges in our presence. This point is well illustrated by a curious fact a fisherman once told me. He explained that the smell of baking bread from the Paynesville bakery encouraged him, when fishing in a particular region of the lake, to throw all his weight behind the task of hauling his nets. This was because, since he was fishing down wind from the bakery, the smell of fresh baked bread heralded a westerly change. The connection he made was not consciously calculated. It is not that he perceives a smell that he then categorises, notes that it has come from the direction he knows as west and, then, finally orientated, concludes that a westerly change is approaching. Rather, because he is caught-up in the task at hand the fisherman directly understands the bakery smell and its implications for his purposes. The fisherman attends and responds to the world in a particular way.
because of the particular goal he has – to catch fish – the tools at his disposal and the environment he is working in.

To understand the complex but routine world of fishing in which the Gippsland Lakes community of practice comes into being, and through which local subjectivities are formed, the social, environmental and technical context of learning must be accounted for. I give the following account of a scene from the water to illustrate this point.

When Shaun, a fisherman of two years experience, had the chance to spend the day fishing with Allen who had been fishing for 40 years, he took it. He did so not only to help Allen, but in order to ‘pick-up some ideas about fishing’. Throughout the day, Allen, when confronted with various happenings such as a particular kind of algae appearing in the net, was reminded of other occasions when such things had happened and recounted a story about them. Each story held a wealth of social and technical information that was construed as crucial to understanding these environmental happenings. On the odd occasion, when Shaun unceremoniously broke into Allen’s reveries and asked a direct technical question – such as \textit{when is the best season to fish Lake Wellington?} – Allen would rebuff him by tersely directing his attention back to the task at hand.

A strictly representational analysis of this situation might find that Shaun’s understanding of fishing had not been enhanced during the trip because no propositional knowledge had been transferred from teacher to student. The way in which Allen treated environmental occurrences as portals to different times, places and people was not self-evidently informative. By taking a ‘dwelling perspective’, however, it is possible to view Allen’s aloof posture and terse tone as, in effect, saying to Shaun – \textit{haven’t you been listening}? In this way Allen directed Shaun’s attention to the point of his musings about, for example, algae, which were invitations to take note of the context in which things occurred. Not only was it important to take note of where, when, and how you had come across algae in this way in the past, but it was also important that you recalled which people, and what kind of people, had first drawn your attention to algae in the first place. Allen was saying

\footnote{Pseudonyms are used throughout this thesis.}
indirectly, that it was no good asking for simple rules of fishing – such as when it was best to fish Lake Wellington – because no simple answer could be given. Thus, Allen was emphasising the importance of paying attention to the contextual richness of neighbourhood events.

Taking a ‘situational’ view of the learning encounter between Allen and Shaun the encounter can be comprehended as one that ‘encompasses mind and lived-in world’ (Lave 1993:7). The encounter then becomes a social situation on board a boat in a particular environment and not merely a process contained in Shaun’s mind. Allen’s stories, populated with other fishermen’s trials and triumphs, suggest the wider community of practice. Thus, taking

‘… a decentred view of master-apprentice relations leads to an understanding that mastery resides not in the master but in the organization of the community of practice of which the master is a part …’ (Lave and Wagner 1991:94)

Shaun learns directly from Allen by attending to his actions on board the boat. As these events take place he is encouraged to link them to broader environmental patterns and the wider practice community. Allen does not need to, nor want to, represent this information in propositional form because such representations lose their immediacy and, thus, their efficacy. In this way community-wide modes of attending to the world are established and re-established. The process of learning, although being a self-motivated movement of discovery and re-discovery, is thus never pre-social, or pre-conceptual, and is, in fact, implicitly directed by other persons. This is not to suggest, however, that the emergence of new insight and ‘creative acts of discovery’ are not possible or that knowledge is spread evenly across the community.

Taking a dwelling perspective, then, it can be argued that aspects of the world emerge into, or recede from, our direct awareness according to the activities we are caught-up in at any moment in time. The social settings in which we undertake activities influence our awareness of aspects of the world. The movements of a solitary fisherman quietly scanning a secluded bay for signs of fish, for example, are expressions of the practice
community because the fisherman has learnt to see fish in this way, at least partly, by
imitating others. What he finds, and how he interprets those findings, cannot be entirely
disentangled from the way in which other Gippsland Lakes fishermen have influenced his
vision and, in this way, generated the local neighbourhood of known places, familiar
signs and understandable responses.

In the following section I will briefly explain how I spent my time at the lake and thus
how I generated the ethnographic data that lead me to these conclusions.

*How I Spent My Time*

I lived at Lakes Entrance, a town situated on the shores of the Gippsland Lakes, between
November 2002 and March 2004. During this time I accompanied eleven of the eighteen
licenced fishermen on at least one of approximately forty fishing trips that lasted between
four hours and five days, with most lasting approximately eight hours. In the course of
these fishing trips I spent my time as a deckhand helping fishermen with their work, as an
observer and, simply, eating and sleeping. It was in this context, and other ‘fishing
contexts’ that I knew them best.

Initially it was difficult to convince fishermen that taking me with them on a fishing trip
would not be a bad idea. After a while, however, I began to get more invitations. I can
only imagine that this was because, when it became known that my presence was not too
much of a burden and that I was not too clumsy or a danger to the operation, word spread.
In fact, fishermen began to respond positively to the fact that I had ‘been out on the lake’.
They took this as a sign of genuine interest in their practice, an interest which few
outsiders had shown before. It became clear that the interest I showed enabled them to
feel confident that my presence on board was, at the very least, benign. Once I had been
out on the lake I too was able to participate, in a very limited way, in the constitution of
the lake neighbourhood because I could talk about nets, fish, boats, fishing shots and
lake ‘personalities’.

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5 A fishing shot is a place where a fisherman casts, or as they say at the lake, ‘shoots’ his net.
Over the course of fifteen months at the Gippsland Lakes I spent much time speaking to all of the current licence holders and around thirty other ‘insiders’ who had been former licence holders, deckhands and former deckhands about the lake, the work and their relationships with one another. I spoke to men, in their lounge rooms, on their back porches and as they mended gear in their sheds. Sometimes I interviewed them more formally, and recorded these interviews. Towards the end of my time at the lake I spent time with ten current and two retired fishermen recording the names and whereabouts of fishing shots in order to produce a map of these places. I also spent time with fishermen en masse by attending meetings of the East Gippsland Estuarine Fishermen’s Association (EGEFA)6 where discussion ranged across topics as diverse as micro-algae infestations, native title claims over the Gippsland Lakes and the National Competition Policy. Throughout 2003 I worked, on a casual basis, at the fishermen’s Co-operative where I packed fish for export to Japan. Because I worked at the Co-operative, and was therefore to some extent ‘an insider’, I was able to contribute, in some small way, to the ongoing round of gossip that surrounded this complex. Doing this work enabled me in another way to contribute to the ongoing unfolding of neighbourhood at the lake.

I had some opportunities to spend time with fishermen in contexts where the everyday practical concerns of fishing receded into the background and other concerns about family or politics, for example, became apparent. These were occasions when I was invited to fishermen’s homes for dinner with their families or when I attended ‘stakeholder’ meetings convened by the Department of Primary Industries (DPI). At such meetings lake fishermen interacted with other lake ‘stakeholders’ such as Victoria’s recreational fishing lobby group VRFish, tourism operators and conservationists. I found that it was in the context of close family and in the presence of ‘outsiders’ that genealogy, heritage or both were foregrounded. My account of the lake neighbourhood remains partial, however, because I was least familiar with these neighbourhood contexts. Yet, as

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6 The EGEFA grew from an earlier fishermen’s association based in Paynesville, the town that had once been the centre of the Gippsland Lakes commercial fishery. The earlier association had a cooperative function, providing fishermen with ice and nets. The EGEFA no longer operates as a cooperative; it is independent from government and membership is voluntary.
I will show throughout this thesis, the spectre of genealogy and heritage remained as background to encounters ‘on the lake’; it was the very effort to suppress these ways of conceiving of relationships that suggested their significance in other contexts.

I will now briefly contextualise this thesis by providing some background information concerning the Gippsland Lakes, the commercial fishing industry that exists there, and the wider, regional setting in which the lake neighbourhood exists.

The Lake and Commercial Fishing

The fishermen who are the focus of this work live in the towns and settlements situated on the immense flood plain south of the Great Dividing Range that fringes a substantial system of interconnected inland estuarine lakes known as the Gippsland Lakes (see fig. 1.1). The lake, and those aspects of the environment that affect its many guises, consume fishermen’s thoughts on a daily basis. It is a focal point in these men’s lives. In many cases fishermen’s homes lie within walking distance of the lake’s shores, and in some cases their homes, as well as their windows and arm chairs, overlook an aspect of the lake.

At both small and large spatio-temporal scales the lake system presents as a place of diversity, changeability and contradictions. In order to keep abreast of the ways in which the lake changes through time and space, and thus to fish competently, fishermen must spend an enormous amount of time on the water peering into its depths and scrutinizing its shallows, mulling over weather forecasts, interrogating the paths of birds and the phase of the moon.
The lake system covers an area of approximately 360 square kilometres. Situated behind an ancient but slim sand barrier that keeps the oceanic waters of Bass Strait at a remove, the lake forms a complex waterway having both wide expanses of water with vistas as far as the eye can see and more contracted spaces where mazes of islands, sand bars and tiny bays create a sense of seclusion and secrecy. In some places the lake is fringed by dense population centres, in others by large tracts of national park. Travelling by boat through the water-ways one passes isolated sandy beaches fringed by banksia scrub, eucalypt woodlands or wetlands. Where large trees overhang the lake shore, the dark forms of submerged tree trunks and branches can be discerned in the still depths of the clear lake waters. In other places, large pleasure boat marinas, holding hundreds of expensive, shimmering boats, extend out into the lake. Here the surface water is lightly smudged with rainbows of leaked motor fuel that boats have left in their wake. Behind these marinas lie ostentatious holiday homes whose greedy windows soak up the lake and ocean panoramas.

The variation described above is also found as one views the lake over brief (day to day), intermediate (season to season), and longer (decade to decade) time scales. On a calm day the lake appears as solid silver spread to the horizon. When the breeze picks up, though, this appearance can rapidly disintegrate. At these times the lake turns a dark blue, broken through with white-capped waves that make it difficult to set and haul nets. In some seasons, the waters of the lake appear as a sapphire blue expanse and it is possible to peer down to the lake bed and see the seagrass meadows lying below. After major rainfall, however, the five primary rivers that feed the lake system can swell, bringing pulses of freshwater into the estuary and causing fish to move as the water’s salinity changes from place to place. At these times the lake becomes dark and murky from the silt brought by the flood waters. And sometimes, after long hot summers, blue green-algae can bloom turning the lake into a green sulphuric smelling quagmire that forces tourists to leave in disgust and limits fishermen’s ability to catch fish.

The lake is similarly changeable across larger time scales. Originally the lakes were predominantly freshwater, since the natural entrance opened to the ocean only
periodically after floods. The lake system has been permanently connected to the ocean (Bass Strait) since an artificial entrance was opened in 1889, however, and since then has slowly changed to being predominantly estuarine (Synan 1989:169). Over the course of decades, as salinity levels increased across the system, fringing reed beds and paperbark swamps disappeared. After this, sea-grass beds gradually became the predominant aquatic vegetation type (Synan 1989:192). The distribution of sea-grass beds has also fluctuated during the last century with a substantial die-back in the 1920s and 1930s associated with the presence of a species of small crab that were so numerous they hindered fishing and were named the ‘plague crab’. Fishermen who recalled this infestation said that these crabs denuded the bottom of seagrass and destroyed fish habitat. As a consequence, they argued, bream catches, in particular, fell. Fishermen say that as the ‘plague crabs’ gradually disappeared around the 1960s, the sea-grass beds flourished and fish, particularly bream, were again caught in large quantities (see also Lee & Ellis 2001).

These long term changes which occur over the space of lifetimes are difficult to perceive in the context of a system that is characterised by much variation at lesser time scales. Two fishermen, who came into the lake fishery from the ocean fishery where it was common to record the time and place of catches, said that they no longer recorded such information because the variability of the lake environment made it almost impossible to discover patterns in catch data.

The lake system has a total catchment area of 20,600 square kilometres (Webster et al. 2001) making it extremely vulnerable to external or off-site environmental modifications such as irrigation, farming and logging (Harris et al. 1998) The opening of the entrance, alterations to the flow of four of the five major rivers as a result of dams, substantial logging in river catchments, intensive agriculture, and the development of population centres around the shores of the lake have led to substantial alteration of the Gippsland Lakes environment and, thus, the fish life it supports (Synan 1989; Webster et al. 2001). These modifications have increased the variability of an already variable system.
For instance, the depletion of oxygen (anoxia) in lake waters, caused by water stratification, has meant that 80% of subsurface water (below 5m) is incapable of sustaining fish life (Gunthorpe 1997). Water stratification occurs in the lake because, since the opening of the artificial entrance, waters with differing salinities and, hence, weights are now present. When stratification occurs oxygen rich surface waters do not mix with heavier, more saline, water and anoxic regions emerge. Anoxia is further exacerbated at the Gippsland Lakes by periodic blue-green algae (\textit{Nodularia})\textsuperscript{7} blooms that cover the lake in a thick blue-green sludge. The decomposition process of the bloom biomass uses an enormous amount of oxygen, and therefore exacerbates the anoxic conditions. These events are fed by nutrients introduced into the system via run-off from farms and logged areas (Gunthorpe 1997; Webster et al. 2001). Blue-green algae blooms, produced by high nutrient loads, were once rare but have now become cyclical because of the way in which the algae’s life-cycle actually generates conditions – decreased oxygen levels and nitrogen-limitation – that favour blooms. In this way, bloom events establish a positive feed-back loop in which one bloom establishes the conditions which encourage future events, and so on. Thus, the amount of viable habitat for a large range of animals and plants has been greatly reduced by human interventions in the lake system over the last 100 years (Gunthorpe 1997; Webster et al. 2001). Further, these interventions have most likely contributed to the frequency and magnitude of variation in the lake system through that time.

Despite these environmental fluctuations the lake system supports at least 100 species of fish (Gunthorpe 1997). The most important commercial species of recent times have been black bream (\textit{Acanthopagrus butcherii}), followed by tailor (\textit{Pomatomus saltatrix}), silver trevally (\textit{Pseudocaranx dentex}), dusky flathead (\textit{Platycephalus fuscus}), yellow-eye mullet (\textit{Aldrichetta forsteri}) and the introduced species European carp (\textit{Cyprinus australis}) (PIRVic 2004:10-11). In 2004 Gippsland Lakes fishermen caught 686 tonnes of fish at a value of A$1.9 million. Thirty-three tonnes of this was black bream at a value of

\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Nodularia} although commonly called blue-green algae is, in fact, a photosynthesizing, nitrogen fixing bacteria from the family Cyanobacteria.
A$340,000. Since the late 1970s, the annual value of the fishery has been between A$1.5-2.0 million (PIRVic 2004).

Recently, commercial fishermen have been targeting the lucrative salt water species King George whiting (*Sillaginodes punctata*). A number of fishermen have commented that the increase in numbers of King George whiting is a response to the increasing salinity of the lake system and signals the inevitable decline of the black bream population; black bream prefer brackish water and the survival of larval and juvenile black bream is thought to be dependent on salinities in the range of 19-21 ppt (parts per thousand) (Cashmore, Conran & Knucky 2000).

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8 The fisheries production information produced for the Department of Primary Industries (PIRVic 2004) does not provide a separate listing for this fish species; it is included as ‘Other’. It is likely that the King George whiting catch makes-up a substantial amount of the $649,000 value recorded as ‘Other’ in 2004.

9 The salinity of the oceanic waters of Bass Strait is 35 parts per thousand (Harris et al. 1998)
Figure 1.2 shows the fluctuation in the black bream catch since records began in 1914 (Cashmore, Conran & Knucky 2000:7). Although bream catches have been declining since the 1970s it is difficult to attribute this trend to commercial fishing, either alone or even in small part, given the environmental fluctuations that have been recorded over this period\(^\text{10}\). It is likely, however, that the changing species profile at the Gippsland Lakes reflects the substantial alterations that have been taking place in the lake system in the course of the last 100 years. Despite declining catches, during my field-work black bream was still the most talked about, anticipated, and celebrated of fish while King George whiting remained a private pleasure to catch.

As the description above suggests, the lake presents, at different spatio-temporal scales, a highly changeable environment, both because of, and in spite of, human interventions in the system. The variability of the lake system across space and time keep fish on the move in search of favourable habitats in which to dwell.

Gippsland Lakes fishermen must follow fish in order to catch them. Here, fish are caught using either mesh nets or haul seines, and fishermen may specialise in either method or use both methods. Each technique expresses the tenet ‘follow the fish’ in a slightly different manner and, thus, each technique moves fishermen through the water in a slightly different fashion. Mesh nets are set like fences in the water and ensnare fish, such as black bream, flathead, silver trevally, mullet and flounder, as they move through the water (see fig 1.3).

Using this method, fishermen set eight to twelve nets across a region of the lake each night and haul them the next morning. Fishermen often analyse the way in which fish mesh in their nets to discover in which direction they are moving. For this reason, they say that ‘mesh nets tell you’ what the fish are doing. Fishermen move to new places and set their nets in these places according to the indicators they find in their nets from week to week.

\(^\text{10}\) The interpretation of the graph is made even more uncertain by the fact that over this time enormous changes have been made to input technology and concomitant restraints imposed on fishermen by management.
Haul seines, by contrast, are cast in a semicircle around schools of fish such as black bream, silver trevally, tailor and garfish (see fig. 1.4).

Fishermen spend many hours searching, sometimes in vain, for schools of fish in a suitable location. Some fishermen will travel great distances in search of fish, while others routinely search in more localised regions. As they troll along the waterways, fishermen scan the water for signs of movement – a flick of a tail, a shimmer of a fish scale, or signs in the shallows that indicate a school is nearby. Once a school of fish is
located the net is cast around it and each end of the net is gradually hauled closer and closer together until a tight circle is made and the fish become trapped. For both haul seine fishing and mesh net fishing, the action of casting a net is termed ‘shooting’ as in ‘I am shooting my net’, and places where fishermen shoot their nets are called fishing shots, as in ‘I know a number of shots around Flannigan Island’.

Gippsland Lakes fishermen say that they are ‘nomads’ or that they ‘follow the fish’ and stress that they do not remain ensconced in established bounded tracts of water awaiting the arrival of fish. By contrast, Orlove (2002), working with Peruvian lake fishermen, and Acheson (1988), working with lobstermen in Maine, have discussed the emphasis these fishing communities, despite their enormous differences, place on the construction and maintenance of boundaries in each respective water body. Instead, at the Gippsland Lakes, fishermen are concerned with the dissolution of boundaries, which inevitably arise in the course of fishing (as discussed in Chapter 7), rather than their reification. It is by moving across the water from place to place, from one encounter with a friend or enemy to another, that community and locality are constituted. Fishermen are concerned to always dissolve boundaries because boundaries would constrain that movement. The way in which community is constituted here, through participation and performance, and the way in which inter-personal relationships take on a certain dynamic quality under these practices, directs fishermen’s attention to the variability and movement in their surrounds. Thus, although fishermen move through the lakescape following fish, it is only because they conceptualise the lake as a place of passage, with no clear boundaries, that they practice in this manner.

Therefore, local ways of conceiving of social relationships simultaneously act to embed fishermen within local environments in particular ways (see also Hornborg 1998). Changeable environmental states do not determine fishermen’s experience of social relationships. Rather, the relevant aspects of the environment – its changeability and unpredictability, as opposed to its manageability or measurability, for instance – are foregrounded by fishermen’s own socially constituted purposes and capacities. Through the process, described earlier, of privileging states of movement over fixity, fishermen
remain attentive to their surrounds, and in a very real way this characterises their
deady to reproduce locality, as a form of attention to the ever-changing environment
within which they work.

Fishermen’s ability to move through the lake, however, is constrained, to an extent, by
various forces beyond the lake system itself. First, fishermen must work within
parameters established by the state government which sets out, under the Fisheries Act
(Parliament of Victoria 2002), when and where it is legal to fish. Significantly, fishermen
may not fish in rivers or within 400m of any river mouth and in certain other designated
water bodies. Also fishermen may not fish between twelve noon on Friday and an hour
before sunset on Sunday.

Secondly, and perhaps most significantly, conflicts with recreational fishers over fish
resources constrain commercial fishermen’s movements within the lake system. The most
tangible of these constraints is the code of practice that commercial lake fishermen
themselves drew up, in conjunction with the fisheries department, in order to limit space-
use conflicts between themselves and recreational fishermen. This code of practice
excludes commercial fishing in particular locations during peak tourist times because
those places are frequented by recreational fishermen and boaters, are highly visible from
the shore or both. By excluding themselves from those places, in this way, commercial
fishermen have attempted to minimise politically damaging spatial conflicts with
constituents from the powerful recreational fishing lobby group VRFish. It is ultimately
hoped that the code will reduce political pressure from the recreational fishing lobby to
oust commercial fishermen from the lake (VRFish 2005).

The failure, to date, of fishermen’s public relations efforts is evidenced by the fact that
state governments continue to pressure commercial fishermen to ‘voluntarily’ relinquish
their licences, for a nominal fee, at the behest of the recreational fishing lobby. These
decisions are the ultimate restriction upon fishermen’s ability to pursue relationships, and
by their movements, to reproduce locality. In 1892 it was reported that there were two-
hundred men fishing from one-hundred boats at the Gippsland Lakes (Lee and Ellis 2001:
10). Since this time the number of fishermen fishing the lake has been steadily declining. In 1989 there were thirty-seven commercial fishermen operating at the Gippsland Lakes (Victorian Bay and Inlet Fisheries Association [VBIFA] 2005). When I began my research (2002-2004) there were eighteen. In 2006, as I write, there are only ten lake fishermen11 remaining (Minister for Agriculture 2006).

In the following section I will examine, in greater depth, the dimensions of these conflicts by providing a brief portrait of the wider milieu in which fishermen practice. In Chapter 8 I consider the way in which the dwindling of movement on the lake, as licences are bought-back by the state government, and men grow old, has affected the remaining members of the community and their ability to continue to reproduce locality.

**Tourism and Other Kinds of Fishing**

When I lived at Lakes Entrance eight of the eighteen lake fishermen and a number of retired lake fishermen also lived at that town. The other ten licence holders lived in the towns of Paynesville, Metung, Swan Reach, Buchan and Bairnsdale. Although it is one of the largest towns12 in which lake fishermen reside, Lakes Entrance is similar to the other smaller towns because, like them, it caters for a large number of seasonal domestic tourists and is home to a substantial retiree population.

Lakes Entrance lies on a large finger of land that extends out into the Gippsland Lakes, near the place where a narrow entrance connects the lake to the open ocean. The town is a major domestic tourist destination, and is particularly attractive to recreational boaters and fishermen because of its proximity to both the lake system and the sea. The main shopping strip at Lakes Entrance stretches for a kilometre or so along the shore of one small arm of the Gippsland Lakes. The strip is aglow with ‘appealing’ tourist outlets including bait and tackle shops, minigolf parks, ice cream parlours, cafés, motels and fish and chip shops. In summer the town buzzes with the noise of families on their annual

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11 In the category ‘lake fishermen’ I do not include those people who are licenced to catch carp, eel or bait. These people also work the Gippsland Lakes, among other places.

12 Lakes Entrance has a population of around 5,000 people (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996).
holidays. These tourists spend their time surfing, swimming, boating, recreational fishing, and lounging in the dry heat of the Australian summer, returning at night to sleep in motels, bed and breakfast accommodation or caravans situated in the extensive caravan parks that cover much of the town’s land. Lakes Entrance fishermen, though, like myself, lived beyond the busy main street in modest residential homes on quiet urban streets.

Lakes Entrance is one of Victoria’s major commercial ocean fishing ports. Its calm estuaries harbour from fifty-five to seventy-five ocean-going commercial fishing vessels that catch a large variety of seafood including shark, flathead, prawns, pilchards, crayfish and scallops. As one drives or walks down the main street of town it is impossible not to notice the large, brightly coloured, ocean-going fishing boats moored at the numerous jetties extending out into the southern arm of the lake. It is from here that ocean-going boats leave the lake system and enter the ocean via the narrow ocean entrance. On most days, when the weather is fine, the colourful ocean boats are busy with movement as fishermen prepare for fishing trips, and tourists wander about peering into boats and marvelling at the unfamiliar sight of industry at work. At these times the wharves ring with the sounds of voices, power tools and radios, and are strewn with nets to be mended and gear to be loaded or unloaded.

On the other side of town, away from the main street, lies a quiet arm of the lake. It was here that seven lake fishermen moored most, or all of, their small fishing vessels among the tiny yellow, red and blue hire boats and larger recreational fishing vessels. On most days, especially at weekends and school holidays, the boat launching ramp was a riot of activity as tourists launched pleasure boats and left to go recreational fishing on the lake. Often large crowds gathered to watch, give advice to, or wait in line behind boat owners as they either skilfully or ineptly manoeuvred awkward boat trailers down the narrow ramp, and into launching position. At such times excitement and tempers ran high. It was to this same boat launching ramp and the small jetties that surrounded it that I sometimes came in the early hours of the morning, groggy and freezing, to join a fisherman (and his crew if he had any) for a fishing trip. The quiet night and pre-dawn departures of local
Lakes Entrance commercial fishermen contrasted markedly with the riotous animation of the post-dawn recreational fishing crowd.

Gippsland Lakes fishermen live in dispersed locations centred on the lake. It is on the lake and not so much down at the jetties or launching places that lake fishermen come together. Thus, many lake fishermen do not moor their boats alongside others; in fact, many fishermen launch their boats at remote locations each morning and return, boats in tow, after the day’s fishing. For these reasons they appear, to the anthropologist, to be an elusive group. There is another reason for this enigmatic behaviour however; lake fishermen deliberately keep low profiles, preferring to fish in places out of view of townships and lakeside residences because, as they said by way of explanation, ‘people like to eat fish, but they hate nets’; tourists loved boats and watching fish being unloaded at the dock, but they did not want to come face to face with the processes by which fish were caught. Tourists, lake fishermen explained, were enchanted by the ocean-going fleet, since they would never actually see these boats at work. It was quite common, however, for the same sort of person to watch lake fishermen as they went about their work, often from telescopes situated in well appointed holiday homes, and to subsequently call the fisheries department complaining about nets being used in the lake (despite their legality). At peak tourist times, then, fishermen felt unwelcome at the lake, and shied away from populous places where hundreds of windows overlooked the lake. They also stayed away from areas frequented by recreational fishermen because of the way some deliberately blocked off fishing places and destroyed gear in a bid to dissuade them from fishing.

In the summer months and school holidays, as fishermen fade into the background, the lake begins to buzz with the sounds of other pursuits, as speed boats, cruisers, yachts, canoes and house boats dot the blue expanse of lake. Many of these boating tourists come to catch fish with a hook and line – the same fish that commercial fishermen target. It is not surprising then, that conflict over access to fish resources exists at the Gippsland Lakes.
These tensions between resource-user groups have existed since fishing first began in the lake. Synan (1989) notes, for instance, that in April 1878 the *Gippsland Mercury* chastised the commercial lake fishermen, bemoaning ‘the criminal slaughter of the finny tribe’ and accusing the commercial fishermen of

using nets indiscriminately; without regard to the size of the meshes and thoroughly indifferent as to whether they are violating the law or not. It is stated that nets from which the most minute fish cannot escape are used, being run from boat to boat, and the contents being dragged on shore irrespective of size and description (quoted in Synan 1989:165)

These outraged accusations are remarkably similar to those levelled at contemporary commercial fishermen at the Gippsland Lakes. For instance, Ray Page the executive officer of VRFish wrote to ‘Letters to the Editor’ in the *Barnsdale Advertiser* that,

It is time the commercial fishing industry recognised the days of taking as many fish as they like using any method they can are over (December 2, 2002).

Fishermen have consistently been the losers of these political negotiations, mediated by the Victorian state government, about resource sharing arrangements. This, in fact, seems to be a common problem around the world with commercial fishermen rarely being able to command the political influence that recreational fishing lobby groups can (Griffith 1999; Kitner and Maiolo 1988; McGoodwin 1990). The outcomes of such negotiations have often seen older fishermen ‘encouraged’ to sell their licences in periodic rounds of government buy-back schemes. In recent years such buy-back rounds have been accompanied by what fishermen perceived to be veiled threats to completely close the fishery to commercial fishing. Indeed, to add weight to such implicit threats, in 2003 the small commercial fisheries at Mallacoota Inlet and Lake Tyers, east of the Gippsland Lakes, were unceremoniously closed to commercial fishing and turned into ‘recreational fishing havens’.
Until very recently the recreational fishing lobby has consistently levelled claims of ‘over-fishing’ against commercial fishermen, suggesting that commercial fishing is inherently un-environmental and rapacious. In making these claims the recreational fishing lobby has implied that recreational fishing itself has no measurable effect on the environment. In part, recreational fishers have been able to imply this because state governments only measured the commercial catch. Arguably, the reallocation of resources from the commercial sector to the unscrutinised recreational sector, by the state government, has been a politically astute decision because it enables government bodies to escape the reality of the environmental problems at the Gippsland Lakes made evident through catch data provided by commercial fishermen. Although commercial fishermen, by their own admission, have an impact upon the fish population they become, as the sole environmental indicators, easy scapegoats for largely external, almost intractable, environmental problems occurring across the vast catchment area.

In fact, the Department of Primary Industry’s (DPI) fisheries division website states that,

In recent years declines have been observed in catches of ... black bream in the Gippsland Lakes. While these trends are more likely to be a result of deteriorating habitat/environmental conditions affecting reproductive success and/or migratory behaviour of the fish, there is nevertheless a need to ensure that fishing pressure on these two stocks is contained to a level that does not exacerbate the situation (DPI 2005)

And, while fisheries managers from the DPI volunteer similar opinions, these agencies and agents are, like commercial fishermen, unable to counter (through recommendations to elected members of parliament) the Realpolitik of fisheries resource management where resource grabs are made by well funded, politically-savvy lobbies. As many fishermen are aware, their natural allies, the fish consumers, have little or no idea where their fish comes from and, for this reason, are in no position to demand their right to continued access (by proxy) to this public resource. Thus, legislation to phase out fishing in Victoria’s Bays and Inlets, VRFish’s stated goal (VRFish 2005), continues with little resistance.
Interestingly, in recent times fisheries management has become increasingly concerned about the impact recreational fishing has upon fish populations. In a recent report it was found that in the year 2002-03 commercial fishermen across Victoria caught 53 tonnes of black bream while the recreational catch was estimated to be 203 tonnes\(^\text{13}\) (Henry and Lyle 2003:88). In response to this new scrutiny the recreational fishing lobby has begun to make economic arguments against commercial fishing in place of environmental arguments.

The declining number of commercial fishermen at the Gippsland Lakes is an outcome of political machinations taking place beyond the lake’s shores. The decline of the bream population since the 1970s has also played a part, because the scarcity of this fish has compounded existing tensions between the Victorian recreational fishing lobby and commercial fishermen. The decline in the bream population, and therefore fishermen’s current political situation, can be explained by inevitable environmental changes that have taken place since the construction of the artificial entrance at Lakes Entrance more than one-hundred years ago. For lake fishermen, however, as I will explain in Chapter 4, these changes, like other short and medium term environmental alterations, are not experienced as unexpected or conceived of as avoidable. Thus, their response to long term variability sets them apart from others who have concerns about the lake system.

The conflict over fish resources that exists at the Gippsland Lakes is not surprising. One consequence of the emergence, in practice, of particular local subjectivities is that ‘disagreements over what is relevant; whether, and how much, something is worth knowing and doing; what to make of ambiguous circumstances … and who cares most about what’ (Lave 1993:15) are likely to arise when different communities of practice are brought together by competing or shared interests. For instance, the smell of baking bread is unlikely to be of relevance to a recreational fisherman fishing down-wind of Paynesville, in the same way that it is for a commercial fisherman. In this scenario the recreational fisherman is much less concerned about his gear being destroyed (and

\(^{13}\) 80% of black bream caught in Victoria come from the Gippsland Lakes (Gunthorpe 1997:22)
therefore his livelihood being destroyed) because he fishes for pleasure using different techniques.

Despite their intention to keep a low profile, lake fishermen are out and about, meeting in far flung locations on the lake, at the fishermen’s Co-op, or visiting each other on their way to and from work. Thus, to observe, and participate in the social life of fishermen one needs entrée into these private spaces. Certainly it was only when I began to be invited on fishing trips that I realised that the lake itself was one of the most important arenas through which fishermen produce ‘reliably local neighbourhoods within which [local subjectivities] can be recognised and managed’ (Appadurai 1995:206). Indeed, it was only to my eyes that the lake lay as an open blue expanse. For Gippsland Lakes fishermen it was teeming with the kind of social significance that exists in any ‘reliably local neighbourhood’. The social signs in the water compressed this apparently wide expanse, creating a familiarity which could be experienced as both heartening and stifling. Fishermen simply needed to hear the sound of a particular motor, see a particular net in the water, or a small-boat shaped blob on the horizon to know another’s whereabouts.

Commercial fishermen at the Gippsland Lakes are situated in an environmentally and politically precipitous position at the turn of the 21st century. Fishermen, however, will happily point out that things have always been like this. As one elderly fisherman told me, when his grandfather arrived at the Gippsland Lakes at the turn of the 20th century the townsfolk told him to keep heading east since the lakes had been fished out. What has changed, however, is fishermen’s capacity to challenge those who would dispute their right to fish the lake, because new, alternative visions of the Gippsland Lakes are being fashioned in a way that leaves no place for fishermen’s practice. Indeed, as areas reserved for recreational fishing are enlarged, and anti-competition policy is enforced, it is becoming clear that the neighbourhood is being entrained by other cosmological terrains with different preoccupations and concerns. And fishermen grown old find it more and more difficult to mount a challenge to other ways of conceiving of the lake
neighbourhood since, there are few young people to whom these constituting practices may be passed on.

**Thesis Outline**

In Chapters 2 and 3 I explore the basis of the tension between backgrounded genealogy and foregrounded performance within which the neighbourhood subsists. I show how ‘on the lake’ the determinative qualities of kinship, structured by the family tree, are experienced by fishermen as a burden and that, for this reason, fishermen attempt to downplay the genealogical logic that frames understandings of relationality in other contexts. In Chapter 3 I follow fishermen as they traverse the lake neighbourhood pursuing relationships between kin and non-kin alike. These relationships, I show, by contrast to those discussed in Chapter 2, are open-ended and flexible and reveal fishermen’s preference for a neighbourhood constituted by performance.

In Chapter 4 I show how, by attending to the concerns of more experienced men, fishermen come to learn and perform these styles of relating to one another. Thus, I draw attention to the way in which this tension, outlined in previous chapters, is reproduced. I show how the social milieu of the neighbourhood constitutes particular modes of attending to the environment and principles for acting in that environment, principles I have called *incomplete knowledge, being there*, and *raw fishing*. These principles set fishermen apart from other groups, such as fisheries scientists and recreational fishermen, groups that also have an interest in the lake.

In Chapter 5 I describe the kinds of relationships fishermen have with one another and sketch out the moral dimensions of belonging at the Gippsland Lakes as envisioned by fishermen through the local discourse of the Gentlemen’s Agreement. These agreements are not simply a way of evenly distributing fishermen across the lake, although they achieve this too. Rather, I show that the agreements provide normative guide-lines, including the principle of paying attention to irony, which ensure that in competitive contexts, relationships – which are susceptible to ossification in such contexts – remain fluid.
Chapter 6 concerns the way in which fishermen conceptualise and realise attachments to places in the lake. I discuss how fishermen’s emphasis upon participatory modes of constituting community engender a particular understanding of possession, whereby rights to place are judged according to a person’s performance of place-knowledge.

Continuing the concern with place, Chapter 7 describes and presents the outcomes of an exercise undertaken with a number of fishermen to record and map the names of fishing shots (places) at the Gippsland Lakes. Places enter, remain in, and disappear from society over time. At the lake the instability and character of the local toponyms reflect the pedagogic practices described in Chapter 4 and index, more broadly, the inter-relationship between movement and fixity within which the local neighbourhood inheres.

In Chapter 8, I discuss how the nature of inter-subjective relationships described throughout this thesis is beginning to change as the nation state intrudes more and more upon the lake neighbourhood. As relationships to people change so do the dimensions of fishing places, because it is at fishing shots that fishermen come together. Once, these places held vestiges of these past inter-subjective moments captured in names and stories. As these are founded and recalled less and less frequently fishermen’s experience of themselves and their surrounds becomes concomitantly despondent. These changes, as I will show, are being experienced as loss.

Finally, in Chapter 9 I conclude that it is by actively backgrounding kinship relationships ‘on the lake’, stressing the achievement of belonging, conceiving of an indeterminate environment, attending to irony, conceptualising entitlement as enskilled and understanding themselves as co-authors of the shifting narratives of fishing shots, that Gippsland Lakes fishermen reproduce the neighbourhood on a day-to-day basis. It is these performances that ensure other locally generated modes of conceptualising relationships do not become the only lens through which relationships are understood. By backgrounding genealogy in occupational contexts fishermen ensure that very ‘real’ and affective ties of kinship, depicted in the cherished photographs that adorn so many of their homes, do not determine and, thus, fix the potentialities of encounters that transpire on the lake or down at the co-op.
Figure 1.5 Aerial view of Gippsland Lakes showing entrance.

Figure 1.6 Gippsland Lakes Fishing Boat.
Chapter 2
Families: The Submerged Trunks and Branches

Introduction
Families
The Shape of Relationships
Blood Lines and Permanence
Setting Limits on Family
Family Background: Setting Limits at the Gippsland Lakes
Conclusion

Introduction

“Do you have a favourite? You know, a fishing place that has treated you well over the years?” I ask hopefully.

“No, no, no, we follow the fish!” The fishermen tell me emphatically.

Fishermen derive their living from an environment that is constantly changing. Some say that they live for the thrill of this changeability. Fishermen move about to follow fish, or the rumour of fish, regardless of the temporal or spatial scale that defines the extent of the grounds they most often frequent. This movement across the water inevitably leads to competitive encounters between men. Sometimes these encounters occur between members of what the fishermen themselves would term the extended family. Yet explicit obligations and expectations rarely figure in these encounters. Instead, fishermen engage as if they were not tethered to a family tree. They can meet as if they were non-kin because much work has gone into limiting or backgrounding blood relationships. At the Gippsland Lakes the need for movement, as well as the value placed upon it, is reflected in the way that fishermen place limits on family obligations.

When I mention to my friends from the city of Melbourne that the fishermen I work with in the Gippsland Lakes are all very much interrelated, they are surprised, there is an awkward silence. My friends are unsure what to make of this closeness. To them it is unusual, even exotic. They would like to know more. I tell them that the family trees of men who still work in the industry often reveal multiple genealogical connections that link those individuals.
To my friends this closeness seems either dangerously parochial and suffocating or wholesomely tight-knit and inclusive. Their reactions convey a concern for boundaries and limits within family relationships. Their ambivalence is demonstrative of a major preoccupation in the lives of people everywhere; a preoccupation that involves separating or defining relatives and non-relatives and, once this distinction is drawn, deciding how we should relate to those categories of people. This is a concern that my friends share with the fishermen of the Gippsland Lakes; one that stems, in part, from the way in which Euro-American societies reckon kinship.

Relationships with kin are important to fishermen at the Gippsland Lakes. And yet they articulate explicit identity claims along the lines of “I am a fifth generation fisherman” or “my family has fished these lakes for 100 years” much less often than expected given that most of them could do so in good faith. This is surprising, since these powerful statements of ‘right through descent’ enable much needed traction in debates with recreational fishermen and conservation groups concerning the ongoing viability of commercial fishing in the Gippsland Lakes. It would also be expected that such statements would provide traction in the many disputes between fishermen arising over access to, and use of, fishing places. But, for these men, claims to ‘rights through descent’ were not a readily articulated mode of conceptualising themselves. With few exceptions, expressions of this kind were reserved for dialogues with outsiders – with politicians, government agencies, recreational fishermen and local indigenous communities.

It was not well known, for example, that the father of the vocal President of the association was born and raised on the Gippsland Lakes and that his grandfather fished there all his life. This man was considered by most to be new to lake fishing. He did not attempt to disabuse others of this idea – a seemingly extraordinary fact given the commonly assumed value of ‘having history’. It was clear that, in terms of their day-to-day interactions with each other and myself, an explicit account of their family’s
associations with the lake did not form a large part of who the Gippsland Lakes fishermen thought they were.

In this chapter I will discuss ways in which kinship is conceptualised in Euro-American societies, including Australia, and show how these broad notions of relationality are played out in the local fishing community of the Gippsland Lakes. Because there has been almost no ethnographic research published on non-indigenous Australian’s conceptualisations, and experience, of family relationships I will refer to work originating from Britain and the United States as a way into the local context (but see Uhlmann 2005). Over the course of this chapter it will become clear why the president of the local association hardly ever spoke of his roots in the industry. In backgrounding his heritage he demonstrated fishermen’s concern to downplay blood relatedness which, in a competitive community constituted partly by kin, is commonly experienced as limiting and intrusive. In doing this he privileged more processual forms of conceptualising relatedness to others. It is the way in which fishermen labour to push down, and re-present, commonly understood notions of kinship relatedness that is my focus here.

Families

Gaining a fishing licence for the Gippsland Lakes has been a fairly difficult proposition for a long time. Between 1960 and 1989 a fishing licence could only acquired through inheritance. The licence consolidation process begun in 1989 altered this situation somewhat. The consolidation process was initiated as part of the government’s strategy to further reduce the number of licence holders in the lake. At the time of consolidation licences became saleable on a two for one basis such that newcomers had to buy two licences in order to make one valid licence. Thus, for the first time since the 1960s, any person with the right amount of money could buy a licence and enter the fishery. However, between 1960 and 1989, with transfers only possible within families, the community had become somewhat of a ‘closed-shop’. And it is partly because licences could only be transferred within families for much of the last fifty years that, of the eighteen current licence holders, fifteen could claim, if they wanted, to have fishing
heritage at a genealogical depth of more than two generations through their mother, father or spouse.

In my early conversations with fishermen I certainly went in search of ‘family history’. I knew in advance that many of these men had deep genealogical connections to the industry but found it much harder than I had envisioned to elicit explicit information. Fishermen certainly understood what it might mean to have ‘history’ in the lake. In general terms they understood what I wanted to hear, since a number of semi-retired and retired fishermen had participated in a recent oral history of the fishing industry at Lakes Entrance (Lee and Ellis 2001). Yet fishermen often seemed lost for words when I wanted to talk about the past: what their fathers or grandfathers had been like; what it had been like fishing with their father; or how they themselves had learned to fish. Perhaps this is to be expected, since these intimate portraits of family life are hard for strangers to come by. However, what was surprising was that they did not have, as a group, a conventional ready to hand ‘History’ of Gippsland Lakes Fishing. At times fishermen even asserted that they were ‘boring fishermen’ or that they ‘didn’t know much about those sorts of things’. But, as I got to know them better, it became clear that histories were all, in a sense, hidden, intimate, idiosyncratic and somehow precious for this fact. People’s histories were not necessarily for display or consumption even though the men knew that this was a possibility. Further, an individual fisherman’s history was recalcitrant to broad generalization. There was rarely overlap in fishermen’s narratives about the lake, from which one might be able to construct a definitive ‘History’ or even a family History.

Having said this, I will briefly and explicitly outline the ways in which fishermen at the Gippsland Lakes are related by birth and marriage. It is this interconnectivity, and its concomitant downplaying, which strikes the outsider as she learns more about the community.

Fishermen commonly begin fishing with their fathers at a very young age. At the time of my fieldwork, twelve of the eighteen licence holders who fished the Gippsland Lakes, first fished with their fathers, three with their fathers-in-law and only three had come into
fishing with no initial family connections. Between 2002-2004 there were six father and son teams working in some capacity or other on the lake. In some cases they worked on the same boat off the one licence; in other cases they worked together at certain times of the year; and in one case both father and son had separate working licences but fish contiguous areas. Continuity of profession across generations is a common characteristic of commercial fishing industries all over the world because of the nature of the skills needed to be successful\(^1\) (Acheson 1988; McGoodwin; Nemec 1972, 1990; Pálsson 1993). Most of the fishermen on the Gippsland Lakes have worked much of their lives in close association with their fathers. These vertical relationships dominate genealogies of Gippsland Lakes fishermen as seen in the accompanying examples (see figs. 2.1 and 2.2).

Daughters of fishermen may also be highly involved in their father’s profession, working with their fathers on board lake boats at times, and, indeed, may lead their husbands into the profession. One man who married into a well-established fishing family laconically explained, when asked why he had become a fisherman, that ‘I married my wife’. In another instance the daughter of a third generation fisherman talked about her husband and his professional trajectory as if it were an inevitable consequence of meeting her. Affines, in a sense, are understood as having the ability and desire to fish, acquired through marriage from their wives. In other cases, women from fishing families marry men who are fishermen themselves. In all these ways, horizontal associations between families are created (see figs. 2.1 and 2.2).

\(^{1}\) These days, however, while they will take their young children fishing with them during, for example, the school holidays, most fathers discourage their sons (and daughters) from actually buying their own licence and entering the industry.
Spouses and siblings who are not directly involved in the industry have been omitted, except when depicting an inter-relationship through marriage.

Figure 2.1 & 2.2 Genealogical relationships between fishermen at the Gippsland Lakes.
Collecting genealogies, and depicting relatedness in the fashion presented above, was a methodological starting point for anthropologists in the first half of last century. It was expected that any self-respecting ethnographer would return from the field with a working description of the kinship system (Bouquet 1994:43); a description that formed a basis for understanding the society in question. The structural imperative which drove these explorations gradually became unfashionable, and kinship, until recently, has been sidelined in favour of other interests (Bouquet 1994; Carsten 2000; Patterson 2005).

Lately, though, anthropologists have begun to consider types of relating as styles of being-in-the-world. These studies recognise that modes of relating between kin cannot be completely understood without recourse to understanding how relationships themselves are conceptualised, undertaken and experienced. As a corollary, the way in which people conceptualise kinship informs the way in which they relate to other persons (Carsten 2000; Peletz 1995) plants and animals (Bird-David 1999 Castro 1998; Descola 1992; Scott 1996).

Two cogent metaphors – the tree and blood – together provide the means by which Euro-American societies tend to conceptualise genealogical relationships. Certainly this is the way in which kinship is conceptualised in many Australian contexts (Uhlmann 2005). For hundreds of years the symmetrical, bilateral shape of the tree has provided the structural basis through which Euro-American societies have imagined the flow of an interrelating substance that connects members of the same family across generations (Bouquet 1994; Helmreich 2003; Klapisch-Zuber 1991; Pálsson 2002). Deleuze and Guattari (2002) have proposed that the metaphor of the tree characterises much of European thought. The characteristic branching and symmetrical shape of the tree informs a relational system premised on a point of origin and control (i.e. trunk, patriarch, managing director, chief). The directionality implicit in the tree’s form generates hierarchically positioned elements between which flows a potent substance (sap, blood, DNA, governance, power) that relates them. These metaphors inform and enliven both everyday thinking and anthropological thinking about kinship and, to an extent, the way in which these
understandings mediate our experience of relationships has made it difficult to imagine relatives in any other way.

Historically, arboreal representation was used by Anglo-Saxon societies to imagine biblical and secular pedigrees where sap ran like blood through hierarchically arranged entities, relating them as it pulsed forward from the trunk to the limbs and on to the outlying leaves of later generations (Bouquet 1994; Fernandez 1998). Over the course of European history, however, the tree metaphor has been ‘… riddled with tensions. Not only was there the competing images of the ascending and descending, the ups and downs of kinship, there was also tension between the languages of roots and branches’ (Pálsson 2002:342).

The hierarchical branching principle of the ‘tree’ can be understood as two coexisting metaphoric images that, as I will show, fishermen use according to how they want to be identified. In the first metaphoric image, represented in figure 2.3(a), ego is conceived of as the lowest central point, connected to predecessors via the stereotypical branching pattern of the tree. In this image ego is the point of confluence at which the ancestral substances, which have coursed forth through time (denoted by the arrow), meet, intermingle and, in the process, nourish ego’s identity.

In the second image, represented in figure 2.3(b), the descending generations are understood as emerging from the sturdy, everlasting, and wise foundation of a common ancestor. In this last metaphor a group derives a sense of ‘social identity’ by tracing their connections back to a common origin. Despite the difference in the directionality of branching the structuring logic of the tree remains the same in each case. In each case the inter-relating substances flow from ancestors to descendant generations. It is this ‘tree’ logic that fishermen, and other Australians, use to imagine relationships to kin.

Following the work of the gestalt linguist Lakoff (1987) anthropologists, such as Bloch (1998) and Barth (2000), have begun to explore ways in which a pre-conceptual, embodied engagement with our surrounds provides the basis upon which we then go on
to structure, through metaphor, complex concepts – including genealogical trees. Lakoff suggests that ‘thought is embodied, that is, the structures used to put together our conceptual systems grow out of bodily experience and make sense in terms of it’ (Lakoff 1987:xiv). He argues that reason, instead of being independent of human beings, inheres in the body, and that metaphoric reasoning emerges from the situatedness of embodied experience. The rational basis of the phrase ‘life is a journey’, for instance, emerges from the physical experience of movement. Importantly, for anthropologists, Lakoff and others argue that diverse embodied ways-of-being in the world can create pre-conceptual points of difference and similarity cross-culturally (Barth 2000; Bloch 1998; Lakoff 1987).

Barth (2000), for instance, has suggested that it is the fundamentally human experience of extending the boundaries of our bodies through tool use that has given rise to a primordial notion of boundary. This experience of the merging of self and object is perhaps, he argues, the basis for the very strongly felt sense of territorial possession some sedentary cultures exhibit in which self is merged with land. The extension of bodily boundaries can be metaphorically projected onto social groups to facilitate the fiction that these too have boundaries and are grounded upon some, however abstract, surface. Barth instructively contrasts a European cluster of boundary concepts with those of Basseri nomads whose experience of boundedness and extension has a very different basis and leads to entirely different metaphorical usage. For Basseri, conceptualisations of boundaries are evident only through movement; in fact, the basic experience of boundedness is the moving social group itself, since, to Basseri, a group only becomes apparent when it moves against a stationary background.

Barth, who is interested in the ways in which people from different societies conceptualise social groups, points out that to assume a common basis for metaphorical constructs of boundaries is to invite misunderstanding. For the Basseri it makes no sense to construe boundaries as signs of excision. Instead, boundaries are an artefact of an entity held together by individual and overlapping bonds and realised in movement. Thus, alternate embodied experiences are likely to lead to different ways of imaging community, among other things.
If Barth explains how embodied experience, in different contexts, can particularise metaphoric tropes then Bloch and Lakoff explain, using a similar argument, how experience in common contexts can lead to universal, or at least similar, metaphorical usage. One example of this is the way in which tree symbolism is used by many cultures to explore the concept of life and, thus, what it means to be alive. The ubiquity and facticity of trees, as well as their ambiguity in terms of whether they are living things – for instance, they are not obviously mobile – establishes them as the perfect vehicles by which to explore the limits of life, the nature of existence, and the possibility of life, in some form or other, after death (Bloch 1998). Further, the growth and habit of trees has long been used in metaphorical explorations of human development, reproduction, longevity and relatedness (Ellen 1998:73).
In the popular T.V. series *Dynasties*, shown by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) the structuring logic of the tree is used to explain the influence of iconic Australian families upon areas of national endeavour such as sport, art and commerce. In each episode, one family’s influence upon a particular aspect of Australian society is explored. Significantly, in the opening sequences of each episode a stereotypical ‘grand old’ tree fills the screen alerting viewers to the enduring influence and vitality of the family while suggesting that a particular trait, such as, *good at cricket*, has been carried forth across the generations as a consequence of their connectedness. In this case, the structuring logic of the tree offers a way to envisage the transcendence of the whole (family) over the part (an individual life-time) and, thus, offers a way to conceptualise the possibility of a kind of life after death.

For instance the synopsis introducing one family on the show’s website begins

The Roycrofts are Australia’s most famous equestrian dynasty. Legendary horseman, Bill Roycroft, has competed in five Olympic Games. Remarkably, his three sons have all competed alongside their father – each driven by the same fierce determination to win. But, today, it is only Bill’s daughter-in-law, Vicki, who keeps the family’s Olympic legacy alive. This film explores how one man’s spirit of competition has shaped a dynasty (ABC 2005).

Each episode is accompanied by a family tree depicting the relevant members of the dynasty (ABC 2005). For example, the Roycroft family tree is depicted below (see fig. 2.4). The Roycroft family tree is an example of the up-ended family tree where ancestors are emphasised as both foundations to, and influences upon, those that follow them. Thus, in Euro-American understandings it is the growth form of trees – where individual units descend or ascend from a focal person in a hierarchical manner – that is the most important metaphorised aspect of ‘real’ trees.
Gippsland Lakes fishermen understand their relationships to kin in a similar fashion – in terms of hierarchically arranged elements interrelated via substance. In conversations with fishermen and their families in the privacy of the family home – conversations which, as I have explained, I was less privy to – implicit but strongly felt desires for, and about, family were often phrased in the structuring logic of the tree. For instance, on one occasion I had been drinking with some fishermen’s wives and we had begun to talk about their children. The drunken banter rapidly turned into a competition between the two women as to whose baby had spoken, walked or smiled first. We were all pretty flushed and exuberant as we downed the bottles of white wine. In the excitement a story, which was a little unseemly and would not have ordinarily been told, tumbled out of one woman’s mouth. Ashley, remembering the birth of her first child, which had been out of
wedlock, recalled with a mischievous laugh how upset the child’s paternal great-grandfather had been when the child had not borne his name on the birth certificate but instead, had borne Ashley’s family name. Ashley clearly thought it was rather funny that she had unknowingly riled the patriarch in this fashion all those years ago. Now, being very much part of the family, it was obvious she could see the gravity of the offence – hence her devilish glee. Even the telling of this story was a little risqué because it revealed strongly held notions of dynastic thinking in her husband’s family; notions that were thought to be somewhat inappropriate in everyday conversation.

Ashley’s story reveals an immense concern for descent and pedigree. The tree, although unspoken, informs Ashley’s conceptualisation of her grandfather-in-law’s claim upon her child. This old man, apparently so removed from her small young family, was able to reach through the branches to make his connection felt. In this example, relationships are understood to descend from the male line. However, members of fishing families understood family relationships as emerging from both men and women. When making statements such as ‘I am a fifth generation fisherman’ fishermen reckoned their line of descent through either their father or mother; again in doing this they implicitly invoked the metaphoric tree where ego derives an identity from any or all of his or her antecedents.

For Ashley the feelings that her grandfather-in-law had about her son were experienced as intrusive but understandable. The structuring logic of the tree often informed conversations, like the one above, but remained unarticulated. In this example the family as tree is expressed as a naturalised, commonsensical way of thinking about relatedness. It is not an heuristic model fishermen offer to explain something but, rather, exists as a self-evident way of thinking about relationships. For this reason, it could be described as a metaphor that Australians, including fishermen, live by (Lakoff and Johnson 1980).

It is perhaps the ubiquitous and persuasive experience of trees that inform this habit of thought: the family as tree. Certainly the structuring metaphor of the tree that informs fishermen’s notions of kinship powerfully mediates their experience of relatives. Bouquet
has suggested that because of their existential properties, real trees and, thus, metaphoric family trees, tend to negate process, appearing to stand for all time as everlasting memorials to those who have come before (Bouquet 1994). It is the way in which fishermen speak of those from previous generations as both bearing them and, significantly, bearing down upon them that is relevant here. The force of metaphors, their pervasiveness and their imperative nature can lead to anxiety, inspiring us to find ways to diffuse and circumvent their authority. In what follows I will outline a case to suggest that fishermen, because they strongly value processual modes of conceptualising community, feel the weight of this burden strongly.

**Blood Lines and Permanence**

If the symbol of the tree suggests to us a way to imagine the structure of our relationships to kin – that is, being hierarchical and unidirectional – then the symbol of blood as a sap-like fluid coursing through the tree/family body provides the sense by which we can imagine continuity, perpetuity and the kind of permanence brought about by a life after death that is entailed by the onward flow of an essential part of ourselves (Fernandez 1998) Together these two interrelated metaphors create a weightiness to kinship relationships, in Euro-American societies, that sets these relationships apart from all others.

Making the same point, Bloch (1973) argued that relationships between kin in societies that reckon kinship via blood, are often assumed to be stronger than any others. This is because relationships given at birth are considered to be non-negotiable and permanent (Bloch 1973:79). The assumed nature of blood relationships was one reason, he pointed out, why people from such societies spent more time and energy working at relationships with non-kin, compared with their blood relatives. The work done to ensure that friendships and alliances endure is not necessary for blood relatives, he argued, because their obligations to, and claims upon, one another are whole and complete at birth. Instead, Bloch argued, time spent strengthening relationships to non-relatives ensures that both kith and kin can be called upon, and are obligated to respond, in times of need.
In a similar vein, Fortes (1969:242) once wrote ‘kinship is binding; it creates inescapable moral claims and obligations’. For Euro-Americans, relationships between parents and children are understood as inescapable because of their biological basis; that is, because they reflect the inward passage of immutable biological materials from parents to children. The ‘realness’ of biological relatedness seems inevitable and irrevocable to us not only because of the compelling structural properties of the tree but because of the way ‘trees’ channel blood.

It was Schneider who first pointed to the assumption contained in the anthropological study of kinship, the belief that *blood was thicker than water*. This belief makes kinship or genealogical relations unlike any other social bonds for they have especially strong binding force and are directly constituted by [and] grounded in … the imperatives of the biological nature of human nature. They are the cultural formulations of what are held to be inherent, relatively inflexible conditions of the biological bases of human behaviour (Schneider 1984:174).

Yet it need not be the case that biological connectedness leads one to think that kinship relations are inevitable and inescapable. Bodenhorn (2000) has argued that it is only when biological substances are deemed immutable that biological relatedness takes on the quality of the irrevocable. For the Iñpiat, a whaling people of the Alaskan coast, what is immutable is not the possibility of making claims upon others via recourse to birth or descent but the ‘right to put forward a claim generated through one’s labour’ (Bodenhorn 2000:132). As Schneider (1984) has observed of Euro-American kinship systems, the notion of having an ex-father is inconceivable because the biogenetic link is thought to be irrevocable. Yet such a situation is only possible if one privileges the biogenetic tie over all others, which Iñpiat clearly do not.

Iñpiat kinship ties are made and lost via labour. What makes a relationship to a kinsman or woman ‘real’ is not blood relationship, or the labour of childbirth, but the giving of
resources acquired by one’s labour. As Bodenhorn argues, this constant renewal of the basis of kinship is pleasurable, yet

having to construct and reconstruct one’s social world virtually on a daily basis can be stressful stuff. People develop ulcers wondering if they are getting it right but they have no doubt that it is real (Bodenhorn 2000:143).

For the Kamea of Papua New Guinea similarly relationships are made and not given. Here, people conceptualise a ‘sharp difference between what goes into making a person in a physical sense and what connects them through time as social beings’ (Bamford 1998:31). The Kamea do not understand children to share substance with their parents. Only siblings are said to be, to use the Kamea idiom, of ‘one blood’. By consuming the products grown on her husband-to-be’s land a girl is transformed and differentiated from her ‘one blood’ siblings, allowing her womb to become the place in which the next generation of one-blooded siblings is created. And it is through labour on the land of his father that a man creates the possibility for this continuity of substance through his wife’s body. None of these relationships is an accident of birth. Here, continuity through time does not resemble our own concept of descent. Bamford suggests it would be better to think of these relationships as being ones of ‘ascent … [since] intentional human effort is required to attach oneself to the male line’ (Bamford 1998:44, emphasis in original).

In both cases connections are made by social work and not given by structures or substance. In these societies it is through intentional acts of labour or consumption that people become attached to others. In this way they cause ruptures here and connections there to produce a web of interconnections. The genealogical tree, a mainstay of the anthropologist’s tool kit, is not well suited to expressing these kinds of relationships where connections are entailed by work rather than birth.

Fishermen conceptualise family relationships according to the assumption that sharing substances creates irrevocable and permanent ties to kin. I recall a small but powerful moment I shared with the first-time mother of a baby boy whose husband and father were
fishermen. We had run into each other outside the post office and in the midst of baby talk she suddenly said in a rush of love for her tiny son ‘you have Papa’s nose [meaning her father’s nose] – some people will hate you, but I will always love you!’

This intimate comment reveals much about the strength of the notion that material connectivity is kinship. Alyssa seemed to be saying that their blood ties would mean she was morally obligated to love this baby for life even if he made enemies, like his grandfather had. In the end, as she was explaining to her baby, kinship relations – reckoned by biogenetic continuity – transcend all others.

This kind of permanent transcendence given by the onward flow of blood is a comforting thought. The hope that something might transcend our short time on the planet is a well understood yearning. However, the fiction of permanency can also be a burden on the living because relationships that are given at birth, and not assented to, cannot be escaped. Fishermen at the Gippsland Lakes, while assuming that people are inter-related by blood, and therefore stand in particular relation to one another, are ambivalent about the experience of this closeness. I will illustrate this with a small portrait of a particular fishing family – the Neilsons. The portrait brings together and merges comments and characterisations offered to me by other fishermen about the men in the Nielson family.

Here is a family of two brothers who live and fish from the same small lakeside village where their grandfather once fished. They rarely talk to each other or anyone else except in an occasional halting monosyllabic nod to speech. One brother never wears shoes even in the depths of winter. On fog bound mornings in spring it is said that one can orientate oneself by listening for the sound of one of the brothers barking directions at his down-trodden, but well loved, son. Neither brother has changed his methods for many years and, as one man put it, ‘they’re fishermen but not great fishermen’. To see either of the brothers fishing out of sight of the village is likely to provoke the remark, sounded in tones of mock disbelief, “he must have been lost, poor bloke”.
From portraits like this we learn not so much about the Neilson family but about the way in which relationships between relatives, and between places and people, are conceptualised in the fishing community. The story represents a metacriticism, by fishermen, of relationships between people and places that are unduly fixed and permanent. This caricatured family portrait creates an alternative reading of family closeness; a reading that suggests too much family can be bad for fishing and bad for families.

In the following paragraph Jim, a cousin to the two Nielson brothers, talks about his uncle (on his mother’s side of the family). Jim was a successful fisherman who recalls beginning fishing with his maternal grandfather when he was just a small boy.

Benny he was ... he was as rough as they come – boisterous, but chicken-hearted but meek and mild ... he, he was a good bloke. The straits never produced any great fortune for the Neilson family .... They never moved with the times. With the mob up here that we were tangled up with in Paynesville, we moved with the times. They, well they never set the world on fire – whereas they got, especially Benny, they got very jealous of me cos he thought I’d step in the boat with him, down there, ah ... he, ah, they never ... [He trails off]

For Jim, the literal and figurative movement away from the incumbencies of family is what you do if you want to set the world on fire. Jim presents movement as the motif of a successful fisherman. His story sets-up a preference for movement over fixity and portrays family as heavy and fixed by nature. It presents kinship relations as bonds which can very often generate negative sentiments such as failure and jealousy. This is despite the fact that Jim still thinks of his individual relatives as “good blokes”.

Despite their, to my eyes, extraordinary interconnectedness, fishermen at the Gippsland Lakes rarely talked about kinship relationships. On the few occasions when fishermen did speak of kinship interconnectivity, they usually phrased these accounts as witty criticisms of others that associated some kind of negative trait, whether it be laziness, lack of imagination or being ‘just plain bad’, with genealogy. It was rare to hear that a particular
fisherman was ‘good’ because his father was also ‘good’. Instead, fishermen usually praised one another by reference to personal achievement rather than inherited qualities. It was clear that, in the context of fishing, fishermen were more interested in relationships of contingency and not those of permanency. Most of the time family lay in the background as an implicit force that weighted all interactions while being deliberately submerged.

I have argued that the structural logic given by the tree and the interrelating logic given by blood are the twin metaphors of relationality in Euro-American societies, including Australian society. The immutable moral obligations given by blood ties, first discussed by Bloch (1973) and Fortes (1969), lead persons from Euro-American backgrounds to imagine relations between biological relatives as inevitable, non-negotiable and, like the substance that runs through the tree’s branching channels, infinitely expansive. The weight that these connections carry, and the extent to which they can be elaborated in cognatic kinship systems, poses a particular problem for tree thinkers, and this is the problem of limits. In the following section I will expand on the problem of limits, exploring why and how people decide to include some and not others in their family trees. Further, I will explore in greater detail, building on the example of the Neilson family portrait given above, how fishermen responded to the weightiness of obligations entailed by shared blood by backgrounding family connectedness. In doing this, I argue, the burden of blood relationships becomes muted and fishermen can pursue relationships with whomever they choose. In this way, they demonstrate a preference for movement over fixity.

**Setting Limits on Family**

While fishermen did conceptualise their connectedness to relatives in terms of a classic model of descent – a model that tends to emphasise hierarchical expansion and immutable connectivity – there was much concern about the negative aspects of closeness presumed to inhere in family ties. As the stories and commentaries about the Neilson family illustrate, kinship obligations can be intrusive and may often require limiting or
diffusing. People often experience their obligations and responsibilities towards relatives as a burden. Despite this, the negative aspects of family ‘closeness’ are seldom understood as potentially influencing people’s lives as much as the positive aspects. The work of limiting relationships, and the way in which exclusion is constructed in terms of kinship reckoning is what interests me here. But this aspect of kinship reckoning, Edwards and Strathern (2000:152) argue, has been of little interest to anthropologists in the past (see also Carsten 2000:24). This elision is indicative of a broad range of Euro-American academic writing, which tends to emphasise the inherent goodness in belonging and connectedness.

A fisherman once told me a story about the limits of family. We had been having an informal conversation about stakeholder politics that became a veiled exploration of the interconnections between people in the industry. The story was about another man’s family – Wayne’s family. (It was often the case that I found out about interconnections between people’s families via others.) The story described a dispute over a licence. A man had put the hard word on his brother-in-law, a lake fisherman, to give him fishing history that he had not earned, so that he could apply for a licence. The relationship between the two men was not good to begin with, and this claim on the fisherman put it under huge strain. Other fishermen were not happy about the situation because newcomers meant more competition, and newcomers with family to help them posed even more of a threat. In the end, Wayne, pressured from all sides, decided against his brother-in-law, stating decisively that ‘I married the sister, not the brother!’ Despite being substantially related to this man through his children, who shared blood with both Wayne and his brother-in-law, Wayne chose not to give his brother-in-law ‘history’. In doing this, he prioritised the relationship between himself and his fishermen colleagues and down-played, yet did not deny, the importance of family obligations. His brother-in-law never became a lake fisherman, and to this day the animosity between the two is great.

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2 Regulatory bodies commonly require prospective licence holders to have acquired some ‘history’ – or, in other words, experience – in the fishing industry before they can purchase a fishing licence. Fishermen usually gain experience by working as deckhands.
The story captures the problem with relatives that is experienced by many of us who live in societies where kinship relatedness is reckoned cognatically through the intermingling of substances. In this case, ‘theoretically speaking, the tracing of ties created by links of biological substance could extend forever outwards …’ (Edwards and Strathern 2000:158). It is exactly this thinking that enables us to sometimes talk of chimpanzees as our cousins. Edwards and Strathern (2000) argue, however, that limitless extension is rarely how people conceptualise their ‘real’ relatives; this collective is actually tightly circumscribed. In fact, the authors point out, people are very adept at limiting the chains of relatedness and justifying the severance or disappearance of some relatives, but not others, from their lives.

Edwards and Strathern note that connections reckoned through ties of a social nature are also thought to expand without limits. They too are branching, and invoke the image of the tree. For instance, in the same ways that we imagine the snowball sample that extends forever outwards, friendship circles are imagined to expand infinitely to the point where we can tell a story about the friend of a friend’s friend without sounding too absurd. Edwards and Strathern argue that while these two modes of reckoning relationships – the biological and the social – are each separately limitless, when used together one or the other can be used to sever linked chains of homologous elements. They call this interdigitation. For instance, when exploring English concepts of relatedness in Lancashire, Edwards found that when relatives became lost to one another it was because they failed to take social action to ensure that affection accompanied biological links. Thus, it is through the differential deployment of kinds of relational links, of either a biological or social nature, that family is circumscribed in Euro-American settings. The way people negotiate these combinations and divisions is particular to Western contexts because the play of these terms follows the always ambiguous, and often ambivalent, preoccupation with the categories of nature and culture.

Edwards and Strathern comment that not enough attention has been paid to the social dimensions of kinship reckoning in Euro-American settings. They suggest that the tree/blood trope does not stand alone, and that anthropologists must further explore the
complexities of indigenous English ways of conceptualising relatedness. They argue that a holistic understanding of kinship at home should make recourse to both the social and the biological:

We seek to sidestep one of the impasses into which contemporary discussion has fallen … the impasse set up by imagining kinship as divided between social and biological manifestations of itself (Edwards and Strathern 2000:150).

When Wayne said that he had ‘married the sister and not the brother’ he was playing with these notions. To have given his brother-in-law ‘fishing history’ would have been easily understood on the basis of family obligation. The reason he did not do this was most likely because he did not like the man, because ‘they were not close’. He may have had a substantive relationship to the man through his wife and children, but this relationship did not, in itself, provide any other basis for ongoing mutual obligation. There were no affective ties between the men and the relationship could be severed on this basis. His assertion that ‘I married the sister not the brother’ phrased the rejection in terms of biological relatedness; his assertion justified his decision to protect his affective relationships with other fishermen while upholding the value or ‘realness’ of the sharing of substance – in this case through the intermingling of substances in marriage. At the same time, his assertion set limits upon family relationships by suggesting that affective ties are a necessary condition for kinship relatedness. As Edwards and Strathern (2000) would phrase it, he deployed the social to limit the biological creating a severance – or an interdigitation – in a chain that had been made of homologous (in this case biological) elements.

Thus, despite the sense in which indigenous Euro-American concepts of kinship allow that biological relatedness is sufficient to enable a kinship connection, in practice people are unlikely to characterise a person as a relative unless the connection includes affective ties (Edwards and Strathern 2000). It is this social aspect of kinship relations that provides Euro-American kinship with a self-limiting character. Without such qualifiers we could find ourselves imagining and extending relatedness to the whole of humanity.
and beyond. Even though a ‘purist’ might claim that the criterion of affectivity falls outside the definition of kinship, Edwards and Strathern (2000:158) argue that this is ‘fruitfully regarded as part of kinship thinking’.

Nonetheless, Wayne’s story does illustrate the prioritisation of biological relatedness in Euro-American kinship reckoning. As Strathern, following Schneider, has noted, ‘there are many ways of defining kin persons but no way of conceptualising a biogenetic tie between persons that does not presuppose it as a kinship tie’ (Strathern 1995:346). In this way, Gippsland Lakes fishermen share with other Australians, Britons and Americans a notion that biological relatedness is a sufficient condition for kinship one that establishes the conditions under which we are always and already related, for good or ill, making kin always inevitable and sometimes inescapable. The interconnected tree and blood metaphors enable us to imagine relationships as if they were inevitable, both because of the patterning intrinsic to the tree and because of the way in which the tree constitutes a unity of elements via the connective medium of blood/sap. But ‘the official fiction of the tree’ (Bouquet 1994) excludes many people from its branches. It is the way in which the tree appears to represent all remembered relationships, while eliding the processes by which forgetting can take place, that makes it such a powerful mode of conceptualising relationships.

In practice, kinship webs are expanded by labour or limited by forgetting and it is these complementary processes that make tree-thinking viable. In Euro-American settings these processes may not be foregrounded but though concealed by the structural logic of trees they are nonetheless the processes that, in many ways, give trees and, thus, families their recognisable shape.

The following story of Len, a fisherman in his early sixties, provides an illuminating, if somewhat unusual, example of the way in which the social aspects of kinship reckoning form a significant part of activating links to kin.
One day Len told me his family story. We were sitting facing the Tambo River, which he had pointed out through the trees. Len was doing network, slowly weaving the needle back and forth as we spoke in the afternoon sun. Len hardly looked at me, and as our conversation progressed it became more and more like Len’s private reverie; I spoke less and Len moved from subject to subject unprompted. After an hour or so he began to talk about his family, a subject he had earlier avoided. He said that he had been in an orphanage until his mother, who was married to a fisherman, had taken him in at the age of seven. He said, however, that he knew with certainty who his biological father was. He laughed, and said cryptically that you should never pay too much attention to ‘bloodlines’ because people can be like animals. Then, more fondly, he recalled that his biological father, also a fisherman, had always called him son. In Len’s story his social father and his biological father became almost like one man, his true father, since they were referred to interchangeably along with all the consequent grandparents. To reckon his fishing ancestry he chose his social father as carrier and claimed, through him, to be a fifth generation fisherman. And yet, although he did not say so, it was also clear that he had named his own son after his biological father.

Len did follow his own logic, to some extent, and did not pay much heed to bloodlines (confusing the anthropologist immensely). Yet, our conversation revealed that he was very much concerned with descent, following hierarchical relations from various fathers and grandparents to his son, again evincing how the tree structures thinking about relationships. Len’s story shows how kinship reckoned through biological connections, despite being sufficient in itself to designate the relationship, requires work to become fully realized. Len’s son, for instance, was not automatically his biological father’s grandson. By naming his son after this man Len worked to strengthen the connection between the two. The name was the social glue that ensured the biological relationship between these two men was enduring. The story shows how kinship between adopted children and their adopting parents is still possible when relationships are worked at, despite the fact that no biological ties link them. Further, Len’s account shows that adopted children acquire all the relationships given by their adoptive parents, to do with as they like. In this way relationships that are made can become instantiated by the tree
and thus transformed into immutable connections, while blood relationships that are
given still require social labour to become fully actualised.

Len’s story is interesting both in terms of its relevance to the way in which fishermen at
the Gippsland Lakes conceptualise kinship, but also for the way in which, more broadly,
Euro-Americans conceptualise kinship. Len’s life history meant that he had thought long
and hard about who he was. What was given and what was made, in terms of his
relationships to relatives, could not be assumed. Further, his particular life-history meant
that the social and affective aspects of kinship relatedness were as important to an
acknowledgement of a kinship relation as were the biological aspects. Len’s experience
was different to the imaginings of Edwards informants in Alltown, who did not readily
articulate the social dimension of kinship although it was clear that social modes of
reckoning kinship formed an important aspect of realising kinship relations in practice
(Edwards and Strathern 2000).

I have shown that those aspects which are given versus those aspects which are made are
strategically used to strengthen or weaken links between people. I have shown also that
these components can actually entail each other, rather than being representative of one
culture or another. Wayne’s kin were impinging on his autonomy, so he deployed social
reasoning to weaken the connection to his brother-in-law and, as a result, shrank his
kinship network. Len, instead, deployed social reasoning to strengthened his kinship
connections and his network was expanded. Finally, however, it is tree thinking that
structures people’s beliefs about relationships, whereas affective modes of understanding
relationships are generally used to limit and manage these structures.

The work of kinship is not only in keeping connections but also in limiting them, or
softening their affectiveness. I have suggested that fishermen have ‘real’ genealogical
connectivity with each other but that they tend to downplay, and often talk negatively of,
these connections. As one old fisherman wryly commented of the relationship between
one of his associates and another fisherman ‘Old Billy is Mick’s uncle and they hate each
other, but that’s normal, they’re family!’
Family Background: Setting Limits at the Gippsland Lakes

For the fishing community at the Gippsland Lakes, as is often the case elsewhere in Australia, ‘real kin’ are unquestionably thought to be related through blood (Uhlmann 2005). I have suggested though, following Edwards and Strathern, that a holistic understanding of a Euro-American kinship system must include reference to how limits, as well as connections, are established. I have shown how this is part of kinship reckoning at the Gippsland Lakes just as it is in Alltown, England, where Edwards carried out her ethnographic research.

However, what was perhaps absent in the Alltown case, and in other Euro-American studies, is the concern to actively downplay family connections, or to read them negatively. Whereas Alltown people thought of their severed relatives as somehow forgotten (as in many cases they had been), fishermen, working among extended family, have no such ‘soft’ option. Edwards and Strathern (2000) comment that limiting relation through forgetfulness is considered a permissible offence in European cultures, because forgetting is not considered to be a social action in the same way that it might be in other cultures (cf. Harrison 2004). Gippsland Lakes fishermen, however, are keenly aware of who is related to whom; it is just that they often do not view this connectivity in a positive light but, rather, choose to re-interpret it and re-value it in a more active manner.

During my fieldwork Simmo, a young man who had married into a fishing ‘dynasty’, began fishing in the lake as a nominated operator on his father-in-law’s licence. He was the only fisherman to take up fishing during my fieldwork. His story, although exceptional in some ways, provides another example of how family is actively backgrounded in the course of everyday fishing practice. He had had some experience fishing with his father-in-law, and had worked in other parts of the industry for a number of years. He had had a baby son with this man’s daughter and was very much part of the family. But when he began to fish in the lake he suddenly felt extremely isolated.
As I fished with other men in the course of the following months many had ‘Simmo stories’ to tell. Some fishermen were upset because he had ‘shot all over them’\(^3\), or ‘flogged their shots’\(^4\), or, through lack of ability, he had split up schools of fish. He had pushed boundaries in this way not out of aggression, however, but out of ignorance. In doing these things he had violated some significant, but largely unspoken, rules of how to go about fishing alongside others. His mistakes were indicative of having no locally substantive relationships with other fishermen, relationships that would have entailed knowing where, and how, they fished. These stories all had one broad theme: that Simmo was not very aware of his surrounds, that he was just a beginner and not well versed in the idioms of the lake.

Not only was Simmo having difficulty understanding the lake – how and where to fish – but now it seemed, no one would talk to him. He said, bewildered, that ‘even Pa [his grandfather-in-law] is a closed book’. He had known that fishermen were secretive but had not expected that members of his own family, people he had formerly gotten along with, would become so unapproachable. He went on to say that Macca, his father-in-law’s cousin, would not even give him a wave as they passed each other on the water, yet previously they had always had a laugh on the occasions when they met.

Suddenly the dynamics of relating between members of the extended family had changed. Simmo had been given a tour of the lake and his father-in-law had shown him some shots, but no one had prepared him for this\(^5\). He had expected some help from the members of his extended family who fished on the lake but, instead, he got silence. And as if to highlight this lack, it was other fishermen, not his kin, he told me with surprise, who came and had a joke with him while he was hauling, and asked him how he was doing.

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\(^3\) He had placed his nets too close to other men’s nets.
\(^4\) ‘He had ‘stolen’ other men’s favoured fishing places.
\(^5\) The fact that Simmo was not from a fishing family meant that he would have had relatively little exposure to ‘talk’ that would have given him some understanding of how relationships change once a person begins to fish. Thus, Simmo was particularly unprepared for this eventuality.
Simmo was experiencing not the severance of kinship ties so much as their backgrounding. The disorientation he felt was bought about by the displacement of a way of thinking about relationships through blood in favour of more processual forms of relationality. For the other fishermen, effort no doubt had to be made to keep their silence and avert their eyes. His family were making him aware of the need to reformulate the terms of their relationships. His grandfather-in-law and Macca were silently prompting him to pay attention to the negotiable and fleeting aspects of relationships. Indeed, it was non-kin who were, in a sense, inviting him to share with them and, in doing so, showing Simmo how to begin to relate.

The vertigo Simmo experienced was bought about by a re-positioning from kin to kindred. Suddenly, it was not who he was – in terms of his position in a kin network – but who he could be – in terms of entering into diverse kinds of relationships with kin and non-kin – that mattered. And, as a new fisherman, especially as a man who had not grown-up in a fishing family, he was a complete novice both in terms of his knowledge of the waterways and, more importantly, in terms of his standing with each and every other fisherman on the lake.

Two young fishermen from ‘established’ fishing families, who had begun fishing a few years before Simmo, actively downplayed their respective fathers’ involvement in the stories they told about how they acquired fishing knowledge and experience. They spoke at length about how other men had helped them, emphasising the connections they had made beyond their families. These young fishermen, unlike Simmo, were not shocked or hurt by the lack of help or advice from family members. The mood of their accounts suggests that they had been informally ‘prepared’ throughout their lives to construe family involvement and advice as an unhealthy dependence.

What I am describing is not a denial of family relationships, and not even their loss from everyday awareness, but rather a sense in which fishermen act to limit the affectiveness of the static, immutable and given aspects of biological kinship connections; the connection which, I have argued, is the most recognised and intensely felt in Euro-
American societies. Instead, fishermen seek to emphasise the value of relationships that are made and re-made on a day-to-day basis. By privileging the processual aspects of relationships, which form part of both kinship and friendship, fishermen make the point in their daily practice that all relationships are, to some extent, a labour of love – even those that are given.

Emphasis upon the processual aspects of relationships and upon the constitutive power of participation, in a context (Australian society) where blood-relationships tend to dominate people’s understandings of inter-personal relationships, establishes a tension between movement and fixity. The energy contained in this tension inspires fishermen to pursue relationships with one another, and to renew and enliven those relationships once they are formed. Further, because in the process of restating relationships fishermen encounter each other on the lake, that process also constitutes and re-contours places. Inter-personal encounters on the lake can become memorialised in places and it is the addition of new strata of social memory in locations that engenders a creative dimension to this tension; when fishermen are moved by each other they become co-authors of locality.

But family remains, in the background. Fishermen prefer to remain quiet about relationships between kin – relationships that are given. Because families are often so close, both in terms of proximity and affection, much of what goes on between kin – those many unremarkable hours spent in each other’s company – remains unspoken. To me, an outsider, this silence was at first suggestive of apathy; it was only later that I began to understand the intense closeness of some of these families.

I arrive at Patto’s house. He lives alone now on the hill overlooking the lake. Like all fishermen his back garden is a tangle of nets and boats. Near the shed a vegetable garden looms over a garden path. Nothing is wasted, all is utility. When I enter, I tell him I am back to find out more and Patto quips, in his quaint idiom, gently mocking me – ‘Are you simple, girl?’ As if to say, surely you should understand it all by now. He is a high-coloured man in his mid-sixties. I walk into the kitchen and I am reminded that the year is
2003 as I am greeted, incongruously, by the abrupt guitar strains of a new indie-rock teen pleaser on the popular Australian youth radio network. Somewhere in the background a radio is playing.

The previous passage captures, if one looks carefully enough, the tenderness and endurance of the relationship between Patto and his son Damien. The music station is, of course, the one that his son listens to. Patto has picked up on it somewhere along the line, and now it forms part of his life. It is a sign of the many unremarkable and unmarked hours they spend with each other every day – on the way to and from fishing grounds, on the phone talking about weather and fish, and dropping in at other times to get this tool or that bale of net. This time carries weight and influence. Yet it is implicit, embedded in action and words. It is back-grounded to such an extent that Patto, like other fishermen, will deny that he had anything to do with fostering his son’s fishing skill; ‘he learnt all those grounds himself’ he says proudly. He says similarly, of his own apprenticeship with his wife’s family, ‘they didn’t teach me anything!’ – a statement which could hardly be further from the truth. As I will explain further in the following chapters, fishermen downplay the impact of their family in the development of their fishing skills, always emphasising their own hard-won knowledge over what they learnt from their parents.

It is not so much that family is not important; it is overwhelmingly important. It is more that family is assumed and, in many cases, felt to be overly determining. I recall an early conversation I had with a fisherman, which was indicative of the implicit yet weighty effect of family. The fisherman, who was completely without family ties to the industry, was somewhat frustrated with the work it took to belong. He talked with an air of awe and bitterness about those extended fishing families who ‘were like the mafia’. It seemed to him that many of those he worked among were involved in somewhat secret, impenetrable and perduring networks that he had no way of understanding. He sensed that, but could not articulate exactly how, or in what circumstances, they helped each other, making him less competitive and keeping him from the decision-making process. His allegations were to an extent apt, yet he had not considered the extent to which he had been given the opportunity to participate. While family relationships may have
facilitated entry and performance, the fishery was not as impenetrable as might have been expected if such ties had been explicitly privileged.

**Conclusion**

The structuring logic of the family tree provides Euro-Americans with a particular way of thinking about relationships. This trope foregrounds irrevocable ties of substance and the moral expectations pertaining to such substantial connections. At the same time the family tree relates people with substances in common in certain ways, such that particular branches and points relate to other parts of the structure in particular ways. In general, and certainly at the Gippsland Lakes, the structuring logic of the tree means that antecedents are understood to have influence over, and form the foundation for, the generations that follow them. Because kinship relations entail not only moral obligation but potentially limitless chains of connection through shared substances, they can be experienced as a burden. Edwards and Strathern (2000) have argued that one way in which people respond to the burden of having limitless numbers of relatives is by deploying social modes of recognising and affirming kinship. Because social modes of recognising kinship limit kinship webs, they are a complementary aspect of a trope that foregrounds irrevocable ties of substance.

At the Gippsland Lakes fishermen work alongside relatives. They respond to the burden of the moral obligations kinship relationships entail by downplaying and disparaging those relationships. I found that, while fishermen seemed lost for words when I attempted discussions about ‘family’ and ‘family history’, there was no shyness when matters turned to what had happened in the recent past out on the water. Gossip was readily passed on, and fishermen delighted in entering into conversations about each other between themselves, around me and with me. In backgrounding biological modes of constituting relationships, fishermen emphasise the value of participatory modes of constituting relationships. In this way, fishermen attempt to reposition kin as friends, competitors or enemies. In the next chapter, I will explain how, by doing this, fishermen
create a space in which to pursue relationships with each other, allowing them to revel in the daily social round in all its incoherence.
Chapter 3
No Man is an Island:
Fishermen in Pursuit of Relationships

Introduction
The Next Step: Becoming Fishermen
Autonomy and Equality
Institutionalising Participation
Fishing Family versus Our Family
The Stuff of Belonging
Conclusion

Introduction
In the previous chapter, I discussed how the weighty relations of kinship, understood through the metaphors of blood and family trees, are intentionally played down in the actions and conversations of Gippsland Lakes fishermen. I illustrated how fishermen tend to actively limit the overt affectiveness of blood relationships because they are experienced as restrictive, curtailing movement. In this chapter, I will explore how, and to what end, fishermen pursue another form of relationship with both kith and kin, one that is more context specific, future orientated, inclusive and responsive. This achieved form of relationality coexists with that of the ‘tree’ but does not carry the same burden of predictive structure. Rather it allows fishermen to pursue, form, and create anew, relationships with each other. In this chapter, I will show how fishermen’s energies are always directed towards opening up fields of relationship and maintaining those potentials. They do this in order to catch fish and to create other kinds of value.

The Next Step: Becoming Fishermen

Community, at the Gippsland Lakes, emerges in the daily round of fishing. It is through the inter-subjective kinetics of everyday relationships that this community is produced and reproduced. The shape of community here resembles an overlapping and interlacing network of associations, friendships and hostilities. Links in this network form and
dissolve as fishermen hold conversations on the lake, or at the Co-op, about occupational concerns such as fish, nets, boats, fishing places, the weather and the government, or while sharing a joke and a cup of tea on the back porch after a day’s fishing. At all these times common interests are formed and re-affirmed and, as a result, a quiet, assumed and everyday collectivity is created. I will argue that it is of these seemingly mundane moments that community at the Gippsland Lakes is largely constituted.

By contrast, it is often argued that ‘community’ is best understood as constituted in opposition to an imagined other. Bohlin argues, for instance, that ‘political contestation lies at the heart of the construction of notions of belonging’ (1998:168). In this formulation, community is understood to be formed by representational boundaries that differentiate categories of people, according to, for example, ethnic group, nationality or culture. The ‘symbolic community’ (Barth 1969; Cohen 1985, 2000), however, while being an important analytic, does not account for the way in which a sense of togetherness can arise simply through shared moments in familiar places. Sentiments of togetherness can be conceived through participation and need not be based in essentialised social identities or symbolic boundaries (see Astuti 2000; Kohn 2002; Amit and Rapport 2002).

The two modes of conceiving community need not be mutually exclusive. Kohn argues that there may exist within a community competing discourses of belonging – ‘one which relies on action [and] social commitment … and another, traditionalised one, which suggests that people without the right names … and histories cannot ever achieve [insider] status’ (2002:155). Kohn, whose fieldsite was in the Scottish Hebrides, found that flagging the appropriate traits associated with a ‘traditional’ construct of identity such as islander heritage, islander blood-lines or Scottishness only became significant when those who made allusions to tradition also participated in village life. This was true for both insiders and new-comers to the island. Those people with ‘the right names’ who, for one reason or another, did not participate in the community, were not accepted as fully belonging. Kohn (2002) explains that such people, despite their efforts to flag what
they saw as symbols of their insider status, remained forever hovering on the edges of the community, never fully recognised or treated as participants.

Interestingly, people who were new to the island, and who, like Kohn herself, did participate in the many and varied aspects of community life, from the parents association to the ‘knitting bee’, still found their own position as insiders difficult to assert, because they had no language with which to articulate their insider status. Kohn suggests that a tension between the two discourses remained, despite the fact that heritage was an insufficient mode of belonging in itself, because:

… incomers who wish to make a Scottish island their home are conscious of the need to involve themselves actively but are unable to articulate the real affect of that involvement (that they are becoming islanders). They are unable to do this, perhaps, because of the imagined history of the nation and ideas about belonging to remote island communities with which their minds are laden. (Kohn 2002:155)

Despite the difficulty in explicitly attributing insider status to the new islanders, people who did participate were being continuously, though implicitly, acknowledged as belonging. A striking example is the well-attended funeral given for an incomer dearly loved by his adopted community. As Kohn comments, ‘one does not choose to be born in a place, but one does choose where to be buried’ (2002:155). To choose and pursue relationships at this Hebridean island is clearly the valued mode of belonging.

As Kohn (2002) and Minnegal et al. (2003) point out, it is often in the context of appealing to outsiders that traditionalist discourses are employed to make claims of belonging and identity. This is certainly the case at the Gippsland Lakes. In particular contexts, when fishermen seek, are forced or are invited, to represent themselves to ‘outsiders’ who either challenge or highlight their right to fish, fishermen do invoke, because it is so often effective, essentialising discourses of relationality in which the metaphorical allusions to blood and trees establish symbolic boundaries, and within them, legitimate and authentic genealogical groupings and persons. But within their own community, although a tension does exist, precedence is rarely cited in claims to
legitimacy. It is not so much that fishermen are overwhelmed by notions of heritage, as Kohn’s islanders were, but that they recognise its capacity to overwhelm and actively negate this tendency. At the Gippsland Lakes the two discourses are not in competition, as Kohn found on the Scottish Hebridean Island; instead, according to context, one is fore-grounded and the other back-grounded.

Until recently, I will argue, the most compelling constituents of community here have been inter-personal relationships rather than relationships to ‘outsiders’ beyond a symbolic boundary. In this thesis, therefore, I am mostly concerned to explore the ‘self-referential’ ways in which community at the Gippsland Lakes fishing is produced and reproduced. This is not to suggest that the construction and maintenance of discursive boundaries is not an activity of Gippsland Lakes fishermen, or that they are not subjected to peripheralising discourses themselves. I do suggest, however, that here community remains largely unimagined and relatively unsymbolised because it is in the course of face-to-face relationships in day-to-day life that ‘community’ is largely formed. Further, I argue that it is quite possible for two modes of understanding belonging and community to co-exist within the one group, and for their differential emphasis to be a matter of context. It is through the often unremarkable, and unreflected upon, encounters at the Co-op, on the lake, outside the post office and at the supermarket that, what Appadurain has called ‘local subjectivities’ are produced (1995:215). At the Gippsland Lakes, these encounters are so effective that no flags need be raised, or burned for that matter, in order to reaffirm the togetherness that underlies them.

Towards the end of my fieldwork I had a revealing telephone conversation with a fisherman which was to clarify for me the way in which fishermen conceptualised the substance of their relationships with one another. I learned that, ultimately, it was effort and not blood that related people in this community. The fishermen I spoke with said he had been asked to write an introductory speech to an event we were both to attend in a few weeks time – the launch of a book entitled *Where Pelicans Are – A Story of Tragedy and Tranquility* (Severs 2004). This partly autobiographical narrative told of the tragic
drowning of a young lake fisherman only a few years earlier. The author Joy, was the deceased fisherman’s aunt.

Joy, had asked James, a respected lake fisherman although not a relative, to speak at the launch on behalf of ‘the fishermen’. James told me he was honoured to take on this role but that he was having a very hard time coming up with some words to say since Joy had given him the difficult task of speaking about ‘what it meant to be a fisherman’. He admitted that he had been flummoxed for quite a while, unsure how to go about discussing this topic. But after many drafts and re-drafts he had come-up with something with which he felt happy.

The following is part of James’ speech, the part that he had so struggled to put into words. He told me how happy he was when he finally captured the most important aspect of being a fisherman.

All of us grew-up in this culture that is the heritage of fishing, and I believe that each of us from fishing families feel a special connection to the lakes, the sea and the area that becomes almost spiritual because we grew-up steeped in these traditions. But not all went the next step and became fishermen. That’s where the most important element comes in. To be a fisherman you must love it, you must live for fishing because it is your life.

The book-launch was an emotional and, in many ways, intimate forum where both insiders (fishermen and their families) and outsiders (the public, politicians, etc.) had gathered. Perhaps it was the way in which an intimate demonstration of a family’s grief – this was, in many ways, a second memorial service for the young fisherman – coincided with a public gathering that made it the right context in which to make explicit what was generally implicit among these men and enabled James to verbalise a theory of identity that was resistant to articulation.

James’ illuminating speech presents a theory of identity and belonging that invokes both heritage and participation as aspects of belonging. However, he clearly states that having
family heritage in fishing is not the most important aspect of that identity because the latter must be activated through participation – by fishing. Without participation, the significance of heritage to identity formation remains dormant. Thus, here, the way in which one belongs to the group is the inverse of conventional Euro-American understandings of how one belongs to a family.

Fishermen become insiders through participation. Action in the present is an identifier, and a modality, of belonging. A man may have a licence to fish in the lake, but this, taken alone, means very little to those who ‘are in the family’ or ‘lakies’. Having fished in other places is also not a sufficient basis by which to become part of the group of fishermen who consider themselves fishermen of the Gippsland Lakes, although it helps. One has to be seen to be fishing the lakes, and be able to discuss what is going on in that place, in order to be recognised as a lake fisherman. A man must become part of, and contribute to, the ongoing flow of knowledge, gossip and gear that combines people through time and place before he will be able to become known, and more importantly treated, as a Gippsland Lakes fisherman.

The unstable character of belonging is well exemplified by the way in which older retired fishermen attempted to maintain their presence around the neighbourhood by continuing to take note of what was happening on the lake. By doing this, retired fishermen maintain an ability to contribute to the ongoing process of neighbourhood constitution. An elderly fisherman I knew lived in a large house that overlooked the lake, a position that enabled him to watch the comings and goings of the younger fishermen. By simply looking out the window he was able to glean fishing information that he could later exchange with the fishermen he remained in telephone contact with. One morning, as we chatted about his life history, he was continually being distracted by activity down on the lake, thereby frustrating my attempts to take him back to his past. As we talked about the past his attention continued to wander to the window and our conversation became laced with commentary concerning the current events that were taking place below us.
On another occasion I was again doggedly pursuing the topic of old Skinny’s past only to discover that he was much more interested in talking about the fate of ‘young’ Simmo, who he had been keenly watching through the floor to ceiling windows overlooking the lake as we ‘spoke’. Skinny said that, on most days, Simmo did not take his boat to the Co-op to unload. He had noted also that Simmo’s boat sat as high in the water when he returned as when he left; a sure sign that he was not catching many fish. Skinny commented gravely that the poor fellow was doing it hard, like all fishermen just starting out. He recalled how difficult his early fishing experiences had been. He asked my opinion. I mentioned difficulties that Simmo had had the day I went fishing with him. As I told my own story old Skinny’s eyes lit-up and he now wanted to talk about the past. In the context of current events his own experiences as a young man became relevant once more and he could contribute to the constituting narrative of the fishing community. Without the present events to shed light on the past and make it relevant, his past experience, had seemed less alive and less meaningful.

Another retired fisherman who also lived above the lake was renowned for walking a considerable distance down to the shore on occasions when a younger fisherman fished that area. The latter fisherman said he could always be sure that ‘old Jim’ would show-up as soon as the net had been shot because the lake was never very far from the old man’s mind or vision. For an hour or so, as the net was hauled in, the two men would discuss the shot’s virtues and draw backs. The young fisherman said that ‘old Jim’ never failed to turn-up, nor did he fail to impart new and interesting knowledge about the fishing place that, in earlier times, he had often used.

In both these examples we see retired fishermen placing emphasis on present events and participation with current fishermen. Skinny was much more concerned to talk to me about what was going on right then and there than in talking about his past. He was, implicitly, directing my attention to what was most important to him: action in the present. In the second case, it is clear that ‘old Jim’ would go out of his way to still join in fishing. According to the young fisherman ‘Old Jim just had to be there’. In both cases, the old men’s pasts and past experiences were reinvigorated and reincorporated by their
actions in the present, transforming what had been and gone into what was current and contingent.

The attempts by older fishermen to remain insiders are particularly telling. One might assume that their lifelong association with the lake and fishing would give them kudos, regardless of their efforts or ability to contribute to present action. It is important to note, however, as the past two examples illustrate, that elderly fishermen do not remain part of the lake fishing community simply because of their past actions, just as fishermen do not become part of the community simply because of the actions of their fathers or forebears. As Astuti has argued, not all theories of identity are ethnic theories (Astuti 1995).

Vezo, a fishing people of coastal Madagascar (Astuti 1995), have similar concerns to those of Gippsland Lakes fishermen. In this coastal community a tension between becoming and ascription also characterises concepts of community and belonging. Astuti reports that the Vezo assured her that ‘the Vezo are not a kind of people’ (Astuti 1995:467). In coastal Madagascar it is clear that locals are not born Vezo but become Vezo as they learn to become skilled fishermen, boat makers, fish sellers and seafood cooks. Vezo people understand that the differences between Vezo and other groups lies in what one does rather than what one is. A Vezo person can become Masikoro (an inland farming people) if they learn how to farm and forget how to fish. Thus, identity is conceived of as a processual and achieved state. Being Vezo is an activity, writes Astuti, and for the Vezo ‘people are what they do’(Astuti 1995:469).

At death, however, a Vezo person takes on an identity derived not from action but ascription. At this time a Vezo person’s body is interred in the tomb belonging to his or her father’s lineage. In life Vezo kinship relations may extend laterally and horizontally as far as is possible for ego to imagine and activate. However, at death this multiplicity of real relations becomes dramatically curtailed, as the body, unlike the living person, is understood to belong to only one raza (lineage). Astuti writes that the Vezo understand the living and the dead as different kinds of persons; hence their different genealogical identities (Astuti 2000). Thus, Vezo suppress until death deeply held notions of unilateral
kinship connectivity. They do so I suggest, because this concept of relationality is resistant to ways of conceptualising and enacting relationships that are laterally multiple and complex.

The story of Simmo discussed in Chapter 2 illustrates that, like Vezo. Gippsland Lakes fishermen seek to avoid genealogical fixity because it limits possibilities for imagining and actualising relationships. Simmo, upon entering the fishery, found that he was expected to reformulate his relationships in accordance with his new position as a member of the fishing community, rather than as a member of a particular family. Thus, fishermen achieve the same end, as do Vezo, by ensuring, throughout their lives together, that genealogy is not the only basis by which one defines who one is; that genealogy can only ever be a partial designator of identity. Even though Simmo’s repositioning was only a matter of emphasis – that is, a down-playing of the ‘given’ aspects of relationship in favour of the ‘made’ aspects – for Simmo, becoming a fisherman and joining the community was experienced as a painful elision of family. In both cases this takes effort in a world that assumes blood is identity.

A highly reflective and curious fisherman I knew who had no ‘roots’ in the fishing industry provides a paradigmatic example of how, through participation, one makes the transition from outsider to insider. Hugh enjoyed talking to me about fishing and fishermen. He had thought a lot about the group of men he worked among, and liked to reflect upon his relationships to them and their relationships to each other. He had his own theories about fishermen that he would discuss with me, mainly for amusement. But what was now amusing to him had once been distressing. His wryness came from a position of relative comfort. He had made the transition from outsider to insider, although he knew this process was never going to be completed.

Hugh told me that when he first bought his licence and began to fish in the Lakes he had enthusiastically read local history books to give him knowledge of the region’s history and the history of the fishery. As he recalled his eager and inquisitive start Hugh laughed and commented that he ‘couldn’t care less about that kind of crap now’ and would rather
take his wife to a good restaurant than ‘spend time looking at history books’. He now found it comic that he had once romanticised his place of work so much. I asked him why he had. He replied that he had liked that kind of thing and told me about all the wrecks he had dived on along the west coast of Victoria. He explained that he was interested in maritime history and ‘things like that’. He went on to say that he was not treated very well when he first began to fish and got ‘chased up the lake’ away from the more popular fishing places. In a later discussion Hugh told me about his philosophy of fishing which had come to him over time. He said, ‘it was simple really’ – he treated others the way they treated him. Locally, this kind of inter-subjective negotiation, in its positive manifestation, is called ‘working in with’ somebody.

Hugh’s retrospective scornfulness about his former interest in local history, although seemingly dismissive of the fishery as a whole, is actually indicative of his insider status. He has gone from being ‘chased up the lake’ and reading (what he now views as) romanticised local histories to ‘working in with’ other fishermen. The narrative begins with Hugh as an outsider, attempting to relate to his colleagues and his environment through a textual abstraction; it finishes with Hugh integrated to the point where he is setting the terms of his own engagement with others and where ‘romance’ consists of having dinner with his wife rather than reading maritime histories.

Of course not all new fishermen read local histories of place in order to try and understand their relationship to it. Hugh’s story is instructive, however, because it sees Hugh attempting to become accepted through the acquisition of esoteric knowledge particular to that community. Hugh’s efforts to read himself into place are reminiscent of the way in which, Kohn (2002) reported, Hebridean islanders attempted to pursue belonging through knowledge of island, and national, history. For Hugh, however, books finally had to be shelved and ongoing, sometimes fraught, relationships had to be entered into in order that he begin the process of becoming an accepted member of the community.
For Hugh, as for Simmo, insider status was not a matter of *being*, it was a matter of *doing*. Both men learned quickly that to find space and acceptance for themselves among the other men they would have to engage with them. Simmo’s kinship connections were not enough to form and maintain relationships with the other men. For Hugh, knowledge about relationships from the past was not enough to form or maintain relationships in the present.

It is because relationships must be worked at that licenced fishermen can still become pariahs in the community. Interestingly, the two fishermen who were least liked, were the most consistently, and widely, complained about, and who found it most difficult to participate in the ongoing dialogue from which, I have argued, a kind of togetherness is constituted, were both from old fishing families. Even though these men both had a substantial fishing heritage in the Gippsland Lakes, long-retired fishermen – and even I – knew more fishing gossip than either of them. Their inability to discuss goings-on on the lake set them apart from the others. This was not for lack of interest, on their part. These ‘insiders on the outer’ were just as keen as anyone else to hear news that could give them a feel for the ‘current state of play’ on the lake, but they could not elicit it.

Their position as relative outsiders had not been, as far as I could gather, life-long. They had in some ways earned this disrespect. Both appeared to have three things that counted against them. First, they had spent a great deal of their fishing careers away from the lake. One man had usually fished with his father (who had since retired), predominantly, in a smaller inlet elsewhere, despite the fact that his father had a licence to also fish the Gippsland Lakes. Thus, he had spent a great deal of time apart from other lake fishermen. The other man had left fishing altogether for nearly two decades, and then returned. Second, for people who had not spent much time fishing in the lakes they were considered to have strong opinions, at odds with those of other fishermen, concerning future management of the fishery. Third, by all accounts, both men were thought to be unusually unscrupulous operators, though this opinion could have been a result of their peripheral standing and not a cause of it. There is no doubt, however, that both men were
considered to be dabbling in lake fishing; they had not spent enough time fishing the lake or talking to others on the water or at the Co-op.

On a few memorable occasions I was jarred to hear these men accuse others of not being ‘real’ fishermen on the basis of the latter’s genealogy. At these times, because I was not then alive to the significance of context in relation to authenticity claims, I was not able to properly reflect upon why it was that I felt this way. In retrospect, I interpret their language of authenticity as a device employed when more appropriate avenues, through which belonging could be demonstrated, had vanished.

**Autonomy and Equality**

Deleuze and Guattari (2002) have compellingly argued that, in contrast to the relational logic of the ‘tree’, certain styles of inter-relating entailed by particular social settings and values constituted therein generate communities formed through relationships patterned by the metaphoric logic of the rhizome. The tree has a binary logic where one becomes two and two becomes four, while ‘the rhizome is an anti-genealogy’ because it may ramify in all directions, any point can connect to any other and any part is generative such that fragmentation is only a prelude to renewal and becoming (Deleuze and Guattari 2002:11). However, Deleuze and Guattari (2002:18), in a somewhat overdetermined and essentialist manner, attribute rhizomic relational logics to ‘… the East, Oceania in particular’. Here, by contrast, I argue that the practice of rhizomic modes of relationality are very much part of the day-to-day constitution of neighbourhood at the Gippsland Lakes. Indeed, in the previous chapter I implied that genealogical logic only makes sense in terms of rhizomic modes of conceptualising relationship, because the latter idea, based upon the achievement of affective ties between kin, informs who is considered ‘real kin’.

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1 The concept of the rhizome I use here forms no part of everyday folk concepts about relationships for Australians of European origin. Fishermen would not immediately recognise the concept of the rhizome nor would they readily speak in terms of it. On the other hand, as I have argued, fishermen do, like most Australians, recognise the concept of the family tree and discuss their own kinship relations using aspects of this trope. In fact, it is the very facticity and discursive pervasiveness of this trope that leads fishermen to attempt to curtail its influence and to emphasize, without directly asserting their preference for, more rhizomic forms of relationship.
The botanical tropes of the tree and the rhizome are helpful ways through which the difference between belonging as an achieved state and belonging as an ascribed state can be envisioned. Social groupings can be characterised as either structured by an hierarchical logic in which components are inter-related by the flow of an internal essence or as a rhizomic profusion of multi-directional offshoots. The rhizome, then, describes the form of relationships that are worked at day-to-day and not those that are given at birth.

Rhizomic relationships pre-empt pattern: adventitious lines of growth may depart from any point and join at any other point such that the shape of the becoming-whole shows hair-like departures, tubulous conglomerations, matted intersections and abrupt fissures. The structure of the rhizome is quite unlike the hierarchical and predictable structure of the tree because any part of the plant can be conceptualised as a potential point of origin, control or termination. Because rhizomic relationships are not prescriptive and occur between non-essentialized elements of the emerging whole, these relationships can be understood as being formative of an acentered system, the principle characteristic of which is that ‘local initiatives are coordinated independently of a central power …’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2002:519, note 15). In such a system each part acts as a centre influenced by, and influencing, all that it is connected to without reference to any particular transcendent part. Thus although interconnected and influenced by those interconnections, parts are in fact autonomous.

Some Australian indigenous communities have similarly been described as holding an acentred relational view of the world (Rose 1988). People at Yarralin (Victoria River Valley) understand that people, plants and animals autonomously create and maintain reciprocal relations with each other. Although Rose largely explores relations between very different kinds of beings, the model she sets forth may be generalised to communities such as that among Gippsland Lakes fishermen.
At Yarralin, as well as in many other indigenous Australian communities, it is understood that people choose the kinship relationships they wish to instantiate – emphasising connections and backgrounding differences accordingly (Myers 1986; Rose 1988). Kinship itself is largely processual in the sense that individuals understand that they are born with a unique constellation of potential relationships to kin that require work and care to actualise and perpetuate. Born into a field of potential relationships, a child learns that it is only through care, learning and respect that these potential relationships can be actualised.

Rose explains that because each person forms the nexus of a unique constellation of relationships and responsibilities to places and people, links to country and kin separate and combine people in the same place of residence in multiple ways. Thus, when people form relationships in acentred systems they must be mindful of the way in which other persons, with whom they have formed a relationship, themselves exist as nodes in the centre of their own relational fields.

Bird-David has suggested that this acentred form of relating is a common feature of so-called band societies where immediacy of relation is emphasised instead of moral or blood ties (Bird-David 1994). In this case a person is concerned to apprehend the immediate and the contextual; there is no space to generate generalities. Thus, kinship is not elaborated into ‘Kinship’; being a father or a sister is not a loaded position because the question always is ‘whose father are you and where do you come from?’ (Bird-David 1995:78).

Bird-David and Rose describe societies with an ego-centred view of the world. In these societies relationships are not formulated according to abstract principles of hierarchy. In this sense identity is not a result of the bounded individual taking-up or being relegated to a ready-made position in the world, such as ‘teacher’ or ‘father-in-law’, but is achieved through inter-subjective relationships. The conjunctive rhizome construes relationship as a continuous movement, something never completed, and, thus, something that one works at, pursues and strives for. For Gippsland Lakes fishermen who your father was
does not designate, in any simple way, who you are. For all these reasons I liken Gippsland Lakes fishermen’s conceptualisations of human persons to those discussed by Rose and Bird-David. However, fishermen have an entirely different understanding of non-human agents, and, hence have a cosmological vision that is very different from that of both indigenous Australians and Nayaka of the Gir Valley South India (Rose 1992; Bird-David 1999).

In the following excerpt James describes the process by which he formed three new relationships. James’ narrative illustrates the intricate shape of relationships at the lake; it shows how enmities and friendships combine and separate people to create fields of relationships unique to each man. It is clear, in this case, that community is formed and maintained through encounters on the lake and in the day-to-day round of fishing, and that these encounters provide the substance of future encounters that may, in turn, cement or fracture existing connections. The relationships James’ speaks of below illustrate an acentred network.

‘He was a funny sort of a fellow because if you didn’t expect anything from him you got on quite well.’ So begins James’ story of his relationship to Norm. Actually the story concerns the formation of a relationship between James and three other fishermen from a neighbouring town who did not like Norm.

We carted [Norm’s] fish for years and I always remember the first time I went to Lake Wellington which was 1985; the day I went up there was the same day that he arrived. No connection. I just decided I was going up there.

The Paynesville fishermen had absolutely no time for him [Norm]. I’d had very little to do with them [the Paynesville fishermen] up until that point in time.

I couldn’t get me nets in that day it was blowin’ too hard and I was only by meself. The next day I had to be at the dentist at three o’clock and it was still blowing so I had to go out and pick up me nets bring them ashore and then pull through them.
I had about twelve bins of fish and there was bugger all room in the boat – learnin’ the hard way: I pulled them into the water, which you’d do in Tambo Bay or anywhere up the lake, there – you’d just stand in the water and pull the nets through and chuck the fish out and then pull’em back – but up there, the wave action comin’ around the shore is bringing all these little sticks about two inches long and I got a bloody net full of sticks. I had, from memory I had eleven boxes of bream, I had seven boxes that were no worries that didn’t have to be measured. I have four boxes I had to go through and measure ‘em and time’s tickin’ on and Norm’s there, he’s sort of standing there looking at me and I’m standing there wading through the mess I got and he’s having a cup of tea and I said are you gonna go down to the Co-op Norm? ‘Oh s’pose I might have to’ and I said ‘I’ve gotta be in Bairnsdale at three o’clock would you be able to take me fish?’ ‘Oh gee I wished you’d have told me earlier now I’ll have to rearrange ‘em all in the back of me truck’ and I said ‘look don’t bloody worry about it! If it’s that big a hassle don’t worry about it’ – ‘oh well, yeah I’ve got a bit to do’ and away he went!

Up until then the Paynesville blokes had just been totally … ignoring me. Anyhow away he went. Fred Johnson came over and said ‘ah, I thought he was your mate’ and, well I said ‘well, I hope mates would treat you a little bit better than that’. ‘Yeah, well I s’pose you’re right’ he said ‘you’ve gotta get to Bairnsdale do ya?’. And I said ‘yeah’ and he said ‘well you measure your fish’, ‘and we’ll start pulling these nets across for you’. And next thing Ronald Gibbs, who I count as a very very good mate these days, and Brian Sutton … who’s a good bloke too, come over and were pulling the sticks out. It’s getting late and Brian said to me ‘where do you want these shot?’ And I said ‘why?’ He said ‘you get going, I’ll shoot your nets for you’. Total transformation because up until then ...

But that was the sort of relationship you had with him [Norm]. Like Norm wouldn’t think of that as thoughtless it was just that ‘oh gees I’ve gotta go to the Co-op now cos you’re not gonna, better get goin’, can’t wait’ it was just the way … if you didn’t take offence at that sort of thing you’d get on very well with him. To go and talk to and that – you couldn’t get a nicer bloke’.

These relationships between James, Fred, Ronald and Brian have lasted over 20 years. So too has the relationship between James and Norm. But not all relationships are
maintained so successfully. In many ways this story is about James’ relationship with Norm. Indeed, prior to this part of our conversation, James had been describing how he had learnt quite a lot about fishing from Norm. Norm had helped him in less tangible ways than the other men, but they had been just as meaningful to James. The three men from Paynesville, who James became and remains friends with despite their dislike for Norm, did not and do not judge James badly for his good relationship with Norm. At the lake, then, each and every relationship is negotiated in an individual and on-going manner to create a situation in which each man is related to all others in a variety of ways such that no two men, even if they are ‘great friends’, necessarily, have the same kind of relationship to another man.

On many occasions I heard a fisherman, in conversation with other fisherman, lamenting the character flaws of a third man. And on many of these occasions, the second man stood-up for the man who had been criticized. Instead of an argument ensuing, the accuser relented and suggested that perhaps, sometimes, the man in question did act with social grace, it was just that he himself had not experienced this. The two men were happy to ‘agree to disagree’ on the character of the absent party, and conversation moved on without any consequences for their own relationship. Fishermen understood that each of them was involved in a multiplicity of individually negotiated relationships that changed over time, becoming stronger or weaker, being broken or renewed. Ultimately the autonomy of each man in his relational field was understood and respected, even though, sometimes, a particular man’s opinion was not agreed with.

Fishermen at the Gippsland Lakes conceptualise themselves and their colleagues as autonomous agents. They are loathe to speak for others or speculate authoritatively on their motivations. They understand that their experience of each other and their environment is unique. They act according to the assumption that each man comes from a different vantage point in the world and that, for this reason, his decisions will be different. Thus, fishermen rarely expect consistency from their colleagues, and they spend an enormous amount of time attempting to second-guess their peers.
Fishermen expect their colleagues to have other agendas and to behave autonomously, and so men are united and divided in an ever-shifting web of alliance relations. Thus, there is little consensus about personalities on the lake. It is rare for most fishermen to feel the same way about another man – rare for a man to be truly on the outer. To be a man with a fishing licence but with few hallmarks of ‘belonging’ was only possible, therefore, by consistently failing to get along with most of the other men, most of the time. It was not a matter of heritage.

No one fisherman has the same set of relationships, to other men, as anyone else. It is the additive effect of all these cross-cutting, divergent and overlapping estimations of a man’s character that positions a person in the community. Because there are so many divergent views, and because all men are expected to make their own decisions regarding relationships with others, the overall result is surprisingly inclusive and flexible. When the signifiers of belonging are participation, willingness to engage, and attention to people and place, belonging becomes a matter of motivation and not being.

**Institutionalising Participation**

When commercial fishing first began at the lake anyone could go fishing if they paid a nominal fee to the fisheries department. Many drifted in and out. This freedom ended in the 1960s when the issuing of licences was frozen. At this time licences could only be acquired through inheritance and, for this reason, tended to stay in families. In the late 1980s, however, licences were able to be bought and sold for the first time. At this juncture the fishermen’s association asked the state government to attach some conditions to the acquisition of a fishing licence.

After a forty minute session spent plying the then Premier of Victoria with fresh fish and salty conversation the Premier, I am told, agreed to the suggestions of the East Gippsland Estuarine Fishermen’s Association (EGEFA) representatives that prospective licence holders be required to undertake a two year apprenticeship program before being able to own a licence. Any prospective licence holder would, thus, have to seek out and convince
a current licence holder to take him or her on as an apprentice for two years before being able to apply for a licence. The two men who drove this process explained to me that the reason why it was necessary to have an apprenticeship was so that new fishermen learnt what was ‘expected of them’ and knew what to expect themselves in terms of lifestyle, work and remuneration. Clearly boundaries were being established, but what kind of person were they supposed to contain? What were these newcomers to understand, to know and to see?

One fisherman who went through the apprenticeship process, rather resentfully I might add, said that he suspected that he had been taken on as an apprentice because he had been a shark fisherman in Bass Strait and that this had given him the required kudos among the lake fishermen. He added that during his apprenticeship he ‘never learnt anything about fishing on the lake’ because the fisherman with whom he had fished with ‘never left sight of Point Thomas’. Of course this apprentice fisherman had learnt a lot, as the subtext to this last comment attests. What he learnt was that even though he had spent two years fishing near Point Thomas this place was well and truly someone else’s domain and to question this, as he might have found out, leads to chastising gossip and net tampering. He would also have learnt however, that it is through continuous and expert use of a place that one becomes identified with it (the way in which fishermen implicate themselves in places will be discussed further in Chapter 6).

In 2002 fishermen were dismayed to learn that their apprenticeship program had to be ended because it had fallen foul of new National Competition Policy guidelines (ACIL Consulting 1999). After this the only criterion for acquiring a licence was capital. Fishermen criticised the change in various ways. One man commented that ‘it prevents the genuine blokes like Nathan getting into the fishery’. Another said, ‘I might end up fishing beside Chopper Read! I just don’t know!’ And a third stated that ‘a licence should be earned not bought’. All were concerned about who was going to come in and buy a licence and why. The three men were not concerned about precisely how, when and

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2 In this thesis, where appropriate, places have been given pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of fishermen strongly identified with them.
3 Mark ‘Chopper’ Read is a well known, and published, Australian career criminal (Read 2002)
where a person was going to fish – these were matters for government regulators. Their concerns were with the social dimensions of the fisheries, dimensions that are largely ignored by regulators.

For instance, it was understood by one fisherman that a genuine bloke – a bloke like Nathan – was a man with a young family who was currently working as a deckhand on a lake fishing boat. He stressed that simply having the large sum of money now needed to buy a licence was no guarantee that one would catch fish. It was also clear that he believed that ‘genuine blokes’ would not have $200,000 available to spend on a fishing licence. A ‘genuine bloke’, by his estimation, would be young, raising a family and with few assets. He was also concerned that anyone outlaying so much capital initially to get into the industry would no doubt put an enormous amount of pressure on fish stocks so as to be able to recoup such an investment.

A ‘genuine bloke’, then, is one who has put in time working in the industry. He has shown commitment to the industry, the occupation, the lake, and his colleagues. Such a person has demonstrated concern about the continuation of the industry as a whole and, as such, has earned his licence and not just bought it on the market. In earning his licence a ‘genuine’ newcomer has worked closely with another fisherman – his skipper – and shown himself to be a good worker and not just a dabbler. Counter-intuitively, even though they are in competition with, and therefore unhelpful to, newcomers, fishermen are still sincerely concerned that people do not simply dabble in the industry: drifting in and out with little commitment to learning how to fish or how to get along with each other in the lake.

Commitment, hard work and willingness to follow the lead of other fishermen are important characteristics for a newcomer to exhibit since fishermen feel that a certain level of mutual trust is necessary if they are all to go to work each day. This is partly because they must trust their colleagues not to interfere with the expensive gear they leave unprotected on the lake for periods of up to 24 hours. In fact, they hope that their colleagues will keep an eye out for others who might be attempting to steal or otherwise
interfere with their equipment. But these qualities are also important because fishermen value the small social moments spent with others while on the lake and they hope to encourage these values in others.

The process of apprenticeship, both in the selection and the teaching resonates, with what Appadurai (1995) has termed the production of local subjectivities. He writes that ‘a great deal of what have been termed ‘rites of passage’ is concerned with the production of what we might call local subjects … [involving] complex social techniques for the inscription of locality onto bodies’ (1995:205). Thus, it is only these local subjects who, as I will explain in future chapters, will have learned to see and come to understand the local terrain in which fishing places, names and stories make sense.

However,

the work of producing neighbourhoods – life-worlds of relatively stable associations, shared histories, and collectively traversed and legible places – is often at odds with the projects of nation states. This is because the commitments and attachments that characterise local subjectivities are more pressing, more continuous and sometimes more distracting than the nation state can afford (Appadurai 1995:215).

Certainly, at the Gippsland Lakes, the apprenticeship program became a distraction that the state could ill afford. When it was over-turned in 2002 on the grounds that it was anticompetitive the government effectively implied that becoming a fisherman was merely a question of having enough money to afford a licence, a judgement with which, it would seem, fishermen at the Gippsland Lakes would disagree. With that decision the struggle to produce and define locality slipped a little from the hands of fishermen.

**Fishing Family Versus Our Family**

The way in which fishermen imagine or represent belonging is difficult to describe, precisely because of the emphasis on its enactment. This is because belonging, as James stressed in his speech, is primarily processual and not categorical. Since belonging to the
community is a processual and lifelong project there are no hard and fast identifiers of those who belong and those who do not. There are, however, degrees by which one may be identified as belonging – as was illustrated in the example above in the case of two fishermen who had little opportunity to enter into relationships with other men. Their relative status on ‘the outer’ could be identified by the strategies they used in attempting to voice their sense of belonging. Of course these strategies, in themselves, only served to further mark them as not fully part of the community.

The way in which these two men conceptualised belonging, via genealogical depth, was not the norm. The story of Len, on the other hand, the adopted fisherman discussed in Chapter 2, provides a glimpse of the way in which fishermen often imagine the community as being inter-related by metaphorical biogenetic ties. Len told me, amused by the irony of the situation, that his biological father had always called him ‘son’ despite the fact that neither was aware of the ‘real’ relationship at the time. In this understanding the fishing family transcends all other family groupings.

It struck me, and other fishermen who were new to the industry, as curious – and not incidental – that, in the year 2002, fishermen would refer to each other in a seemingly quaint manner as ‘young Wayne’, ‘young Simmo’ or ‘old Norm Henley’. Because this was a form of address largely reserved for those in the lake fishing community I began to consider it indicative of the way in which relationships within the community were imagined.

Fishermen often begin fishing with their fathers. It is common for fishermen with sons to imagine, somewhat wistfully, that their child might follow in their footsteps. (This was despite the fact that most men ultimately encouraged sons to do something else because they saw fishing as ‘a dying industry’.) For many older fishermen without sons, or without sons who had shown an interest in the industry, it was a bittersweet pleasure to impart knowledge to younger, unrelated men. For some it was truly satisfying, while for others it was difficult to loosen a tongue reined in by a lifetime’s secrecy. Some men offered to show youngsters how to hang nets, others offered: ‘I’ll show you what goes on
around [such and such a place] when I retire’. There was a sense across the fishery that older men would one day share their knowledge with younger men and so, in effect, reproduce the fishery.

The president of the fishermen’s association told me on a number of occasions that he would like to impart his knowledge to another fishermen, most likely the man that bought his licence after he retired. His son, now a marine biologist, had not wanted to be a commercial fisherman. He recalled, fondly, the two men who had taught him to fish the lakes when he was young. Both had been elderly at the time and needed someone younger to do the heavy lifting work that is a feature of fishing. As part of the work ‘contract’ they said they would tell him everything they knew. The president said this knowledge was invaluable and it was their show of generosity that he would like to emulate in the future.

This was an important way in which the web of relationships was imagined at the Gippsland Lakes, whereby older men guided younger less experienced men in gaining an understanding of the lake. A sense of these expectations was evidenced by fishermen’s modes of address when they prefaced names with ‘young’ or ‘old’. But again, I stress that autonomy was always a feature of this engagement between older and younger generations. Two moments I recall from my time at the Lakes highlight this point.

One night, as we waited for the sun to set and for the prawns to rise and travel out the entrance, we spoke to an older fisherman and his son who had pulled up alongside our boat for a chat. The fisherman I was with commented that he thought he might try some seining in the following months because he had been given some nets. The nets needed to be re-slung, however, to suit the conditions of the lake. The older fisherman in the boat alongside us, who had only minutes earlier been regaling us with a slew of the latest jokes he had picked-up at the golf course, commented, very seriously now, that he would help the younger fisherman re-sling his nets. The younger fisherman politely thanked him and the conversation moved on. Later I asked him if he would be taking up the older man on his offer. “Nah!” he said pointedly “I can figure it out myself”.

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On another occasion, as described in Chapter 1, while out fishing with Allen and a less experienced fisherman, the younger man broke into Allen’s recollections and stories and asked in a stilted manner ‘do you know what’s going on up in Wellington this time of year?’ After an awkward pause Allen subtly rebuffed him with a quiet grunt, kept on working and began another story. Later in the fishing trip the older fishermen talked a little about fishing in Lake Wellington, but it was precious little.

In both cases we can see that younger and older men conceptualise themselves primarily as autonomous agents who may or may not engage in a particular way with others. In the first example the older man did not expect the younger man to jump at his offer and respected his decision to figure it out himself. In the second example, the older man registered the request but made it obvious that he would let the younger man in on the facts very slowly. It is apparent also, however, that there is a common understanding about the flow of knowledge from older to younger men.

I came to realise that when men warmly referred to each other, prefacing first names with ‘Young’ or ‘Old’ in the form ‘Young Davie is getting the hang of it’ or ‘Old Bob Hattie is starting to lose his eye sight’, they were invoking an orientation towards the past effected by tree ‘thinking’ where substances flow to and from an origin, relating people across generations. In these cases, however, community relationships are imagined to transcend family relationships. The blood flows beyond the family and the community as ‘fishing family’ is fore-grounded.

Fishermen use tree/blood metaphors to imagine relationships in ways that capture their processual view of community constitution. The metaphor, of blood and branching, which give genealogical connectedness their apparent firmness and facticity, are transferred to the weaker discourse of processual relationality giving it a quality of ‘realness’ and a firmness through which moral decisions can be made. This transference from background to foreground of the dominant metaphor links the implicit mode of
relation to the explicit mode of relation and, in echoing each other, the import of both is maintained.

The relationships that form between younger fishermen and older fishermen are a more explicit example of the ‘group as family’ trope. A more subtle example of this same image of togetherness is given by the related notions of ‘top boat’ and ‘being hungry’. Some fishermen aspire to be ‘top boat’; that is, to catch the most fish on a particular night or week. Others claim not to want this, thus rationalizing why it is that they are never achieve it. Being ‘top boat’ is a position to be proud of. Men may be jealous of the ‘top boat’ but there is no doubt that they consider this position to be one of virtue. One must be skilful to become ‘top boat’. That status is an indication of a man’s resourcefulness, talent, experience and prior learning. Being considered ‘hungry’, on the other hand, is not a virtuous position. Often fishermen would comment that ‘so and so’ was a ‘hungry’ fisherman and that ‘he’d stab you for a mullet’ (a mullet is considered a fairly worthless fish nowadays).

The accusation that someone is ‘hungry’, that they are selfish and, importantly, that they would ‘stab’ another fisherman for a mullet describes a relationship gone wrong. A ‘hungry’ fisherman is perceived to be a man who blocks another’s ability to get along in the lake. He prevents others having their fair share of opportunities and he blocks processual engagements in favour of himself and his family. A ‘hungry’ fisherman is a man who is portrayed as not stopping for a five-minute chat, who doesn’t give a little clue here and there about where the fish are, who keeps information to himself, while being successful.

Being ‘hungry’ is different from being ‘tight’ with money. A charming cluster of related stories, told by a number of fishermen, about a recently retired man, illustrates this point. It is widely said that Old Joe’s wife can make a roast chicken last for three meals. One man linked the family’s waste-not-want-not mentality to the fact that Old Joe was always popping-up from behind a headland to bot a smoke off a passer by. But, he assured me, Old Joe was always keen for a long chat to go with the smoke. Another fisherman, who
had done his apprenticeship with Old Joe, recalled with much amusement his dread of going to work and wondering what kind of trouble the older man would enthusiastically embrace that day. Old Joe just loved things going wrong, apparently. His former deckhand grinned and remembered ‘Old Joe loved drama; he wasn’t happy until he was fully bogged!’

Old Joe, by all accounts, was a man who had ‘deep pockets and short arms’. He was successful and owned what many thought was an enormous home thought to have been paid for by a combination of skilful fishing and parsimonious use of chicken. His economy was not, however, considered antisocial. He was, on the contrary, a well-loved figure on the lake in spite of his tight-fistedness, precisely because he was generous in terms of the time he had for other people. His desire to become entangled in calamities was actually a desire to bring about shared moments, albeit in extremis, that could then be reminisced about later. His former deckhand recognised the social dimension of Joe’s love of trouble.

A story I heard on a number of occasions, is illustrative of how ‘being hungry’ is different from being tight-fisted with money. The story told of how, on a very foul Saturday morning, when most ordinary people would be having a well earned break, a particular man’s wife was seen in wet-weather gear busily making a net amid torrential rain and icy wind. The story was about a particular fisherman’s hunger, told by reference to his wife. The implicit criticism is of fishermen who would ostentatiously invoke blood relations in order to outdo others, especially on a Saturday.

Being ‘hungry’ or being the ‘top boat’ is all in the eyes of the beholder. A man who caught a bin of fish through sheer ‘hunger’ may, arguably, look a lot like a man who caught a bin of fish by sheer skill (thus deserving the title ‘top boat’). The important point is that the terms used to describe a man’s motivation are pronouncements about the right and wrong way to go about fishing alongside other men. It is no coincidence that the story of the ‘hungry’ fisherman makes reference to his wife. A hungry man

4 Until he had fully bogged a car in the mud.
unbecomingly takes care of his own first – foregrounding family in the process of constituting the neighbourhood. A fisherman like Old Joe may take care of his family but if he takes care of his relationships in the lake then he will never be disparaged as being a ‘hungry’ fisherman. The two terms, then, are suggestive of the tension that exists between individual fishing families and the group as a whole.

It is no co-incipience that the first woman to be mentioned in this chapter concerning ‘community’ is presented as somewhat inhibiting the reproduction of the neighbourhood. Women tend to fall outside the community of Gippsland Lakes fishermen. They are not excluded from boats – some women work, on and off, as deck-hands on their husband’s or father’s boat – but because they are not considered autonomous participants in the fishery, they are not considered to be involved in the production and reproduction of the community. Women, like men, are progenitors of fishing heritage but it is precisely this role and this realm that fishermen seek to downplay in their day-to-day activities on the lake. To an extent, this downplaying of family backgrounds women’s voices as well.

Fishermen understand that fishing is competitive but they also hope that it might be more than that. They hope it might be about forming relationships with each other that lead to some kind of shared and memorable episode. A man who is ‘hungry’ eschews such moments in dogged pursuit of fish and in the process chooses his own family over the community. He chooses relationships conceived as immutable blood ties over those formed in the day-to-day business of fishing. This is a choice that ultimately inhibits movement and contributes to the kind of stagnation that prevents a man, as Jim commented of his cousins, from ‘setting the world on fire’.

The Stuff of Belonging

Gippsland Lakes fishermen spend an enormous amount of time in their gear sheds slinging nets. Nets need constant updating: they need to be reshaped, repaired and altered to suit new conditions and new visions. I often first met fishermen in their gear sheds. These places were extraordinary, dense with equipment and vast in scale; some gear
sheds exceeded the size of the man’s family home. And, in many cases, before we sat
down to have a cup of tea or talk about family we talked about gear. As I poked about
among the swathes of net hung from the rafters amidst the smell of decomposing seaweed
and fuel I learnt about relationships.

It was immediately clear to me that these sheds, which contained literally hundreds of
thousands of metres of net of all colours, ages, and mesh sizes, contained objects that
expressed nearly a century’s worth of environmental change. As the populations of
different fish species had fluctuated, or habitats had changed, gear had been changed in
response. Fishermen never threw out their old gear because they could never be sure that
some species of fish would not come back or that a particular place might not revert to a
former state. Change, as reflected in these sheds, and as will be discussed in Chapter 4, is
an expected part of fishing.

It was not obvious, on sight, that gear denoted not just ecological relationships but also
social relationships. Yet, one of the first things that fishermen mentioned was who had
given them various pieces of gear. Nets, in particular, tended to have quite complex
social lives. Most men had nets that had once been owned by someone else. Fishermen
took pleasure in recalling who had given them nets and how they had later changed those
nets in order to make them uniquely their own. Individual nets were also commonly made
from cast off parts of other men’s nets. Further, nets had sometimes been constructed by
a number of people; friends and members of the immediate family had tied the knots
together to make the net. These sheds sat like vaults containing, in encyclopedic fashion,
not only the environmental history of the lake but the social history as well. As one
younger man marveled, referring to the first time he had been invited into an older man’s
shed ‘it was like walking back through the history of the lake’.

Because inlet and estuary fishing in Victoria is a specialized industry, gear is not readily
saleable; there is little call for $10,000 seine nets or bails of mesh net outside of the small
number of men actually commercially fishing these waterways. It is uncommon,
however, that when one fisherman wants to sell a piece of gear another wants to buy it. For this reason, quite a lot of gear passes from fisherman to fisherman, as gifts.

During my fieldwork I took a trip – more out of curiosity, than necessity – to a small commercially fished inlet 200km east of the Gippsland Lakes at Mallacoota. I had arranged to meet some other inlet fishermen, here. On this occasion I met an elderly man who had retired from fishing but continued to build and restore boats. When I arrived he was in his shed steaming wood to shape the hull of the boat he was restoring. We talked about his gear. He told me he had given quite a lot of it away since he had retired. In fact, he said, he had just given away the last of his seine nets the other weekend to a young Gippsland Lakes fisherman. He had, at first, tried very hard to find a different young fellow whom he had once met while building a boat down at Lakes Entrance. This young man had impressed the older fisherman as a hard worker with a young family. He had really wanted to give his nets to this man but had been unable to find him in the phone book and, because he had lost contact with many of the people he had formerly known, had not been able to track him down.

This retired fisherman was a laconic, direct, and understated man and so I was surprised at the lengths he had gone to, both in thought and action, to find the young person he felt most deserved his nets. His story alerted me to the fact that fishermen did think hard about who they would give their gear to. Bestowing gear was a sign of approval. It followed the general concern among fishermen to foster, in their colleagues, a sense of commitment to the fishery – both in term of its environmental dimensions and its social dimensions.

Gear sheds, I came to see, stood as testament to the desire fishermen felt to ensure the transcendence of the fishing community over particular family groups. Possessions were not hoarded or left to rot, they were given to the right man at the right time. But the right man was not necessarily your kinsman; it was someone who had shown commitment to fishing – someone who, as local fisherman James said, ‘lived for fishing because fishing was [their] life’. The musty depths of these sheds represented the orientation towards,
acceptance of, and capacity to embrace, change. Gear was a manifestation of both past and potential social and environmental relationships. Although still and dank, gear captured the continuous and autonomous movement towards and away from others that characterised belonging – as process – among Gippsland Lakes fishermen.

**Conclusion**

Fishermen pursue relationships with each other because belonging to the group of men who call themselves Gippsland Lakes fishermen is, largely, an achieved state. Fishermen who did not come from fishing families did have to work hard to achieve belonging. Interestingly, all the ‘newcomers’ belonged to the fishermen’s association and were on speaking terms with the other licence holders, while the most socially ostracised lake fishermen were two licence holders from ‘established’ fishing families. Belonging to the community of lake fishermen has a different conceptual basis to that of belonging to a family. Part of the labour of belonging can involve backgrounding the immutability of genealogical connections so that men who are kin can work alongside each other, in the same way that men who are not kin can. Men work at belonging because their other option, the overt flagging of heritage and other discourses of authenticity, is experienced as inhibiting the autonomous pursuit of relationships. Dwelling on genealogy, fishermen point out, privileges some relationships over others, weakens men’s independence and, ultimately, their interdependence. Thus, ideally, no relationship – even ones between close kin – is assumed. When the apparent immutability of relationships between kin are submerged, fishermen are able to create relationships with each other that are dynamic and responsive, allowing movement through water space, and, thus, the acquisition of new relationships and the implementation of new knowledge. Belonging is achieved, and community made, in a myriad of ways. Fundamentally, however, it is made through striving to share moments, and conversations, with others – on the water, at the Co-op, at the boats, at the supermarket, while walking the dog, or over a cup of tea.
Chapter 4
Fishing in the Raw

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Introduction

In the previous chapter I commented on the way in which knowledge and skill are transferred from fisherman to fisherman, within families and beyond them. Family is an important reservoir of knowledge and skill, although it is certainly not the only ‘institution’ through which a novice fisherman becomes competent. Here, I will take fishing knowledge and practice as my subject, and explore the processes of knowledge acquisition, application, transformation and reproduction. By working alongside one another fishermen come to have overlapping understandings of, and modes of interacting with, their surrounds. Indeed, the sensibilities formed through practice inform the content of fishermen’s sense of togetherness and contribute to the constitution and maintenance of the neighbourhood at the Gippsland Lakes. As I will illustrate towards the end of this chapter, when fishermen come together with others who also have interests in the lake, such as managers and scientists, to negotiate access to natural resources, it is their own contrasting style of environmental interpretation that is foregrounded in the process.

The variability of lake ecology and the fact that fishermen target multiple species of fish and crustaceans, means that to earn a living by fishing is a very complex task. Despite
this, fishermen gain and employ insight into current conditions from past experience and, thereby, reduce the uncertainty of outcomes. In order to become competent, fishermen must be aware of, and able to respond to, the enormous range of variables that influence fishing success. Despite being skilled at what they do, fishermen know that it is impossible, despite the attention they pay to the lake, to ever be certain that they have taken into account all the variables. Their approach is that they never really know and that there is always more to learn.

In the following two sections I discuss recent anthropological explorations into the nature of knowledge, practice and learning in order to build a framework through which to explore the ethnographic material that follows.

Knowledge and Practice

Keller and Keller (1996:14) write that ‘there is a dialectic between knowledge and practice that gives an emergent quality to accomplishment’. Their conceptualisation of the dialectic is largely framed by earlier anthropological discussions concerning structure and practice (Ortner 1989). In this view, it is understood that observed practices are informed by social, cultural and environmental structures. However, because structure does not dictate practice, and because practice is often exploratory, improvisational or imperfect, structure is not always reproduced in practice but can actually, intentionally or unintentionally, be transformed by it (Keller and Keller 1996:16). For Keller and Keller, knowledge constitutes one of the structural underpinnings of practice. For the individual, knowledge is an abstraction from experience integrating the social, cultural, and environmental phenomena that are internally brought to bear on behaviour. In turn, knowledge is learned in the process of behaving and is organized to facilitate a person’s anticipated goals (1996:17).

The authors argue that knowledge is both constructed by practice and applied to it, while practice is governed by knowledge at the same time as being an open-ended, creative process that informs and transforms knowledge (1996:14). They stress that the structuring
effect of knowledge *governs* but does not dictate practice. By this they mean that knowledge provides guiding principles or concepts for action rather than a step-by-step series of instructions. And it is from the unexpected, encountered in practice, that new knowledge emerges.

Other recent anthropological discussions concerning structure, practice and knowledge take a similar view: that structure and practice form a mutually constitutive dialectic. In this view, knowledge is not to be found in either structure or practice but is best understood as *immanent* in this dialectic. An account of context thus becomes important to any discussion of knowledge or learning, because what is known does not simply reside in the mind (or the body for that matter) of the person performing knowledgably. Instead, knowledge is understood to be immanent across the whole of the-person-performing-in-setting (Hutchins 1995; Ingold 2000; Keller and Keller 1996; Lave 1993). Lave makes the related point that decontextualised learning is a contradiction in terms, arguing that more programmatic approaches to learning found in regimented institutional settings such as schools, universities and laboratories are still in the business of generating “learners”, “learning”, and “things to be learned” *in practice*’ (1993:10 emphasis added). Thus the social, environmental and technological aspects of a fisherman’s learning milieu must be taken into account when exploring the generation of knowledge at the Gippsland Lakes.

In their compelling account of the blacksmith at work, Keller and Keller (1996) illustrate how knowledge is constituted in the dialectical relationship between structure and practice in the context of society. They write that ‘articulated explicitly in blacksmith’s conversations about their work … expressed implicitly in their products, performances and literature’, are three principles that govern a blacksmith’s approach to work – *transformation*, “think hot” and *working freehand* (1996:52). Although, blacksmiths generally work alone, their practice is governed by these principles for action gleaned from participating in the wider blacksmithing community, through, for example, working in apprenticeships, attending blacksmithing fairs and reading blacksmithing literature.
One of the principles governing the approach of blacksmiths is that iron should be worked hot. Blacksmiths routinely express the principle ‘think hot’ by the means they choose to reach a particular end. For instance, instead of drilling a hole in a bar of iron the blacksmith will produce a hole by hot-punching it. Stock iron ‘will be heated and cut on the hardie (a sharp-edged tool fixed in the anvil over which hot iron can be severed) rather than sawed or cut with an oxyacetylene torch’ (Keller and Keller 1996:54). Keller and Keller explain that principles for action such as ‘think hot’, rather than being found in a code of practice or a blacksmithing handbook, feature implicitly in the discursive and material spaces of the artist blacksmith. The principle think hot, can be gleaned, the authors argue, from master blacksmiths derogatory remarks about those who ‘pound cold iron’ (Keller and Keller 1996:54) or by walking though the blacksmith’s work space to find that the inventory of tools and their organisation facilitate the practice of this principle (Keller and Keller 1996:75).

The functional associations of tools based on [this] principl[e] constitute aspects of a stock of knowledge organised for the accomplishment of forging … On the basis of such knowledge, the blacksmith constructs expectations for future projects and these expectations become materialized in the arrangement of his implements (Keller and Keller 1996:75-76)

I take the authors’ point that conceptual principles inform but do not dictate practice and that such principles may be evinced in discourse as well as in the products and processes of practice. I employ these ideas to articulate and explore Gippsland Lakes fishermen’s own principles for action. These principles, which I will gradually expand upon in the course of this chapter, I describe as: incomplete knowledge, being there and raw fishing1. These three principles are encompassed by an overarching theory of learning – a theory of knowledge – which says that the ability and desire to fish is found ‘in the blood’. I have, of course, reified these principles by naming them. In reality, these principles exist as unarticulated assumptions about, and approaches to, fishing on the Gippsland Lakes.

1 The term ‘raw fishing’ was used regularly by one fisherman at the Gippsland Lakes in an attempt to explain how he went about fishing at the lake. The term gives an apt sense, however, of how all fishermen conceptualized the way to go about fishing at the lake.
In the stories, episodes, transcripts and everyday comments that follow I will show these principles at work. First, however, I turn to an account of the how the principles I have outlined above are understood to become a part of collective, everyday, conceptualisations of the task of fishing. That is, I outline the fishermen’s theory of learning.

‘In the Blood’: A Theory of Learning

Social Context of Learning

In his monograph “Cognition in the Wild” Hutchins (1995) makes the point that to study the interrelationship of knowledge and practice cognitive scientists must move physically and conceptually beyond the laboratory and into the ‘wild’ realm of ‘everydayness’. Laboratory based studies of cognition, he argues, still retain the unhelpful assumption that knowledge begins and ends in the mind whereas studies of ‘cognition in the wild’ are socially, culturally and ecologically situated. Making a similar point Lave writes that,

The idea of learning as cognitive acquisition – whether of facts, knowledge, problem-solving strategies or meta-cognitive skills – seems to dissolve when learning is conceived of as the construction of present versions of past experience for several people working together (1993:8).

In my analysis of the way in which fishing competency emerges from the dialectic between knowledge and practice at the Gippsland Lakes I follow Pálsson’s appeal,

The proper unit of analysis is no longer the autonomous individual separated from the social world by the surface of the body, a natural being who passively internalises the mental scripts of the cultural environment, but rather the whole person in action, acting within the contexts of that activity (1994:904).
Learning to fish the Gippsland Lakes is intensely social. One cannot understand how a fisherman fishes with competency, or how he became able to do so, without recourse to the wider social milieu. For example, many of the commercial fishermen at the Gippsland Lakes have memories of fishing with their fathers and grandfathers after school and on school holidays. One man recalled the long hours spent at night shivering alongside his father while fishing for prawns. Another recalled the peace he felt sleeping at the stern of the boat, after growing tired of helping his father to fish. Fishermen delighted in taking their own children fishing and spoke of how they enjoyed hauling the nets in the presence of inquisitive eyes and fingers. Everyone, including ‘newcomers’ – men with no prior kinship connection to the lake fishing community – learnt to take advice where they could find it – advice that came in clipped comments at the Co-op, down at the pub or on a tree-lined shore. And everyone watched, through binoculars, from bushes, hilltops or hidden boats, where and how other men fished. These clandestine observations added to a man’s knowledge. Even the most experienced fisherman still used the ‘glass’ to glean new knowledge.

Boats were often silent during the most difficult phase of a fishing trip. As men worked they rarely spoke to others. Much of what was learned on boats passed from practice to practice without ever entering the discursive realm (Bourdieu 1990:74). Thus, for the anthropologist and the novice fisherman alike, concepts were generally to be discovered by paying attention to the directives embedded in people’s movements and contained within everyday conversations with more experienced men. Gippsland Lakes fishermen understand that the acquisition of knowledge is socially mediated and entails learning particular modes of attending to significant aspects of one’s surrounds.

In the following excerpt an elderly fisherman named Douglas speaks about learning to identify fish at night by the sounds they make and by the ‘tracks’ they leave in the water. The tracks are made by the fish’s movement disturbing a species of microscopic zooplankton that is found in the lake’s water in summer time. The creature phosphoresces on contact with other objects, producing an eerie green light.
Douglas: My dad taught me. [We] used to spend most of the time looking for [poddie mullet] of a night-time. You know, going along, stop and listen, stop and listen, other times you’d get the phosphorous in the water, the fire and you can see the fish moving in the fire.

Simone: And what’s the poddy mullet look like in the fire?

D: Oh, it’s hard to explain but every fish has got a different blob. You learn them … You can look at it and go that’s a skip – he darts, zigzags and leaves a blob every time he darts – the skipjack. A poddy is just a big blob, runs straight. Whereas a bream just runs straight all the way you know and you just see a flat run. All different ways of defining them something you learn – just from continual experience more or less.

Douglas’ opening remark ‘my dad taught me’ situates his learning experience from the outset, showing it to be social. We can imagine Douglas and his father travelling across the lake at night, the younger man following his father in the pattern stop, listen, stop, listen as they wait, in silence, for the tell-tale sound of a poddy mullet as it breaks the water’s surface. Douglas says that, although learning took place, it remains unclear as to how it happened. Douglas points out the difficulty of verbally explaining how to recognise fish tracks and goes on to explain, opaquely, that learning takes place via ‘continual experience’.

It was by standing beside his father at the prow of the boat as it drifted slowly forward in the night that Douglas learned to pay attention to the particular sights and sounds, pertinent to fishing, that fill the night. Ingold has called this process, following Gibson (1979:254) the ‘education of attention’ (2000:22). As Ingold comments

If the … hunter notices significant features of the landscape of which [an observer] remains unaware, it is not because their source lies in [the hunter’s mind] … but because the perceptual system of the hunter is attuned to picking-up information, critical to the practical conduct of his hunting, to which the unskilled observer is unaware (2000:55).
This kind of learning, whereby a novice becomes competent by acting ‘as if she were skilled’, by imitating the person she learns from, has been called ‘enskilment’ by Pálsson (1994). He explains that ‘enskilment’ is ‘learning to attend to the task at hand, [while being] actively engaged with a social and natural environment’ (1994:901). The novice learns by following the movements and gaze of the skilled person whom he or she imitates. Pálsson has likened this process to that of the ethnographic fieldworker who, over time, learns what is important, not only by asking questions but also by following the intentional gaze and actions of her informants (1994:905). It is by following the intentional movements of those who he fishes alongside that a fisherman comes to be able to fish – to see, hear and taste what is significant and to act accordingly. Further, it is by working alongside more experienced men, on the boat or down at the Co-op, that novice fishermen become attuned to appropriate ways of relating to their colleagues.

It is clear, from Douglas’ account, that what one is doing and who one is with are critical constituents of the learning process. In this way, aspects of the world emerge as salient or recede from our attention according to who we are with and the task we are caught-up in at the time. As will be explored in greater depth below, in backgrounding or foregrounding aspects of their surrounds according to what they are doing, the lake emerges for fishermen as a very different phenomenon to that which emerges for managers from the Department of Primary Industries (DPI).

The way in which fishermen conceptualise the learning process coincides with scholarly accounts that argue that learning is always already embodied, as practice, and situated in a social, cultural and ecological milieu. These accounts argue that transformations or reproductions of knowledge wrought through creative, imperfect or skilled practice can be understood only in context.

**The Achievement of Skill**

Learning how to fish is a concern for fishermen. The way in which fishermen conceptualise the learning process is summarised by their explanation that ‘fishing gets
into the blood’ or that ‘fishing is in the blood’. The reply ‘it's in the blood’ is often made in response to questions about why a man became a fisherman, how he knows what he knows and why he stays at it given the extremely difficult – environmental, political and economic – working conditions.

When fishermen say ‘fishing is in the blood’ they are pointing out that fishing skills are embodied, and like blood, enliven the body from tip to toe. Further, in this ‘emic’ account of learning, ‘blood’ as a connecting substance metaphorically refers to the social context of learning; in particular, to the way in which one’s family informs the ability to fish. When fishermen explain fishing skills and the desire to fish they are careful to emphasis that these qualities are acquired and are not given by genealogical connections. However, in encounters with outsiders, the tension existing between backgrounded traditionalist discourses of belonging and foregrounded participatory discourses of belonging is revealed. In such cases, there can be slippages where fishermen speak as if their skills were innate – rather than acquired.

Of the eighteen licenced fishermen fishing the lake only three did not have their fathers or fathers-in-law show them how to fish. Twelve grew-up fishing with their fathers and/or grandfathers. Fishermen associate growing-up with fishing alongside members their family and, inevitability, associate their desire to fish with genealogy. The notion of ‘blood’ mingles ideas about innateness and kinship, yet the association remains loose and, thus, never definitive or causative. It remains that, as James Newell said, one ‘becomes’ a fisherman. And, in the words of a third generation fisherman, ‘[fishing] gets in your blood, a bit, after a while, I think’.

In attempting to explain the notion of ‘in the blood’, Laurie, a recently retired fisherman, said that when he was fishing full-time he used to ‘find fish in [his] dreams’: ‘You’re always dreaming in fish. Sometimes I have caught them in the vegie patch in amongst the caulies and carrots!’ Fishing got into Laurie’s blood so much that it took over his dreams. To go dream fishing, to carry out the familiar movements of searching for fish and
netting them in one’s dreams, expresses the way that fishermen understand, and experience, the ability to be able to fish as being an achieved bodily disposition.

Fishermen, in fact, never explained their choice of profession in terms such as ‘my father was a fisherman so I became one as well’. The following stories show that, instead, fishermen understood that time spent with members of the family ‘just being there’ enlivened their desire to fish. James said

We were always in the boat and that. Well, I remember that vividly because back in those days the old man was secretary treasurer at the footy club. And on the night that he had to go to football club meetings, which would be at quarter-past seven or eight, something like that, I would be allowed to go with him from dark until he had to go to the meeting. We were always in the boat and that … I was the biggest nuisance … I wanted to be there. I just always liked fishing and fooling around in boats.

And Laurie explained,

I was bought up in Metung and went to school in Metung until the end of the war. And then dad got the job in the hospital in Bairnsdale … so they shifted into Bairnsdale. I used to ride me bike to Metung just to go fishing! Yeah every weekend, yeah Friday night. And I was a bugger of a kid. Oh, think I’m Robinson Crusoe. I was shocking. I was off on me bike Friday and me grandmother would ring up and say ‘he’s turned up down here’. Just to go fishing; to go fishing in the boats with me uncles. But old grandfather he used to sit up the top of the hill because he had a heart problem when he was forty odd so he never fished after that. So he would sit up the top of the hill, and when the boys came home he’d say well there is a patch of trout down the creek worked up there this afternoon. He fished off the veranda. It was an education to me. It was a learning process.

Fishing gets into the blood, it seems, with the help of other people, often family members. The loose association between genealogy and skill, expressed in the quotes above, remains so because, in everyday discourse between fishermen, there are processes at work to ensure that learning is understood as *acquired*. No one is born with the desire
or motivation to fish in his blood. It is generally not understood as an immutable attribute carried through the generations via the blood. One must work, and work hard to become a competent fisherman.

Yet, when speaking to ‘outsiders’ explanations as to why a man became a fisherman become altered. The sense that ‘being there’ with family informs a person’s abilities, is changed to the inevitability of genealogy. For instance, Gippsland Lakes fisherman Arthur Allen speaks about lake fishing during an interview on the *George Negus Tonight* television show (ABC 2003). Following the ‘leading’ narrative of the reporter, Arthur slips into talking about why his family and, as a consequence, why he has fished the lakes for many years as if it had been transmitted from father to son.

DAVE MORLEY: Arthur followed his father Jack into fishing the Gippsland Lakes, continuing a proud family tradition that traces back to his great-great-grandfather – a pioneer in the area.

ARTHUR ALLEN: My family goes right back to William Carstairs who came here from Hastings about 1870, and we've continually fished the Gippsland Lakes and the coastal waters ever since.

In this outside forum, fishing is presented as inherited. It is already in the blood; the inevitability of desire is determined by birth. The slippage is easily understood given the ambiguous nature of the blood metaphor and the enormous pressure from, often sympathetic, outsiders to represent identity narratives in genealogical or biological terms (Astuti 1995; Howell 2003; Kohn 2002). Among fisherman today, however, the source of ability and desire to fish – that is the fishermen’s own ‘theory of learning’ continues to be represented as determined by context, which may or may not involve one’s family.

*A Fishing Trip with Allen*

A trip I took with Allen illustrates the way in which fishermen conceptualise learning as a socially mediated achievement. This account describes a particular fishing technique –
haul seining – that, though, different to mesh netting (see Chapter 1) is practiced according to the same guiding principles. Through the dense array of events or ‘moments of elucidation’ that I describe below, the principles guiding the practice of fishing at the Gippsland Lakes – *incomplete knowledge*, *being there* and *raw fishing* are implicitly expressed. It is in these moments – as we wander the lake looking for a fishing place, meet people, find a place to cast our net and, finally, haul it in – knowledge-sharing takes place. In these moments I describe how the inexperienced persons aboard Allen’s boat are encouraged to perceive as if we too were the skilled, respected person that who accompanies us and, in so doing, we learn to learn, thus putting into practice the principles that guide lake fishermen.

In each section of this account I explore moments in which one of these principles is expressed in practice. At the end of each section I discuss the principles further by offering ethnographic observations gathered at other moments and with other fishermen. In the final section, ‘The Reproduction of Principles in Practice’ I explore how learning – ‘a process of changing understanding in practice’ (Lave 1993:6) – which has taken place via the guiding principles outlined above transforms the design of Allen’s fishing net.

**Incomplete Knowledge**

Fishermen accept that both their co-fishermen and fish, are autonomous agents having particular intentions and perspectives on the world. They understand that a person can have only partial insight into the motivations and intentions of other agents on the lake and so are guided in their practice by the assumption that they have only ‘incomplete knowledge’ of their surrounds.

Allen was an older fisherman who was getting ready to retire. He wanted to sell his licence and his gear and was in the process of showing prospective buyers the ins and outs of his business. Allen had said to me that just as he had been shown how to fish he would like to be able to impart all that he knew to the person who bought his licence. Allen’s knowledge was going to be part of the
package on sale. I was there the day that Allen, along with his deckhand, took one prospective buyer out on a fishing trip. Allen’s intention on this trip was to show the other man what lake fishing was like and, thus, begin the knowledge sharing process. In this way, Allen began to educate our attention to the social and ecological dimensions of the lake that influenced fishing competency.

The day we left was cold and clear. Dawn broke as we entered the region where Allen liked to fish. I asked Allen where we would be going today. He chuckled and so did I, since I knew by then that the question was foolish. I was just making conversation. Allen declared, as always, that we would be going ‘for a wander’. He generally referred to the process of finding a place to fish in this manner. In much the same way, other men said ‘I’m going to go have a look up around [such and such] and see what’s going on’. When the light came Allen began ‘to wander’.

‘Wandering’ implies an open-ended, perhaps even a hopeful, movement towards something. It describes exactly how fishermen search for fish. It is not random, yet it is not predetermined either. A person who ‘wanders’ is sensitive and responsive to their surrounds; if they are not then they are wandering aimlessly. Allen was searching for a good place to shoot his seine net. Such a place, we knew, could take on a plethora of guises since the way in which the tide ran, the direction of the wind and the kind and thickness of the weed would combine to make each fishing place different from any way it had been in the past. The lake had changed since Allen had gone for ‘a wander’ the morning before; what he had learnt yesterday might influence the way ‘he wandered’ but it would be only one of many variables that would influence his search.

Allen ‘wandered’ to various possible fishing places that morning. As he approached a shot – a potential fishing place – he cut the motor letting the boat

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2 Fishermen do not search for fish or signs of fish when they go mesh netting. Rather, they purposefully ‘wander’, albeit smaller, regions for appropriate places to set their mesh nets.
glide soundlessly across the lake. As we moved, Allen scanned the bottom, his
gaze directed through the water’s surface to the lakebed, analysing the colours,
shades and patterning of the weeds below. He did not speak. His down-turned
head and his silence signalled that we too should gaze with him in silence and
take note. All on board, novices and fisherman alike, stood silently scanning the
lake’s bottom. As the boat pulled away Allen commented ‘too much weed’.

In this process Allen had drawn us into our surrounds directing our attention
beyond the immediate concerns of the boat and even beyond the concerns of our
goal (to catch fish) by inviting us to become inquisitive in an open-ended
fashion. It was only at the end that he appended a short verbal comment
intended to help us understand what we had seen. Significantly, he did not make
a final statement about the weed before we had had the chance to cast our eyes
across the bottom. Such commentary would have been premature and may have
restricted the opportunity to experience what we saw for ourselves.

In these early morning meanderings Allen was not only teaching a style for
searching out a suitable fishing place, he was indicating some basic conceptual
principles that govern how fishermen go about the task of fishing. These are the
principles I have termed ‘incomplete knowledge’, ‘being there’ and ‘raw
fishing’. And these principles lie, implicitly, behind much of what is said and
done on the Gippsland Lakes.

By stressing that we would be ‘wandering’ Allen demonstrated that to fish one
must first suspend any preconceived plans or, at least, one must learn how to be
ready to suspend them, in order to be responsive to the environment. To
‘wander’ is to be in a state of thoughtful inquisitiveness; it is an apperceptive
state that embodies the principle that says that, as a fisherman, you never have
complete knowledge of your surrounds and as such ‘you plan by the minute’.
Or, as I was told time and again, ‘you never stop learning’.
As discussed in earlier chapters, fishermen value the mundane but rich social interactions that emerge in the course of their daily travels. The value fishermen place upon relationships that emerge in the course of their autonomous passage through the lake system engenders, in turn, a world constituted, and made meaningful, by movement and flux. This state of constant passage creates in fishermen an openness to, and anticipation of, novelty; a responsive style of being in the world that affects ecological relationships as well as social relationships.

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Before they bought their own licences most fishermen had spent an enormous amount of time on boats observing and participating in the practice of fishing the Gippsland Lakes. The many hours that a majority of fishermen had spent as children in the presence of family members who were planning, preparing for, and undertaking a fishing trip, made it difficult for them to explain when, how and with whom they had learnt to fish. In fact, the familiar comment that ‘you never stop learning’ rendered my line of questioning – ‘who taught you to fish?’ – almost meaningless since it implied that at some point the process had come to an end.

Learning, as fishermen point out, is not merely a phase on the way to competent performance, it is its basis. Likewise, among some cognitive anthropologists and educational anthropologists, learning is understood as ‘the ongoing characteristic of the human condition’ (Keller and Keller 1996:28). Thus, the completion of schooling, an apprenticeship, the movement from novice to master or the transition from uninitiated to initiated does not mark the end of learning. Instead, a master fisherman, a fisherman with ‘fishing in his blood’, could be described as someone who has learned how to learn. As Bateson has written, when a subject learns to learn he has ‘[learnt] to orientate himself to certain types of contexts, or is acquiring insight into the contexts of problem solving’ (2000:166).
Fishermen emphasised that learning is continuous and that the day you stopped taking notice would be the day you became incompetent. The principle of *incomplete knowledge* resounded through these comments and attitudes, prompting fishermen to keep seeking new knowledge because, in their view, no one can have complete understanding of the lake.

Fishermen assume that the animals that they encounter on the lake have minds of their own and for this reason too, cannot ever be fully understood. The important species of bream and prawn, for instance, are considered to be inscrutable creatures which exist in a world of ecological signs that fishermen cannot hope to ever fully comprehend. Fishermen thus claim never to really be able to know for certain what these animals will do next. Creatures with minds of their own cannot be second-guessed. Fishermen do not believe, however, that prawns or fish are conscious in anything like the way human beings are.

What fishermen mean when they happily say that, ‘bream are like women, you never know what’s going on’, ‘I may look like a prawn but I can’t understand them!’, ‘this year the bream have voted with their flippers!’, or ‘a fish never does the same thing twice’, is that these creatures are themselves engaged in interactions with their environments, the complexity of which remains beyond the power of fishermen to completely ascertain. Fishermen understand that only prawns and bream are sensitive to the variables that influence their behaviour. Fishermen may attempt to ‘try and think like a prawn’ but this is only ever an attempt.
Figure 4.1 “Wandering” in search of fish.

Figure 4.2 Hauling in the seine-net.
In the movement of ‘wandering’, or through conversations about animals, the principle of ‘incomplete knowledge’ is present. In the following examples James, discusses how, in conversations with skilled older fishermen, novices come to learn these approaches to lake fishing.

Well … old Cyril Smith, while he wouldn’t go out of his way and say ‘listen, I think you’re doing this wrong’, but just in conversation he’d say ‘oh, you know if you wanna go and catch those up there you do this’ and one of the bits of advice that I always remember is that he used to go sneakin’ around in the dark catching poddies and one particular place up there where they go, at times, he used to say ‘sneak up there and if you see one jump shoot him in and if ya don’t see it shoot him in anyhow’ [laughing]. That was his way of sayin’ well don’t take it for granted that if you don’t see one that there ain’t none there.

The way in which conceptual knowledge is presented is also significant, and James himself points this out. The principle of incomplete knowledge is actually contained in the subtle way in which the concept is passed on; by speaking in riddles and lacing conversations with fishing tips, the older fisherman does not instruct but guides the younger man towards important information. This pedagogic practice ensures that the novice, if he desires to become competent, must be alive to his discursive as well as his ecological surrounds. The novice will only learn when he assumes an attentive state. Highlighting this point James goes on to say,

… that’s always been the case, you know. When I was a kid old Wattie Wilkins who, I can’t even remember him fishin’, but he was a top fisherman in his day. When I was a kid he had hire boats and was semi-retired. But, ah, you’d go down always foolin’ around the jetty and that, and Wattie’d be telling you stories all the time but there was a lesson in all of them you know. You just had to take it in and if you wanted to pick-up and learn from it well it was there … Ah [you] just take an interest, take an interest yeah, yeah.

There is a moral dimension to the concept of incomplete knowledge. In the following conversation two fishermen comment ironically on what they see as the arrogance of fishermen who do not take an interest, and how arrogance leads to failure,
Brian: Gee we saw a lot come in over the years … one-day wonders!

Ronald: They were all knowledgeable. If you wanted to know anything about fishing ask the new comer! He always knew. Yeah we’ve seen some come, we’ve seen some go too!

In a sense the concept of ‘incomplete knowledge’ is one that encourages an attitude of modesty in relation to the surrounding world. This modesty is similarly expressed in the way that fishermen assume the autonomy of their colleagues. Such non-complacency ensures that fishermen do not take what they know for granted but, instead, remain ever attentive to each other’s movements on the lake and the changes to the lake itself.

**Being There**

Fishermen feel that time spent on the lake – ‘just being there’ – is edifying. They endeavour to spend as much time on the lake as they can, because it is only by being out there, on the lake, that they can best attend to, and learn from, the movements of fish and people across the days and weeks. To illustrate the principle of *being there* in practice I begin by continuing to describe the fishing trip I took with Allen.

At first, as we slowly ‘wandered’ along the channels, between small islands and sandbanks, in Allen’s old wooden boat MARION, it seemed that the lake was empty except for a few pelicans standing on the shore. But as the channels converged and the vista opened out into a small bay, we saw that two other fishermen, Jeff and Hugh, were hauling their mesh nets. I recognised both boats and was not surprised when Allen took a wide berth around Jeff. He chose, however, to ‘wander’ over and have a chat with Hugh. It soon became apparent that fishing is a social as well as an ecological endeavour. On the lake, no one is alone.

Allen need not have gone to talk to Hugh, because he was looking for fishing places along the shore and not in the deeper middle sections of the lake where
the other men were fishing for trevally. Hugh was wearing a big grin when we
got to him, and commented on the number of people on board Allen’s boat.
Allen joked that what we didn’t know was that he would be charging us twenty
dollars a head (referring to recreational fishing charters). Allen followed-up this
joking banter with a seamlessly posed, serious question,

Allen: You got your net running up the gutter there?

Hugh: Yeah sure

Allen: How you going?

Hugh [pulling out his fish bins for us to see]: I got a box of skips, some leathers, couple
of whiting … not much going on.

Allen [sincere tone]: prob’ly get thicker as you go along.

Hugh: You’re more full of shit than Bill Pollock [local recreational fishing charter
operator] except he has to get people drunk to get’em to believe that!

[Both men laugh together. Allen is thoroughly appreciative.]

I had heard conversations like this before. They had a certain rhythm and
direction. What was being communicated however, was implicit in the structure
and context of the conversation rather than in the content of the exchange.
Earlier on I would have supposed that Allen had asked where Hugh’s net was
running so he would not run over it. I would have assumed that he had
genuinely been interested to know how Hugh was going and I would have been
surprised by Hugh’s willingness to disclose his catch to another fisherman. But
other more important things were being communicated in this exchange, and
both men were aware of this.
The very act of approaching Hugh instead of Jeff communicated volumes to all present on the lake that day. There is no way that Hugh, Jeff or the others on our boat would have missed the point that Allen made. Fishermen are extraordinarily sensitive to their surrounds. Jeff probably did not even need to look up to know that MARION had passed by, the sound of her motor and the time of morning being all the information he would need for the point to be driven home that he was ‘not well liked’.

Hugh, on the other hand, would have been fairly happy to have a ‘visitor’. Fishermen do pass each other by with just a wave, pursuing fish instead of conversations, but this morning Allen chose to stop. Allen is a skilled fisherman who has intimate knowledge of the lay of the lakebed. He knows the whereabouts, direction and depth of the gutters, the extent of shallows and the way that the water moves over them. He did not need to ask Hugh the direction and placement of his net; he could have assessed this merely by seeing Hugh’s boat in a particular place at a particular time of year. Indeed, he could have almost guessed what Hugh was catching without needing to be told the contents of each bin.

Allen’s question and Hugh’s response were about expressing their openness to each other. They were indirectly demonstrating that they trusted and respected each other. By divulging his catch to Allen, Hugh indicated that he had nothing to hide. And by conveying his concern not to run over Hugh’s net, and offering sincere words of encouragement – things will get better – Allen indicated that he too could be trusted.

However, their intent was also more general. Hugh was saying ‘you can trust me’ while Allen was saying ‘I’ll be looking out for you’. Both Hugh and Allen knew that Hugh would never really ‘tell all’ if he was on to a good fishing spot. Hugh knew that Allen was quite capable of avoiding running over his net and that, in all likelihood, Allen knew that the fish would not get thicker further up
the net. In fact, in his last humorous comment, likening Allen to a particular charlatan fishing charter operator, Hugh referred directly to the dubious content of their dialogue. This concluding quip was not intended to be divisive but served to highlight that they were together, in the sense of generally wishing each other well, while recognising that they were separate because they were in competition. The dialogue was an affirmation that they were in competition, together. Jeff, on the other hand, was on his own. No one would be looking out for him except to ensure that he did not get the better of them.

The interaction which took place between Allen and Hugh served as a performance of ‘relationality on the lake’, nothing was lost to the audience as we looked on silently, being drawn into the conversation between the two men. Just as we had peered into the lake’s depths minutes earlier, Allen’s conversation style, which was performative, rather than inclusive of us, invited us to comprehend how ‘relationship is done on the lake’. He was inviting us to contemplate the intentions of other fishermen on the lake, and the way in which boats and nets in the water are signs of the lives of other men.

‘He finished that net pretty quick!’ remarks Allen as we head towards a small speck of a fishing boat further up the lake. I regard the speck and wonder what I am meant to gather from this comment since it is orientating rather than explanatory. I ask ‘why is that interesting?’ and Allen says impatiently ‘well there can’t have been any fish in it!’ Allen is encouraging me to look beyond the surface of events and to learn how to interpret them. By inviting me to wonder, and in guiding my attention to various aspects of my surrounds, Allen is teaching me to use the social and ecological signs in the lakescape to become a competent fisherman.

The ‘encounter’ on the lake between the two fishermen is an example of the way in which fishermen enjoy creating moments together on the lake. In the next four chapters I explore the way in which these encounters produce,
reproduce and recreate anew local subjects, places and values. Here I wish to point out that fishing trips are occasions replete with social and ecological details. And it is by ‘being there’ that fishermen can take pleasure, discover, ponder over, and assimilate all that is ‘going on’

Fishermen often talked about being ‘lazy’ or talked about the laziness of other men. Men who spent lots of time listening to cricket, making cups of tea or having a smoke were not considered to be serious about fishing because they were not committed to ‘being there’ and, as such, missed important happenings on the lake. Fishermen had extraordinarily high expectations of themselves and of others in relation to their work ethic. For the same reason, they also tended to have a love-hate relationship with the wind, since wind is the major environmental variable that prevents a man from working. One day, as I drove along the road with a fisherman he pointed out the trees being whipped about in the wind. ‘I like the look of that’ he declared, ‘I’m a lazy fisherman!’ At other times I have found men frustrated and fuming in their sheds, waiting for the wind to die down so they could go to work.

A fisherman once said to me that ‘any day not spent fishing is wasted’, another that ‘a good fisherman never stops thinking about fish’. In a conversation about the qualities of a good fisherman one man mentioned a renowned elderly fisherman whom he explained ‘never stopped fishing’, and said he knew for a fact that this old man ‘was fishing’ even as he drove to Bairnsdale each Friday with his wife to do the shopping. As he drove, he would be watching the birds flying overhead, taking note of the species and the direction in which they flew, and adding this information to his overall sense of ‘what was going on on the lake’. The old man’s persistent attention to his surrounds, the other man pointed out, was the attitude of a great fisherman. Another explained that, because he only threw a net in when he was certain there were fish around he could be described as a *champagne fisherman* – by which he meant that he fished with a frivolous attitude. He told me, however, that he usually had to escape to his property in the mountains on the weekend so that he could not see the lake – he had panoramic views of the lake from
most rooms in his house – because the urge to watch the lake and to plan the next week’s fishing was so strong.

The need to be out on the water as much as possible is made strikingly clear in the comments above. Fishermen disliked being absent from the lake. They were anxious not to miss anything. During the weekends, when it is illegal to fish, some men curbed their desire to ‘be there’ on the lake by watching signs, like birds, that would give them some sense of what was going on, while others headed for the mountains in an attempt to get the lake off their minds. Their anxiety about not ‘being there’ indicated their feeling that the only way to maintain one’s fishing competency was to be out on the water taking notice.

Shaun once illustrated to me the great advantage of ‘being there’. Because he had no family and owned a comfortable boat Shaun tended to stay on the lake for extended periods of time. This enabled him to select from a large number of places at which to fish since he had time to travel. Importantly, it also meant that he could become very familiar with what was happening on the lake that week.

He explained that once he had spent a number of days fishing in a particular region when, to his great annoyance, another fisherman came and set nets near by. Because Shaun had figured out which way the fish were moving he decided he would place his nets so as to cut off fish heading in the direction of the other man’s nets. Cutting-off fish in this manner is a common, but hostile, act. However, because Shaun knew the trajectory of the fish he was able to place his nets at such a distance the other man would not have suspected him of the act. Shaun’s superior knowledge of the area, gleaned by ‘being there’ was vindicated when the man gave-up fishing in the region the very next day – no doubt because he was not catching any fish.

It was by being present as much as possible that fishermen were able to determine and act on the small-scale spatio-temporal patterns emerging in the lake on a weekly and monthly basis. Thus, I argue, much of fishermen’s talk of ‘laziness’ and their strong work ethic
were indicative of a guiding conceptual principle that recognised the inherent changeability of the environment in which they practiced. The desire to be there dovetailed in many ways with the principle of incomplete knowledge. Further, by being there fishing alongside others, as Hugh and Allen were, men re-affirm relationships to one another by emphasising their essential togetherness in the context of competition. In this way the principle of being there drives the pursuit of relationships through which learning takes place.

**Raw Fishing**

The need to stay in touch with the lake, as outlined above, is made literal in the third principle manifest in the practice of lake fishing – raw fishing. Again I begin by describing a phase of my fishing trip with Allen, in which he talks about gaining insight into fishing the Gippsland Lakes through direct engagement with the environment.

Allen tells me, as we continue to ‘wander’, that he spent many hours standing on the roof of the boat’s cabin, his head 15 feet above the water’s surface, just looking at the lay of the lakebed. He laughs and starts talking about the channel we have recently passed, exclaiming that he had ‘gotten it wrong before’. He recalls, chuckling, a recent failed attempt to catch fish in this place. It had failed because he had not allowed the ebb tide to subside before he had shot his net. The water’s movement had pulled the net out of shape and the fish had escaped. He explained that, in that particular place, the tide was hard to judge because the water flowed stronger across the bottom of the lakebed than across the surface. He described how, after years of observation, he had learned to recognise this by the shape and direction of the sand ridges on the lakebed. Shaking his head in wonderment Allen warmly pronounced that ‘you never know for certain’ how a shot will go despite the time you have spent trying to understand the way the tide and the lakebed interact. Allen’s account of the way in which he came to know the lakebed indicated the value he placed on fully immersing himself in his surrounds and giving the world his undivided attention, knowing that what
he perceived gave him direct understanding of the way things are. This is the attitude of raw fishing.

At another time he recalled to me a revelatory moment, a moment that exemplifies the principle of ‘raw fishing’. One night, Allen and the older fisherman to whom he was apprenticed, went to bed in the boat a usual. They had set the nets that evening and they would haul them early the next morning. They were roused, however, in the middle of the night, by the boat’s movement as a wave rolled under them. They listened for the tell tale sound of a motor to indicate a passing boat. There was only silence. Strange, they thought. Ten minutes later another wave rolled past, this time the older fisherman sprang from his bed exclaiming ‘bloody hell, we’ve got to get the nets in now!’ Allen laughed, and explained that because the older man slept in his waders, wrapped in some old tarpaulin for warmth, he always went to bed prepared for the unexpected. With no further explanation, he and Allen hauled all eight nets with great speed. Allen recounted how he had no idea what the fuss was about, but was roused by the older man’s urgency and followed with similar resolution. He remembered feeling a small breeze on his left cheek as they had almost finished hauling. The older man explained as he started the boat’s engine that a huge storm was coming from the west, and that the winds were so strong that they had pushed the lake water forward creating the small, apparently, benign waves that had rolled under the boat. They found the closest place to shelter from the westerly winds and what followed was one of the worst storms Allen had experienced on the lake. He had no doubt that if they had not felt the water’s movement they most certainly would have lost all their gear, possibly wrecked the boat, and perhaps lost their lives.

The lesson Allan learnt that night he never forgot. It was that there are available, to one who is attentive, numerous signs that, when skilfully interpreted, can facilitate a greater understanding of one’s situation. He learnt that attentiveness is an approach to fishing that involves the whole body in both interpretation and
response. And he learnt that to endeavour to fish means taking responsibility for yourself and your decisions. When you are alone and confronting a storm it is you alone who must interpret the signs and react to them. This is the principle of raw fishing.

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The first day I went out with Shaun we went fishing at the mouth of a flooding river. When we arrived Shaun bent down, scooped-up some water and gulped a mouthful. ‘Yep’ he said ‘it’s been flooding for a while’. The cool fresh water running out on top, he explained, contrasted with the warmer saltier water of the lake. During another conversation with an older fisherman he told me with a twinkle in his eye ‘a lot of people don’t know that we catch fish with our ears!’ He went on to explain that different species of fish can be identified by the different sounds they make at night as they leap about in the water. Each slap, swoosh, splat and splish belonged to a different fish, he explained. And, as mentioned in Chapter 1, I was told by another that if, when fishing in a particular place, he ever smells the bread from the Paynesville bakery he immediately has to haul any nets shot there because he knows they will be damaged by the strong westerly wind the smell heralds. Another, who had come to lake fishing after years spent as a Bass Strait shark fisherman, told me that in his former career he had been an ‘electronic fisherman’ and now he did ‘raw fishing’. What he meant was that, instead of machines sensing significant environmental variables, then relaying, and translating, that information to the wheelhouse, he now saw himself as being in direct contact with those variables, and responding to them as they arose.

Gippsland Lakes fishermen place an emphasis on direct bodily engagement with the environment. Some men have electronic devices for detecting fish but they are rarely used. Instead, eyes, ears, smell and taste are all employed to understand what is going on in the lake. The fishery appears to be ‘traditional’ for this reason. But the lack of technology belies the fact that Gippsland Lakes fishermen are extraordinarily skilled at what they do, and, thus, technological status is not an accurate indicator of their ability to pursue their ends.
The Transformation of Knowledge in Practice

In this final section, I discuss the transformation of knowledge in practice using the example of how new knowledge, learned in practice, was incorporated into the design of Allen’s seine net thus enabling Allen to catch more of a particular species of fish. This net was the culmination of previous learning experiences that were encountered in practice under the guiding principles of *incomplete knowledge, being there* and *raw fishing*. The net is a material expression of fishermen’s working knowledge and, thus, immanent in its loops and knots is the constituting dialectic between structure (working principles) and practice.

Further along we finally come to a place that ‘looks good’. The shot is called ‘Newman’s’. Allen explains that it is named after the family that had once lived on the shore overlooking this place more than half a century earlier. In the distance are the foothills of the Great Dividing Range. Allen points to the various landmarks that, when aligned, enable him to know which part of the lakebed he is over. These orientating aspects of the landscape help him to lay his net in the right way so that it will take the correct form and direction. ‘The lake’, in Allen’s understanding, extends deep into the mountains.

On this day, Allen used a net he had been ‘working on’. This net had a different design to other seine nets used at the lake because Allen had designed it to catch more King George whiting – a highly valuable fish – which, Allen explained, had been ‘turning-up’ more and more in the lake. Allen’s new net differed from other seine nets in that the bottom panel was made of smaller sized mesh. Allen hoped to catch the whiting in this bottom panel, because this species of fish attempted to evade obstacles by swimming below them. In doing this the whiting would inevitably become meshed in the redesigned lower panel. There

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3 Other fish such as garfish are known to evade obstacles by swimming above them. For this reason, garfish nets only have floats and do not need lead weights to weight the net down so that it maintains contact with the lake bed.
would be little by-catch, Allen suggested, because only whiting attempted to swim under obstacles.

Allen ‘shot’ his net with the help of his deckhand. The net was cast in a semicircle, so that the two ends were approximately 500 m apart. Allen, operating from MARION, began to winch in one side of the net, while his deckhand, operating from a smaller row boat, began to winch in the other. As the net was slowly hauled in, and its length in the water slowly decreased, the men moved closer together making sure to keep the net in the shape of a semicircle. The ‘opening’ of the semi-circle always faces shallow water. Fish do not attempt to escape through this opening by swimming into the shallows because fish ‘escape behaviour’ precludes this option. The fish remain herded towards the end of the net in the centre, attempting to stay as far away from the approaching net as possible. The two ends of the net were gradually brought together and the semi-circle gradually reduced in size. Eventually Allen and his deckhand ‘closed the net’ by standing side by side and hand hauling the net into a tight circle. Within this circle of net a commotion of fish twisted and splashed. At this point they began to sort the still submerged fish, ensuring that no undersized fish had become trapped among the others. It soon became clear that Allen’s new net design had worked rather well. He had caught half a box of whiting. Previously, when he had shot Newman’s with his old net, he had caught none.

Allen had made himself a new net in response to changing fish numbers observed while fishing. Through years of ‘being there’ attending to his surrounds in the attitude of ‘raw fishing – observing the lake, using the whole body to watch, listen to and taste his surrounds – Allen had noticed the lake change from a system dominated by bream (an estuarine species) to one in which whiting (a marine species) was becoming more and more prevalent. Allen responded to these changes, not by attempting to halt them or deny them but by changing his practice to conform to these altered circumstances. In this
way, he demonstrated the working assumption of ‘incomplete knowledge’ in which fishermen assume that because they only have a partial perspective on the system they work within, change cannot be predicted, but, instead, it must be expected and accommodated.

A net is, in many ways, an hypothesis with particular assumptions built into it. Fishermen use nets to confirm or disprove their theories about what is going on in the lake. The ‘answers’ a net provides confirm, refute and suggest alternative paths of inquiry. Fishing nets form part of the arena in which ‘knowledge and learning [are] distributed throughout the complex structure of persons-acting-in-setting’ (Lave 1993:8). Changes to the design of a net result from moments of insight and learning, when novelty is encountered in practice. These ‘insights’ are subsequently incorporated into working knowledge, in this case a new net design. The incorporation of insight into working knowledge may either transform or reproduce those working principles through which the original insight was gained. As one fisherman said, ‘the net is a living thing’.

The design, use and, therefore, catch of a fishing net is unique to each fisherman. Just as nets have particular social histories so they can be also understood as material manifestations of the unique nexus formed between knowledge and practice that is particular to an individual fisherman. New knowledge, arising through imperfect practice or altered context, can inspire fishermen to alter the structure of a net, and, thus, over time, particular experiences become manifest in the shape of a net itself. A net’s basic structure and design, however, is also the result of knowledge attributable to the collective wisdom of generations of fishermen. Thus, some features of nets point to particular habitats and fish behaviour while others remain the legacy of families and friendship groups.

When Allen changed his net design to take account of new conditions he had met while fishing he reproduced the general principles of *incomplete knowledge, being there* and *raw fishing*. These principles together inform Gippsland Lakes fishermen’s attention to,
expectation of, and responsiveness to changes in their work environment. In guiding fishermen’s practice they allow new knowledge to be incorporated into practice, and thus transform practice over time.

The Bream ‘Crisis’: Perceptions of an Environment in Transition

The assumptions informing fishermen’s daily practice are also expressed in dialogues between fishermen and other groups. On such occasions a disjuncture between two sets of working principles are revealed. Towards the end of my fieldwork an event occurred which was to show how fishermen’s perceptions of the local ecological system, based in their particular working principles, differed from those of other groups directly involved with the lake and the life it supported. This episode revealed the ways in which different resource users drew upon different ‘forms of knowledge’ to make sense of the ecological complexity with which they were confronted. Further, the ‘bream crisis’ illustrated the way that conflicts arise when different groups attempt to recognise, or solve, environmental problems using these different principles for acting in the world (King 2005; Paolisso 2002; Roepstorff 2003).

Towards the end of 2003, when the fisheries section of the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) released its annual stock assessment, it became ‘known’ that the annual bream catch was down from 154 tonnes, in 2002, to 28 tonnes in 2003 (2004:11). At this time, ‘experts’ and stakeholders came from near and far to discuss what became known, in the local media and within the recreational fishing lobby, as ‘the bream crisis’.

It was no ‘shock’ to the fishermen that the population of bream in the lake had fallen. They knew a population drop was coming because they were fairly certain there had been no large bream-spawning event for some years. And it had been only recently that they had seen any newly recruited bream about\(^4\). Because there had been so few bream around fishermen had been targeting other fish for most of the year – hence, to some extent, the

\(^4\) Bream live up to 29 years. Bream of legal size are recruited to the fishery episodically, however. In bad seasons fish grow very little and thus, age is not a good indication of size (Cashmore, Conron and Knucky 2000).
Fishermen did not perceive a crisis, although they were concerned, as always, that the frequency of bream spawning in the lake appeared to be declining. A number of fishermen, including Allen, believed that, because the lake was getting increasingly saline as the years went by, the system would soon no longer support black bream and would begin to produce more King George whiting.

Where many commercial fishermen perceived long term inevitable change, and remade their nets accordingly, other ‘stakeholders’ saw a crisis. Over a period of two months, ‘the bream crisis’ was addressed in a series of meetings between commercial fishermen and managers, recreational fishermen and managers, and commercial fishermen, recreational fishermen and managers. In this period the president of the East Gippsland Estuarine Fishermen’s Association also called a meeting of lake fishermen. By attending most of these meetings I was able to witness a period of intense reflection on ‘the state of the Gippsland Lakes’. It became clear, after listening to many and varied theories about what was happening at the lake and what to do about it, that the way fishermen perceived the lake ecology differed from the understandings of scientists, managers and recreational fishermen. This different way of seeing was informed by the guiding principles explored above, principles that were very different, it seemed, from those guiding fisheries scientists, fisheries managers and recreational fishermen. Thus, despite the extraordinarily open, balanced, conciliatory and respectful way in which all these meetings were conducted fishermen found it difficult to get their point of view across.

In answering the questions of ‘outsiders’ and outlining their experiences to them fishermen negotiated and confirmed their overlapping perceptions of the lake and how it ‘worked’. In the process, they not only exposed outsiders as acting on a set of very different working assumptions but showed that their own working assumptions were basically the same: *incomplete knowledge, being there* and *raw fishing*. In a sense they carried an insider’s ‘conversation’ about learning, practice and knowledge into the public realm.

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5 Of course such public negotiations, especially in times of ‘crisis’, can also expose the numerous lines of fission within the fishing community. I do not deal with this aspect of the ‘bream crisis’ here.
**Reading a graph, reading the environment**

The first stock-assessment meeting involved commercial fishermen, scientists and managers only. In recognition of their ‘knowledge and experience’ commercial fishermen were given a first ‘right of reply’ to the stock-assessment before any other stakeholders became involved. At this meeting the PIRVic (Primary Industries Research Victoria) scientist responsible for fisheries research at the lake began by showing a graph that charted the erratic changes in the commercial bream catch over the last century\(^6\) (fig. 4.1). The graph showed fluctuations across the 20\(^{th}\) century, ending at the latest figure of twenty-eight tonne – a low point, certainly, but not the lowest catch ever recorded. The scientist dramatically and rhetorically asked: ‘well, what I want to know is, are you worried?’ The room was silent. The scientist then invited the fishermen to interpret the graph and ‘explain what was happening on the ground’. Everyone agreed that the bream catch had dropped significantly, but views differed when it came to interpreting what this meant and what should be done about it.

The fishermen, very familiar with graphic representations of the commercial catch and effort data and the limited way in which these figures could represent ‘the state of the lake’, began to explain some of the variables that were producing these graphs. It was clear that many of their ideas came as revelations to the scientists. What the fishermen went on to say filled these apparently easily interpreted graphs with a jostle of complexly inter-related variables. As the fishermen ‘fleshed-out’ the static graphs, the sense of rhetorical certainty in the scientist’s opening remarks began to seem very misplaced.

\(^6\) The catch for the years 1998-2004 has not been included on this chart the trend over these years was to increase gradually to 185 tonne in 1999 and then decrease to the low of 28 tonne in 2003.
Managers and scientists attain their understanding of the lake through fishermen’s log-books. Fishermen are legally required to fill in log-books and periodically submit them to management for analysis. In these log-books fishermen record various aspects of their daily operations, including the catch in kilograms according to species, effort (the time it took to find and catch the fish), the gear used, dates and the location (at the scale of 50km²) of their catch. These data are used to generate the kinds of graphs presented at these meetings and to judge the status of the fishery.

The discussion that centred around another graph – the graph representing fishing effort⁷ – well illustrated the different working principles held by fishermen, on the one hand, and managers and scientists on the other. At the Gippsland Lakes the measure of effort, for mesh netting, is a ratio of the total amount of fish caught by all licence holders to the total number of hours spent by all licence holders on board the boat fishing – including setting the nets, hauling the nets and returning the fish to shore. For haul seine netting, the

⁷ The graph of ‘fishing effort’ was not available to be reproduced. The meeting at which the effort graph was presented was considered to be ‘closed to the public’ and, thus, some of the data discussed at this time was not able to be reproduced.
measure of effort is a ratio of the total amount of fish caught per season divided by the
total number of shots made in that season.

It was pointed out to the fishermen that their records had shown that the catch effort had
gone up while the actual catch of bream had gone down. The president of the fishermen’s
association began to address the ‘fact’, represented in the graph – *effort is up, catch is
down* – by commenting that ‘I start looking for fish the minute I step out the door’. He
was signalling to the fisheries that there is a sense of arbitrariness in the measures of
effort based on data extracted from the log-book. Someone might well have added that
some fishermen are looking for fish as they drive to town to do their shopping. Did this
mean that some shopping trips were to be included as ‘effort’, and logged?

Next, the president began to clarify another dimension of the facts presented by the
scientists. He said that lately there had been an enormous amount of epiphyte algae in the
water that regularly made their nets ineffective. The abundant slimy algae clung to their
nets, turning them into a wall of black slime easily seen by bream, which are known to
have high visual acuity. To add to this, he explained, the amount of bioluminescence in
the water over summer and spring had made the nets doubly ineffective. This is because,
when caught on the epiphytic algae clogging the nets, the micro-bioluminescent algae
light up, turning the net into a luminous wall at night.

Another man went on to say, to the surprise of the managers and scientists, that the four-
inch mesh size used to catch bream was also used to catch flounder. And, he said, it was
flounder that the fishermen from Paynesville had been targeting all winter. This was a
surprise to the non-fishermen because fishermen do not record what they target, merely
the mesh size they have used. Scientists and managers alike simply assume that, when
using four-inch mesh, fishermen are targeting (or trying to target) bream. But, as the
fisherman concluded, ‘catching flounder is a totally different proposition to catching
bream’. Flounder (see fig. 4.2) are shaped, and behave, very differently to bream; the
former is a bottom dwelling (dorsoventrally) flattened fish that inhabits muddy bottoms,
while the latter pelagic fish has a more recognisably ‘fish-like’ body shape (laterally
flattened), feeds on sandy bottoms at night, and travels into deeper water in the day (see fig. 4.3).

Figure 4.4 Flounder.

Figure 4.5 Black Bream.

As a consequence of the very different shapes and habits of each fish species the nets used to catch them are also very different. Flounder nets sit right on the bottom of the lakebed and are heavily leaded; they are also hung more loosely, because flounder need to be well tangled in the net in order to be caught. Bream on the other hand mesh easily when they do not see nets or when they panic. Bream nets, therefore, are taut, have less lead, and stand up in the water column. In effect, the two nets look and behave completely differently (as do the fish) although they are both made of four-inch mesh. Hence the comment, made by one fisherman at the meeting, ‘you have to catch fish!’ He meant that fishermen did not just toss any old net in any old place, and that management
should have realised that effort made to catch flounder was not to be confused with effort made to catch bream.

To further the argument that it was necessary to look beyond graphs in order to understand the catch and effort data, another man commented that Tommy, who had been ‘the top mesh net fishermen’ in the lake, had retired. He then asked another man, in a rhetorical fashion, ‘no offence mate, but you don’t haul in the numbers that Tommy used to, do you?’ The other man agreed that he didn’t. He was making the point that effort had gone up in the last year as ‘young guys found their feet’. He explained that young fishermen who were just starting out should not be expected to have the catch to effort ratios of more experienced men. This was just another dimension, he explained, that the log-book did not take into account.

As the fishermen spoke, they invited the scientists and managers to ‘see through their eyes’ and beyond the meagre data contained in the log-books. The picture they painted, in contrast to the battery of ‘clear-cut’ graphs with which the others had come armed, depicted a world in which a person acted with incomplete knowledge and, in which, ‘you never stop learning’. Their approach suggested that simply quantifying the world was never a full explanation; one had to pursue questions of context to make numerical data meaningful. In order to do this one had to become fully immersed in the lake’s environment, to see the nets lit up at night, to feel the thickness of the epiphyte algae and to ‘sling8’ a flounder net from scratch. In other words, to combat the perpetual state of incomplete knowledge one had to ‘be there’ and to do ‘raw fishing’.

In the fishermen’s view scientists and managers did not experience the lake in a manner that enabled them to make informed management decisions. Fishermen felt that log-books were an extremely poor substitute to being out on the water (being there), perceptually committed to one’s surrounds (raw fishing). It was clear that fishermen suspected that managers did not have enough contextual understanding of the lake with which to judge the significance of the log-book data. In light of the wealth of contextual

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8 To sling a net means to construct a net.
information that fishermen appended to the log-book version of events at these meetings
one wonders how the fishermen held their tongues at the unveiling of the ‘damning’
bream catch graph. The graph did not show anything they did not already know. It is
likely that all thought ‘so what!’ when faced for the umpteenth time with the inscrutable
jagged line that zigzagged across the page.

Knowledge, Temporality and Intervention

At the second stock assessment meeting, held a week later, recreational fishermen were
represented. At this meeting the commercial fishermen spoke more about their
interpretation of the bream catch record represented in the graph (fig. 4.1). Commercial
fishermen argued against intervention, explaining that it was too soon to tell if the bream
had ‘really declined for good’ or if the population would recover. The recreational
fishermen, frustrated at the commercial fishermen’s reluctance to intervene, beseeched
management to ‘do something’, one man asking ‘how low do we need to go before
something is done?’ Fishermen answered their calls by drawing people’s attention to the
way in which, when viewing fish population dynamics at larger time scales, perceptions
of permanent fish decline are altered, as large fluctuations in fish populations become
apparent only over long time scales. To add to this they introduced, by way of narratives
of environmental change, the working principle of incomplete knowledge, and by
implication suggested that interventions in the environment had, at best, unforeseeable
outcomes.

By explaining at length, and in intimate detail, their version of the environmental history
of the lake, the commercial fishermen attempted to show how temporal perspective
altered perceptions of change. Working together, older and younger fishermen talked
about the long-term habitat changes in the lake they had witnessed over their careers:
how the habitat had changed from sea-grass and no bream; to plague crabs and no sea
grass; to increased sediment loads from logging in the upper catchments; to silt on which
the seagrass grew again; and then finally to sea grass and bream. To add to this ‘lesson’
about alternative perceptions of environmental flux, one elderly fisherman added ‘well,
when my grandfather arrived in Paynesville at the beginning of the century he was told to keep heading east because the lake had been fished out. But he stayed and we’ve always caught fish. There’s been good and bad times.’ And another commented that ‘we always remember the good times but there’s been plenty of bad times!’ More recently, they explained, rising salinity levels had led to an increase in the number of marine fish species in the lake. Bream, they proposed, were leaving the system because it did not suit them anymore, not because of overfishing. Some of the older men recalled the mass departure of bream they had once witnessed. Another man told of catching hundreds of kilos of bream while in-shore trawling in Bass Strait many kilometres from an estuary. In the place of bream they proposed, King George whiting were beginning to appear.

The fishermen talked in time-scales much larger that those invoked by managers, recreational fishermen and even scientists. Instead, the latter three groups tended to focus on the way in which catch and effort data had altered over time scales of three to five years. This was despite the fact that everyone present had access to long term catch records for black bream going back to 1914. Their focus on small time scales was certainly compounded and reinforced by the fact that in the State of Victoria parliamentary terms are three years in length. And, according to some frustrated managers, because of recent changes to the culture of the public service, public servants, including fisheries scientists and managers, had lost a measure of their power to influence state government decisions. In turn, they found it difficult to argue to ministers, in the face of public – recreational fishing lobby – out-cry, that long-term environmental variables and largely intractable environmental problems played as least a significant role in the decline of the bream population as did commercial fishing pressure.

Earlier that week a frustrated commercial fisherman, in response to what he saw as the short-term outlook of managers and scientists, had recited to me part of a famous Australian poem by Dorothea Mackellar entitled “My Country”. He recited the following verse,
"I love a sunburnt country,
A land of sweeping plains,
Of ragged mountain ranges,
Of drought and flooding rains.

The fisherman said that, as the poem noted, flooding rain follows drought. Through this poem he was pointing out that over long time frames it is possible to perceive balance in systems that are apparently in extreme flux. He was saying also that Australia is a country renowned for extreme climatic shifts. And he was also implying that those who wanted to intervene now were simply being impatient and that, eventually, when the rains came, the bream would breed again. Interestingly, his version of what was happening at the Gippsland Lakes was slightly different from that of some of his colleagues, because it emphasised cyclicity over long time scales rather than balanced change.

In the first case, fishermen implied balance by suggesting that when one aspect of the environment alters, such as the sea becoming saltier, then compensation occurs – in this case by King George whiting taking the place of bream. In the second sense, evoked through the poem ‘My Country’, balance was understood as oppositional forces following one after the other in the sequence – drought, flood, drought, flood – forever more. In the former, the way in which balance is attained is not predictable (cf. Jelinski 2005:272), in the latter it is. Each of these versions, however, emphasised change occurring at large time scales, a perspective on the ‘bream crisis’ to which scientists, managers and recreational fishermen were not attuned.

Fishermen’s sense that there was no crisis and that interventions were unnecessary was, thus, partly due to their sense of temporality. Having ‘been there’ and lived through so many different changes to the lake, including previous bream declines, made it difficult for fishermen to simply forget such events and focus solely on the previous three years.

Fishermen’s reluctance to intervene was also a result of their working assumption of incomplete knowledge that engendered a sense that their effect upon the environment was
negligible. As one man commented ‘these are bust and boom cycles. Mother Nature is more powerful, we need to take a step back and stop manipulating it for our own pleasures’. The use of the term Mother Nature, in this context, to describe environmental processes at the Gippsland Lakes, was certainly rhetorical and metaphorical. In fact, fishermen rarely used this term. In this case it suggested, as it conventionally does (see also Jelinski 2005), a force that was ultimately beyond human power and understanding. I say ‘ultimately’ because fishermen do attempt to understand their surrounds, they certainly make interventions in their environments, and they acknowledge that these have effects. However, what they stress is that they cannot be completely certain how these actions will influence environmental processes. Further, they stress that their actions create variables that contribute to, but do not overwhelmingly influence, environmental variation. Thus, at this meeting an aspect of the working principle incomplete knowledge became metaphorised as Mother Nature, as one man attempted to communicate this principle to management. Management and scientists felt very differently about the issue of intervention and the ability of humans to intervene in natural processes. One manager said that ‘the habitat issues in the lake are a result of human activity and they can only be resolved through intervention. We cannot presume to sit back and let nature take its course’.

The story of the lake that the fishermen told was one of inevitable, and largely unforeseeable, change that, because it was so slow, was hard to apprehend until it had occurred. Fishermen’s sense of temporality contributed to their reluctance to intervene because, in their view, change could only be understood as having occurred when variability was viewed across large time scales. As their interpretation of the catch and effort graphs had told, there were a huge number of temporary changes, such as increased levels of epiphyte algae or the addition of inexperienced fishermen to the fleet that could explain the seemingly huge variability in the bream catch. To add to this, fishermen emphasised that, over large time scales, change was to be expected. And the fact that habitat changes over the last 100 years had been largely unforeseen vindicated their assumption that no one could have complete knowledge of the lake environment. If,
indeed, the lake was changing again it was nothing to panic about; one simply changed practice.

Fishermen felt that scientists and managers held unwarranted beliefs about their ‘knowledge’ of, and, thus, power over, the lake’s ecology. The assurance with which the head scientist and manager read the environment through graphs belied the fishermen’s own experience of uncertain population fluctuations and habitat changes in the context of long term cycles that took place across human life-times and not ‘political life-times’. Where scientists and managers were quick to want to put in place restrictions on bream fishing, fishermen felt that such restrictions were ‘premature’ and that, in terms of the implications and causes of the bream stock’s status, there remained ‘a large amount of uncertainty’. Fishermen’s reluctance to intervene, their ‘wait and see’ attitude, could be read cynically as apathy or even greed. However, their perception that there was no ‘crisis’ accords with their general approach to fishing – the assumption of ‘incomplete knowledge’. This approach, learned among their peers, is a socially valued attitude that enables them to become skilful fishermen.

Fishermen make the point that change is balanced and not necessarily bad. At some point in the lake’s history they had gained bream. Now, they conceded, they might be losing this species. But these fish would be replaced by another kind that, like the bream, but unlike the scientists and managers, know which conditions suit them best. Fishermen are reconciled to change at various time-scales. They are, in fact, well suited to the kinds of habitat change wrought by human intervention, despite their sense that these changes are not wholly of human origin. Scientists and managers, on the other hand, while being aware of the origins of change find it difficult, for perhaps both political and epistemological reasons, to reconcile themselves to such change.

Conclusion

Fishermen become competent at fishing by learning how to pay attention to the salient features of their surrounds. This learning ideally takes place in the company of trusted
and respected ‘elders’, often family members, who educate the attention of the novice encouraging him to perceive as they do. The context of learning is social and thus, all that is learned about the environment is socially mediated, although it is not necessarily discursively represented. Even when a newcomer is left to ‘find out for himself’ he inevitably learns from others during the many social ‘moments’, convivial or antagonistic, played out upon the lake. The social milieu of learning means that particular ways of approaching the environment become valued and these values tend to be passed on from teacher to novice.

It is their particular way of approaching fishing, perceiving their environment and going about their work that make fishermen good at what they do. It is also their particular orientations and aims that sets them apart from other groups of people who make some kind of living from the lake. Through the public forums created during the ‘bream crisis’ fishermen’s difference to ‘outsiders’ was evident. This difference was not simply an aspect of boundary construction and maintenance but was an artefact of fisherman’s ability to speak to one another in conceptually cohesive and mutually-understandable ways – a cohesiveness that was, I argue, a result of general conceptual principles that guide fishermen’s approach to, and understanding of, the Gippsland Lakes.
Chapter 5
Gentlemen, Irony and the Ferment of Community

Introduction

Competition and Conflict: Portraits from the Water
Gentlemen’s Agreements
Gentlemen’s Agreements and Personhood
Gentlemanly Conduct and Censure
Gentlemen and Negotiation
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Introduction

At the lake, conflict, antagonism and negotiation form the connective sinews through which the body of community emerges before the ethnographer’s eye. In fact, the lake neighbourhood could be described as an ‘antagonistic community’. Competition on the lake is generally not manifest in violence, although this does occasionally happen. Instead, fishermen value skills that can contribute to the resolution of actual and potential conflicts in non-violent ways; these entail the use of social pressure, social acuity, fishing skill, restraint and attention to irony. It takes flair, wit and sensitivity to successfully navigate the conflict situations that arise daily on the lake. I will suggest that the kind of relationships that fishermen pursue with each other are enlivened by the frisson of competition and the possibility of both conflict and negotiation.

Conflict over space and access to resources, and negotiated solutions to these problems, are common in commercial fisheries (Acheson 1987; Anderson 1979; Durrenberger and Pálsson 1987; Martin 1979; Taylor 1987). Acheson (1987, 1988) has explored the ways that commercial lobster fishermen in Maine (USA) organise themselves in space to minimise inter-community conflict over fishing places. His insightful studies emphasise ways in which ecological and technical constraints may organize production and bring people into relationships of conflict or co-operation. These considerations provide what Schmidt and Schröder (2001:1) have called an operational approach to violence and
conflict, that focuses ‘on the etics of antagonism, in particular on the measurable material and political causes of conflict’. In this chapter, I will concentrate on ways in which fishermen conceptualise, experience and contend with conflict rather than on the possible ecological causes of conflict. For Gippsland Lakes fishermen, conflicts provide arenas in which to express themselves as local subjects to other local subjects. Via these local modes of sociality, fishermen constitute meaningful local subjectivities and affective narratives of neighbourhood.

The values of moral equality and individual autonomy, evident in fishermen’s interpersonal dealings discussed in previous chapters, are evinced in the oft-used, although nebulous, notion of the Gentlemen’s Agreement. These agreements nominally concern the equitable distribution of lake space in the manner of first come, first served. What mattered far more, however, was the kind of persons – ‘gentlemen’ – who operate by that agreement. As fishermen explained to me, Gentlemen’s Agreements were about ‘honour’ and to break one would be a ‘low act’. Rather than simply being rules to be followed then, a Gentlemen’s Agreement places value on negotiation and leads fishermen to eschew violent responses to conflict situations. Fishermen bring this sensibility to their engagements and, in judging and censuring each other according to these expectations, attempt to maintain control of their social space in the face of increasing state interventions. It is by keeping the lines of dialogue open and the fists in check that fishermen are able to maintain fluid relationships with each other, so that the potential relationships that characterise the social and ecological field of ‘the lake’ remain as potentials and do not become, through uncontrolled violence, or ardent rule making, dead ends.

**Competition and Conflict – some portraits from the water**

At the first East Gippsland Estuarine Fishermen’s Association (EGEFA) meeting that I attended, twelve of the eighteen Gippsland Lakes fishermen and three of the five
fishermen who held licences to fish Mallacoota Inlet\(^1\) were present. The meeting was held in the wooden, shell-pink, Country Women’s Association hall at Lakes Entrance. The hall seemed barely large enough to hold the men who had gathered to elect the association’s office bearers and to discuss other matters. Before and after the meeting the fishermen joked together, recalled catches and discussed fishing politics in a convivial spirited way. There were no obvious cliques and men broke away from one conversation to join another in an easy casual fashion. During the meeting they discussed the items on the agenda, expressing opinions through serious comment or joking derision. Here, then, I was struck by the “togetherness” of my informants, and yet in the course of four months between that meeting and the next, I never saw these men, literally, or figuratively, all together again. Much of the talk I heard in the months after the meeting involved criticism, ridicule and complaint about other fishermen. Usually, at the root of this disaffection lay a conflict that had occurred between two fishermen in the course of fishing.

In most weeks the feeling is strong that there are not enough fish to go around. There is talk of a few people getting some good catches but most fishermen say they are ‘just scratching’\(^2\). As one man pointed out ‘the lake is like a desert with a few oases in it’. Finding these oases is the fisherman’s task. It is both the perception and the reality of scarcity that leads to competition for fishing places. At the end of my fieldwork, at the height of the ‘bream crisis’, Larry and his son had a hundred-box shot of bream\(^3\). Larry tried to keep the place where he caught the bream a secret, but someone saw where he had been and the news spread fast. Several fishing crews rushed to the same location, while other fishermen wryly and knowingly stated that ‘you can’t catch yesterday’s fish’. This is an example of competition on a grand scale. Generally, though, instead of half the fishermen in the lake wanting to fish the same spot it is more common that a particular

\(^1\) Mallacoota Inlet, 200 km. east of the Gippsland Lakes, was closed to commercial fishing in 2002 and established as a haven for recreational fishing only. Until then the EGEFA represented commercial fishermen from both Mallacoota and the Gippsland Lakes.

\(^2\) The term ‘scratching’ refers to the phrase ‘just scratching by’ but also has the connotation of running nets across barren lake terrain. Winter is sometimes called ‘scratching time’. Mesh nets with small sized mesh (holes) are called ‘scratchers’ because they catch small low quality fish.

\(^3\) There are approximately 20kg of fish to a box (depending on size and species) and, given the approximate market price of bream of $A10 per kilogram, this haul was a veritable jackpot.
place is favoured by two fishermen or, alternatively, that a local specialist, doing well, has aroused the interest of another fisherman who has come around to see if he can take a share of the fish.

The ways in which fishermen handle competitive situations are many and varied. Outright violence is frowned upon, however, and overt threats are used sparingly. Generally, fishermen communicate their displeasure through indirect warnings conveyed by verbal tone, body language and through interference with gear. They manage potentially flammable situations by artfully avoiding personalizing hostilities until, or unless, it is absolutely necessary. Martin (1979:290) has observed, similarly, that in the Fermeuse region of Newfoundland, cod fishermen placed a premium ‘on maintaining ostensibly cordial relationships with competitors … [and that] the difference between being a good fisherman and doing your neighbour “dirt” is purely a matter of execution’.

While out catching crabs one night in summer, Shaun noticed a boat further up the channel. ‘That looks like a commercial’, Shaun said gravely, and ‘he’s in my prawn shot’. After setting the crab traps we skulked over, in Shaun’s motor boat to the other fisherman. Shaun made his displeasure known in an indirect yet plain fashion by aggressively approaching the other man’s boat in the last 200m, just missing his trap lines. To barely miss another man’s gear in this deliberate fashion can only be interpreted as aggression. ‘What’s happening? You catchin’?’ Shaun asked gruffly, beginning a tense conversation about nothing in particular. After a few words in which Shaun had made it clear, though he did so indirectly, that he would be keeping a close eye on the new guy, we roared off. The brief encounter served as a warning to the other fisherman. Since the interloper was new to the fishery he would not have been aware that he was fishing, albeit for crabs, in what Shaun considered to be his own prawn shot. He would have been made well aware, after this encounter, however, that what he was doing had aroused Shaun’s ire and, perhaps, would think twice about fishing there again without knowing more about the place. Indeed, Shaun’s pointed disregard for the other man’s gear was a sign of how Shaun might vent his annoyance in the future.
Fishermen told me that a good way to keep others away from mesh shots was to ‘starve them out’ by interfering with their gear. Interference was an indirect, but effective, method to communicate to others to stay away. The offended fisherman set nets on one, or both, side(s) of the interloper’s net to preclude fish from being caught. Depending on what one wished to achieve, an interloper could be made aware of this interference or not. By setting nets around another man’s, and hauling them very early in the morning a fisherman hoped to move the interloper on and avoid a direct confrontation by simply making it seem that there were no fish in the area. Experienced fishermen, however, would not be fooled by this and would realise that they were being ‘starved out’. By not openly leaving his nets beside the interloper’s a fisherman could very subtly make a point to a fellow competent fisherman, or simply lead an inexperienced man to be discouraged. To pointedly leave nets alongside another man’s is more direct and is regarded as an appropriate rejoinder to a persistent interloper. Although, I never witnessed gear interference it was a well-recognised way to keep interlopers from fishing in, or too close to, a favourite place.

The way in which fishermen use nets to negotiate conflict was revealed to one fisherman when he first began fishing in the lake. Initially he fished in the places where his father had fished, since his father had advised him that these were productive sites. But he found that he was not catching anything and could not understand why. One night, while asleep ashore in his swag, he was awoken by noises out on the water. He walked to the shore to see what the commotion was about and, to his surprise, saw another fisherman taking fish from his net and then laying the net neatly back. When he called out and confronted the thief, the man, lying blatantly, said he had just foiled another man attempting to take the fish. The young fisherman felt even more upset by the fact that he had been lied to; the lie seemed to add weight to the thief’s contempt for him and after this encounter he began to fish elsewhere, since, he explained, he knew that such ‘attacks’ would probably continue.

In another example of the way in which nets are deployed to avoid open conflict, two well-organised fishermen explained that they worked together to orchestrate coordinated
campaigns of gear interference in their (neighbouring) fishing grounds, to ensure interlopers did not get a foothold there. The fishermen explained that they would often speak with each other by phone and plan their campaigns against the interloper. This level of co-operation, on the water, between fishermen is unusual at the Gippsland Lakes (cf. Acheson 1988:60) and is likely to be because these particular fishermen have a highly localised fishing strategy, rarely moving from the small area where two rivers entered the lake system.

The examples above express a particular kind of approach to conflict in which fishermen attempt to pre-empt open hostility, by getting their point across in a clear and unambiguous manner. Acheson (1987) describes a similar pattern of graduated hostility for lobstermen in Maine, while Martin (1979) discusses the way that cod fishermen in Newfoundland attempt to balance the tension between ruthlessness and equanimity by avoiding open hostility. In a similar way, lake fishermen tend to ‘attack’ the means by which other men make their living (gear), rather than addressing interlopers personally. Behind these apparently sneaky guerrilla tactics lies high regard for the maintenance of good inter-personal relationships. This is the reason why fishermen are able to maintain amicable relationships with each other in public – at EGEFA meetings, for instance – but complain, sometimes bitterly, about one another in private.

Pre-emptive tactics that are, at once, conciliatory and aggressive form part of a wider set of values that fishermen press upon one another, values that have become distilled in the rich conversation that surrounds the informal conflict avoidance arrangements fishermen have between one another that they term Gentlemen’s Agreements.

Gentlemen’s Agreements

Discussion concerning the nature of Gentlemen’s Agreements at the Gippsland Lakes could well fall under headings such as Autochthonous Property Rights Regimes or Tenure at the Gippsland Lakes, because this is ostensibly what they are about. One could also, quite rightly, describe them as rational strategies for conflict resolution, because this is
the way they are often presented by fishermen. And, one could add that Gentlemen’s Agreements are ecological in character because they often facilitate the rational distribution of fishermen in space according to environmental conditions. Gentlemen’s Agreements are complex social institutions and can ‘do’ all these things (in Chapter 6, I will address other facets of these agreements). In the past, however, anthropological studies have tended not to explore in depth the ways in which these informal space-use agreements operate in practice, how these agreements are experienced by fishermen and, most importantly, how these agreements inform local ways of conceptualising sociality (Acheson 1988; Acheson and Gardner 2004; Begossi 1995; cf. Martin 1979).

The following were, at the time of my fieldwork, the most commonly talked about and practiced Gentlemen’s agreements:

- For seine net fishing it is ‘agreed’ that if two fishermen arrive at the same place simultaneously, or find that they both wanted to use the same place, they will toss a coin to decide who would take the shot.
- For mesh net fishing it is ‘agreed’ that the first man to a place, or suite of places on Sunday evening\(^4\) has that place, or suite of places, until sunset on Friday.
- For prawn fishing with set-nets it is ‘agreed’ that if a person uses a shot for more than two consecutive nights then that shot remains his unless, or until, he does not use that place for two consecutive nights.

Gentlemen’s Agreements at the Gippsland Lakes can be understood as agreements that allow for the distribution of rights to \textit{time} at fishing places. In short, the agreements state that while a particular fisherman is using a place other fishermen should stay away. This feature forms the ecological content of the agreement. Informal access agreements that privilege time over space are common in inshore fisheries (Anderson 1979; Begossi 1995; Martin 1979; Wagner & Davis 2004). This is because fishing is a notoriously unpredictable venture, and fish move around, from place to place, unseen by their human

\(^4\) By law fishermen must cease to fish the lake at 12pm Friday and can only commence fishing again one hour before sunset on Sunday night.
hunters. In a very different setting, on the island of Palau in Micronesia, Hviding (1996) describes a structurally similar solution to the ecological problem of unpredictability in watery environments. Here, fishermen gain rights to sequences of fishing places, joining a series of impermanent sites into a whole to produce historical depth at a larger scale. These ‘fishing paths’ become associated with certain people and it is these people who are looked to for permission to fish at sites along these paths.

Both Gentlemen’s Agreements on the Gippsland Lakes, and the form of marine tenure found at Palau, are social agreements that recognise the inherent changeability of systems where spatial distributions of fish and habitat alter in barely predictable ways. However, the ways in which the ecological givens of scarcity and low predictability become incorporated into local social modes of understanding in the two systems are quite different. It is the way in which these ecological facts, or what Schmidt and Schröder (2001:1) have called ‘the etics of antagonism’, are entrained by particular groups of people in particular times and places that I shall explore here.

On the Gippsland Lakes fishermen do tend to abide by Gentlemen’s Agreements despite the competitive nature of their enterprise. In many ways this is surprising. Certainly some fishermen from the ocean fishery were astonished that, in the context of a ruthless market economy, anyone would take heed of what they considered to be such ‘quaint’ agreements. Yet lake fishermen did. Over the course of two summer prawning seasons\(^5\), for example, I know of only two occasions when fishermen deviated from the Gentlemen’s Agreement related to prawn shots.

Significantly, these agreements are not informed by discourses of tradition. Instead, it is merely assumed that all fishermen are gentlemen until proven otherwise and that no fisherman could, by recourse to genealogy, or heritage, seek priority in a place over another man (cf. Firestone 1967, quoted in Anderson 1979; Anderson 1979; Wagner and Davis 2004). At the Lake the toss of a coin, or priority gained through current use, were

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\(^5\) At the Gippsland Lakes prawn season begins around January and usually lasts until the end of March. Up to fourteen lake fishermen participated.
the ‘agreed’ paths to right of unmolested access. In this way fishermen affirm that belonging is achieved through action rather than inheritance.

At the time of my fieldwork none of these agreements had been written down and fishermen tended to describe them haltingly, as though waiting to be laughed at or contradicted. Tellingly, they often seemed quite uncomfortable in voicing the agreements – it was as though they were describing something that they could not themselves quite believe existed. In fact, as I will show in the following sections, Gentlemen’s Agreements, rather than being a set of codified rules to be followed, established a conceptual framework through which interpersonal morality could be understood, spoken of and negotiated. Thus, Gentlemen’s Agreements constituted a notion of personhood and a moral community within which these local subjects could act.

**Gentlemen’s Agreements and Personhood**

Gentlemen’s Agreements do not simply pertain to issues of ecology or technology. It is no accident that the agreements fishermen make with each other to avoid situations of conflict are understood to be held between ‘gentlemen’. The descriptor ‘gentleman’ is an important notion among fishermen because it points to the social constitution of fisherpersons and the maintenance of a moral standard within the fishing community. The idea of the agreements invokes a nebulous array of values and expectations that are pressed upon those in the fishing community. In a kind of Rousseauian ‘Social Contract’, those who have a licence to fish are expected to abide by these unwritten agreements. The common refrain ‘the problem with the Gentlemen’s Agreements is that you need gentlemen…[to make them work]’ illustrates the wry manner by which fishermen chastise each other and, thereby, alert each other to an idealised manner of personal comportment. As I will show, it is the affects and effectiveness of gentlemen talk that gives the agreements their raison d’être and largely informs the expected comportment of fishermen towards one another.
Gentlemen’s Agreements resemble other ‘social contracts’ cross-culturally because of the way that they formulate, implicitly, the kind of person deemed to be subject to the agreement. As Gluckman (1955) has pointed out, there exists within many politico-legal structures, cross-culturally, ‘a central figure’ who embodies that particular society’s norms and values. It is from this ostensibly neutral construct of personhood that post hoc judgements about people’s responses to particular situations are made, i.e. what would a gentleman have done in this situation? Indeed, it is quite likely that the reasonable man standard (more recently, the reasonable person standard) now largely codified within western legal frameworks, remain as reminders of a once much more ambiguous moral standard in which just who counted as a person could be negotiated. However, when used in common law adjudications the reasonable person standard continues to speak of the norms and values of western societies more broadly (Anon 2001; Perry, Kulik and Bourhis 2004).

A Gentlemen’s Agreement bespeaks of Gippsland Lakes fishermen’s values and expectations of each other. And, as I will show, there is no straightforward way by which a gentleman can be identified. Far from following established rules about conduct in certain contexts a gentleman is a creature of context. A gentleman can only be identified, therefore, by his performance in particular intersubjective contexts. In the following section I create a portrait, albeit fuzzy, of gentlemanly conduct, based upon fishermen’s understandings and interpretations of the performances of others in various contexts.

**Gentlemanly Conduct and Censure**

The existence of Gentlemen’s Agreements raises two questions: who judges when they have been broken and how are they enforced? Within anthropology the study of dispute is informed by a distinction, first made by Gulliver (1979), between negotiation and adjudication (Caplan 1995:4). This distinction recognises that even where highly articulated and formal structures for the resolution of disputes (such as courts of law) are absent, there are likely to be other less formal, but equally compelling, social processes at work that identify, judge and possibly punish culpable parties. The study of either kind of
arena of resolution ‘leads us straight to key issues in anthropology – norms and ideology, power, rhetoric and oratory, personhood and agency, morality, meaning and interpretation’ (Caplan 1995:1).

‘Gentlemen’s Agreements have no teeth!’ begins the President of the EGEFA during one phase of a meeting. His complaint indicates the fact that there is no formal way to adjudicate and subsequently enforce a Gentlemen’s Agreement. At another time a different fisherman reflects that ‘you would never take anyone’s shot but there is no law that says you can’t’. Fishermen were quick to point out to me that a Gentlemen’s Agreement was not ‘the law’. Another, when asked, ‘what happens if you break one?’ replied, partially offended at what I might be implying, ‘we don’t bash’em! We just tell’em straight-up not to do it and they stop … but we can never check and tell. You soon find out you need Gentlemen to make’em work’. While fishermen remain ambivalent about these agreements because they cannot be enforced, it is the inability to enforce a Gentlemen’s Agreement that actually provides the agreement with its moral force. Anyone will keep an agreement if subject to persuasion. To fishermen it is self-evident that only gentlemen will keep to a Gentlemen’s Agreement; those who do not have shown that they are not gentlemen, and can be treated and talked about as such.

During a discussion about Gentlemen’s Agreements, one assertive fisherman told me that ‘Gentlemen’s Agreements were a matter of honour’. He said that ‘I would never stoop so low [as to break one]’ He then proceeded to illustrate his claim with an example of one dishonourable person who had broken an agreement. He began with reference to an agreement that had existed for the (no longer extant) mussel-dive fishery. Gippsland Lakes fishermen had once regularly collected mussels from the lower (saltier) channels of the lake where, in earlier years, mussels had grown in abundance. At this time there was a Gentlemen’s Agreement in place to ensure the market was not flooded at times when mussels were very abundant. The fishermen agreed not to take more than a certain number of kilograms to market per week.

Fishermen can no longer collect mussels for sale as they cannot afford, or are unwilling, to pay for the expensive bio-toxin testing procedures that now accompany commercial shell-fish harvesting in Victoria.
This agreement worked well, I was told, until two fishermen were ‘caught’ flouting it. At the time, one of the two fishermen accused another (innocent) man of being the ‘poacher’ but his lie was revealed because, on the night in question, the innocent party was actually having dinner with the secretary of the fishermen’s association; the convivial dinner took place at the Merimbula Bowls Club about 500km northwest of Lakes Entrance. When the secretary of the association accused the real offender of lying he apparently shrugged and said ‘it was worth a try’.

The association’s secretary loved this story, not only because it came complete with a treacherous lie and a triumphant revelation but also because it recalled the raucous night at the bowls club where one memorable, racy joke had been told. The Secretary was only too happy to re-tell the joke for my benefit. In fact, the joke was the highlight of the story about the dishonoured Gentlemen’s Agreement and had the effect of presenting the dinner guests as good-natured equals who socialised together while other kinds of men skulked around in the dark taking more than they ought to and, by contributing to a slump in the market, injuring the group as a result.

In another case of the breaking of a Gentlemen’s Agreement, a fisherman talked about how another man had taken his prawn-shot – ‘after 200 years continual use!’ he complained. When I, somewhat outraged, asked him what he had done about it he replied triumphantly ‘I let him take it [the prawn shot]’. This did not seem like justice to me. But reflecting upon the way in which a Gentlemen’s Agreement constitutes meaning, this response makes sense. Because there is no way of enforcing such an agreement, except through personal self-restraint and regard for other’s rights under the agreement, the agreement becomes a perfect vehicle by which to assess and discuss another man’s character. Being judged, in the court of public opinion, to have breached an agreement leaves a man beyond the pale; he has abdicated from the world of gentlemanly persons

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7 The fisherman was stretching the interpretation of the agreement pertaining to prawn fishing, suggesting that his father’s and grandfather’s use was to be included as a basis for entitlement there. As I will go on to explain, his interpretation was not widely agreed upon.
and can no longer be dealt with as a member of that class. A man can withdraw from such a person, his pride intact, knowing that the other man will be judged by his actions.

These stories concerning the breaking of agreements are replete with concerns about the inherent equality between fishermen, voiced in notions of fair-play, decency and restraint or lack thereof. From these stories it is apparent that Gentlemen’s Agreements provide a space and a language by which offenders can be judged according to the standard of the gentleman. The stories draw on aspects from the traditional British discourse of the ‘gentleman’, rather than replicating it entirely (see, for example, Collins 2002; Gillingham 2002). In using this value-laden term fishermen are able to harness the powerful moral language that accompanies it, and in this way, they are able to pass judgement upon one another’s actions by reference to this apparently virtuous and supposedly neutral standard.

While having dinner with Alyssa one night, she told me how upset she was with a lake fisherman who had taken her husband’s prawn shot that week. This man was known to be ‘greedy’ she said, with indignation and by way of explanation. Alyssa felt her husband had not done anything to deserve the loss and she, herself, experienced the violation as an attack on her family. Alyssa was tacitly invoking the Gentlemen’s Agreement about prawn shots, which says that only after a fisherman has not fished a shot for two consecutive nights does he lose the right to claim that place as his own. The greedy man had not abided by this agreement.

Later, Alyssa’s husband David, told me how he would respond to the theft. He said he would have a chat to Hugh about what had happened using some strong language to explain just what he thought about Donald, the man who had taken his prawn shot. He went on to explain that Hugh, who regularly spoke to Donald while prawn fishing, was bound to pass these ‘thoughts’ on. He added that this indirect criticism was the best way to chastise Donald and to ensure that he behaved appropriately in the future. David’s approach sought to open discussion of Donald’s behaviour and leave it available for
public censure. The approach seemed to work because David got back his prawn shot and was not disturbed by Donald again.

The discourse around Gentlemen’s Agreements, whether being discussed directly or indirectly, concerns right and wrong ways to go about things and is never neutral in its assessment of people who violate agreements. It is noticeable that in each character assessment, or assassination, of those who had violated agreements the wrong-doer was presented as showing no restraint in the pursuit of his own interests. ‘Wrong-doers’ are presented as persons who believe they are entitled to more than their peers and who reject the gentlemanly proposition of inherent equality between fishermen. In that rejection, they deny others the capacity to autonomously seek and negotiate relationships, something I return to later in this section.

Herzfeld’s vivid account of reciprocal sheep-theft among Cretan shepherds similarly explores the effects and affects of conflict. Here, a man’s worth is judged according to, among other things, his ability to accomplish daring, audacious, witty and well-timed, sheep raids on both rivals and prospective allies (Herzfeld 1985; Herzfeld 1990). However, when rivalry spirals out of control, and the cycle of raid and counter-raid becomes untenable, the rival shepherds seek reprieve through the swearing of an oath before a priest and in the presence of a patron Saint. At this point, the putative victim seeks an avowal from the accused, regardless of the truth, that he did not steal the sheep (Herzfeld 1990).

The oath creates a temporary arena of conflict resolution, made meaningful through its appeal to divine forces to witness and judge the oath-swearer. Herzfeld (1990:305) explains that the petitioning of particular patron saints is a ‘moral ploy’ because it recalls ‘a time before time in which the balanced perfection of social relations [had] not yet suffered the decay that affects everything human’. The oath, then, momentarily reconstitutes an idealised structural form where men meet as moral equals and engage in a reciprocal exchange (of vows). The oath, however, is also a face-saving strategy because it enables the key parties to avoid any further damage to their dignity and flock
‘in the name of higher truths … [and allows] a rival to escape further retribution without necessarily changing one’s mind about his guilt’ (Herzfeld 1990:311). That is, a wronged man can end a feud – he can back-down – without losing his claim to manhood. The oath enables both men to walk away with a sense of righteousness and pride; one because he has sworn the truth, the other because he has brought the matter to an end while maintaining his opinion. The ritual exchange of vows, argues Herzfeld, brings a return, albeit temporary, to the idealized and normative state of balance and equality. It does this in the same way that the invocation of the Gentlemen’s Agreement allowed the prawn fisherman to walk away from his traditional prawn shot with his pride intact.

Herzfeld goes on to comment that, although sheep theft is a crime that can be prosecuted in a court of law, shepherds are loathe to pursue their claims in these formal state sanctioned arenas because to do so would be to subvert their own values of balance and equality. Subversion would result because, in a court of law, a verdict of culpability is given and the concept of inherent equality between men is disrupted (Herzfeld 1990). In a similar way to Cretan avowals, Gentlemen’s Agreements provide a forum and a language through which to pursue ends other than justice, pronouncements of guilt or disinterested punishments. Formal ‘adjudication can settle particular claims because moots and courts have means to persuade contenders to accept a verdict …’ yet both shepherds and fishermen are aware that ‘they have much less success convincing contenders that they are in the wrong, and they do little or nothing to heal ruptured social relationships or abate anger and contempt’ (Colson 1995:79-80). As Just (Just 1994:909) has commented, ‘smaller well integrated moral communities may feel more benefits are to be derived from restoring damaged social relations than from declaring guilt or innocence …’

A Gentlemen’s Agreement is a way of defining, and thus recognising, talking about, and interacting with, moral equals. It is also, therefore, a way of controlling people. The notion of a Gentlemen’s Agreement points towards an idea of personhood by establishing the basis for the constitution of the kind of persons who people the community at the
Gippsland Lakes. The agreement specifies the kind of person who partakes in, and upholds, these agreements.

In each of the cases described above, where fishermen did not honour various Gentlemen’s Agreements, there was gentle but persistent criticism from other fishermen and their families. Even after two years, one man had not been forgiven for cheating on the mussel quota; he continued to be held to public account and subjected to private ridicule. Being the recipient of persistent, albeit gentle, public condemnation among a small group of men can be trying for even the most thick-skinned. There is, however, a wider context to the censure meted out by fishermen, because public criticism by fishermen of other fishermen is likely to be known in the wider community. In a small rural town, this adds to the effect of initial criticisms.

Fishermen feel the sting of ostracism from their peers and from members of the wider community – retired fishermen and their family members and friends, ocean fishermen and their family and friends and others. Conversely, the opinions of fishermen about a particular fisherman’s character are informed by his conduct in the wider community. Thus, the Gentlemen’s Agreements provide one forum through which fishermen may judge each other’s mettle, but it is not the only source of evidence. I give the following examples, unrelated to Gentlemen’s Agreements, to further illustrate the mundane ways in which local opinion can impact upon people’s lives and their decisions regarding interpersonal relationships.

In a number of stories it was the supermarket that loomed large as the place where ostracism came into force. One woman recalled how her father had been the brunt of much, she claimed unfounded, criticism. She told me how upset her mother had been at having to tolerate the ‘whispering in the aisles’ at the supermarket from the wives of other fishermen who were saying ‘that’s the one [whose husband] is fishing illegally’. Similarly, the president of the fishermen’s association once said, in reference to a discussion about the lack of accountability of fisheries department decision makers, ‘I have to face people at the supermarket if I sell the fishery out!’ By contrast, he suggested,
department officials would be transferred or promoted and would not have to take real (social) responsibility for their decisions to, for example, cancel fishing licences. And I was told of another fisherman, notorious in town for cheating people (including other fishermen), who was so lax in paying his accumulated debt at the supermarket that he suffered the indignity of having signs posted at the check-out that declared ‘No Credit for Tom Watts’.

Along the supermarket aisles, at the fishermen’s cooperative and at the post office, representation and counter-representation of events where *gentlemanliness* was at stake are made. The stolen ‘200 year old’ prawn shot is a case in point. The alleged theft had occurred the year before I had arrived. There were other representations and interpretations of this same event among the fishermen. I was told by several people, after I first heard the story, that what had happened was entirely in keeping with the Gentlemen’s Agreement. The shot had been taken only after it had been vacated for more than two consecutive nights. Other men were empathetic toward the man who had had his ‘traditional’ prawn shot taken but they commented gravely ‘that's the Gentlemen’s Agreement’. In this context a ‘strict’ interpretation of the agreement was made, even from members of ‘old fishing families’, strongly suggesting the value placed upon present action and social commitment, rather than heritage (Kohn 2002), as a mode of evaluating different interpretations of events and, ultimately, as a mode of understanding belonging.

Gippsland Lakes fishermen still seek to minimise social ostracism in their local communities, despite being as cosmopolitan, or more so, as the average Australian citizen, reliant as they are upon external, national and global markets; despite the fact that they have televisions, modems and fax machines; despite the fact that they engage with the world in complex ways at multiple scales of time and space. The local continues to matter. That is, when a fisherman is told by his peers to ‘straighten-up’ he does, to some extent, listen. Fishermen continue to turn-up at their ‘allocated’ prawn shot night after summer night, generally resisting the urge to ‘steal’ someone else’s place, even if, for some reason or another, their neighbour’s shot becomes more productive than their own.
**Gentlemen and Negotiation**

I have described how, when fishermen fail to meet the expectations of existing Gentlemen’s Agreements they can be met with censure that reverberates within and beyond the community of fishermen. But although situations of conflict arise frequently they are rarely met with the direct invocation of a Gentlemen’s Agreement. Curiously, after having explained some Gentlemen’s Agreements, and explained what they were intended to achieve, fishermen were often appalled by my next question – ‘when was the last time you tossed a coin for a shot?’ Their incredulous responses were along the lines of ‘I’d never want a shot that much! I can’t guarantee there will be fish there, I’d always just go somewhere else’ or ‘if a guy wants it that much, he can have it!’ I certainly never heard of, or witnessed, a fisherman stating something along the lines of ‘this is my place in terms of our Gentlemen’s Agreement, so stay away!’ The fishermen were suggesting that the particular stipulations of an Agreement were not the main point of the agreements in the first place. It was the values that the agreements engendered, and what could be done with them, that counted.

While out fishing with Russell I asked how the Gentlemen’s Agreements work. Russell, by way of explanation, said that Hugh would not mind if Russell fished in his fishing place – even if Hugh had been using it for a number of weeks – because, as Russell explained, ‘Hugh knows me’. Since everyone fishing the lakes knows everyone else, Russell was actually pointing out that it was who one is, and the potential to negotiate based on this knowledge, that is the crucial element of the Agreement, and not the agreement itself. When Russell commented that ‘Hugh knows me’ he was doubtless referring to earlier times when Russell had fished alongside Hugh without causing too much inconvenience. They have established a working rapport. And, thus, it was by not invoking the Gentlemen’s Agreement that both Russell and Hugh recognise each other as moral equals and, therefore, as gentlemen.
Just as the Agreements identify the kind of person – a gentleman – considered to be an appropriate party to the Agreement, they also point to ways by which rules codified by the agreement can be negotiated. It is the talk and expectations that surround and infuse the notion of the Gentlemen’s Agreement – talk concerning fairness, restraint and equality – that establishes the way by which its strictures can be overcome in each particular case. Fishermen are loathe to invoke their rights to place through direct recourse to the Gentlemen’s Agreement, because recourse to such ideals means that both parties have failed in their pursuit of fairness, equality and restraint. By having to invoke the agreement they have failed to meet that standard of personhood, namely, the gentleman, that the agreements signal as valued in the first place.

On a number of occasions one anthropologically-minded fisherman pointed out to me that I had come at the wrong time, because in years when the rivers flow ‘things get pretty interesting up at the river mouths’. He meant that in such years I would see many more skirmishes between fishermen over fishing places. He was referring to times when the idiom of the Gentlemen’s Agreement had great importance, because at these times negotiations for fishing places could be heated. The closest I ever came to such an event was on a fishing trip to the mouth of a river which was flowing after recent rainfall. Shaun explained, excitedly and amused, as we waited for the sun to set, that I might see ‘a bit of action’ when we got there. He was looking forward to this rare opportunity to show a bit of front to anyone that questioned his right to be there.

The friction Shaun anticipated was understood in terms of rights to place given by the mesh-netting Gentlemen’s Agreement. Significantly, however, it emerged that Shaun had already discussed his fishing plans with one man he knew to have prior claims to the area through years of continual use\(^8\). And, before he set his nets that evening, Shaun also discussed his plans with the other man known to have claims to the area. So the action he

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\(^8\) In fact, it should make no difference if Damien and James had been fishing this area for years because, in terms of a literal understanding of the mesh-netting Gentlemen’s Agreement, priority gained through use is ‘reset’ on a weekly basis. As I will discuss in Chapter 6 the more codified rules of entitlement to fishing places that occur in Gentlemen’s Agreements exist in a tension with other, more tacit, understandings of entitlement that I call ‘enskilled entitlement’. Both are subject to the gentlemanly imperative of negotiation and both conceptualizations of entitlement resist the notion that entitlement to fish can be grounded in genealogy.
anticipated as entertainment was communication and negotiation and not the violence he had implied.

Before he left to fish that day, Shaun had spotted one of the men whose territory he planned to fish in, walking his dog. He stopped and spoke to James about his fishing plans. Shaun said although James was ‘not happy’, he had accepted Shaun’s plans. On the water, at the mouth of the river, we approached Damien, the second of the two fishermen with a claim to the area, and asked where he would be setting his nets. Shaun explained that we would set our nets around Damien’s and not intrude on his shots. This was a gruff, rather fraught exchange, with neither man too happy. Shaun, artfully using my presence to further neutralise the interaction, said ‘I was just explaining to Simone that tonight I would ask you where you were setting so I could set around your shots, since these are your grounds’. To this opening gambit, Shaun received a fairly happy although hard-nosed grunt. Shaun went on to say ‘I was telling her that I would have to set a certain distance from your nets so I wouldn’t interfere with the way the fish were travelling …’. This conciliatory nod to Damien’s rights in the area loosened Damien’s tongue further and he commented happily on the big winds forecast the next day. In this way, Shaun was able to fish alongside James and Damien.

Shaun did not fully assert his rights under the mesh-netting Gentlemen’s Agreement. A literal interpretation of this agreement would have allowed Shaun to take the best fishing places in that region regardless of the other’s prior claims. Shaun chose not to do this. There were no skirmishes that evening. Shaun had skilfully negotiated entry to James’ and Damien’s places, avoiding having his nets interfered with or, worse, inciting open conflict. He had done this by acknowledging and accepting the priority of James and Damien in that place, through his indirect request to fish there. He had set the other men’s minds at rest by explaining, through me, how little he was going to inconvenience them and, thus, indirectly appealing to their reasonableness. In effect he was saying if you make reasonable allowances for me I will make reasonable allowances for you; that is, he was implying, through his actions and conversation, that he would not push his luck, either by taking the best fishing places or by staying in their fishing territory too long.
this way, two men’s claims to place deepened and became more complex. And the relationship that existed between all three men, one of equanimity and equality, was confirmed and strengthened under the trying conditions of competition. The energy of the river’s meagre flow had bought them together and created a fresh opportunity to restate and remake the character of their ‘always becoming’ relationship as one of equality and mutual respect. The outcome of the encounter reiterated that some fishermen might have priority in some places, underlying these differences was an essential moral equality.

This vignette follows Gulliver’s classic definition of negotiation where, rather than seeking the judgement of a third party or an outside force, or resorting to violence, disputants ‘explore the nature and extent of their differences and the possibilities open to them, they seek to induce or persuade each other to modify their expectations or requirements, and they search for an outcome that is at least satisfactory enough to both parties’ (Gulliver 1979:pxiii). Gulliver stressed that negotiation is a dynamic process which is given ‘persistence and movement by the basic contradiction between the parties’ conflict and their need for joint action’ (Gulliver 1979:186). He goes on to argue that the nature of jointly agreed upon outcomes in negotiations cannot be predicted, even where apparent power imbalances exist. Gulliver suggests that ‘power’ exists as a potentiality in various forms – economic, physical, political and normative – and that disputants would strategically deploy these according to context. In the encounter outlined above it is the normative values of non-violence, underpinned by the assumption of moral, if not spatial, equality, that largely contributed to the outcome of the negotiation. Shaun could have ignored the prior claims of both men and used a show of force to assert himself there. Yet had he done this he would have been widely and harshly condemned for flaunting, so overtly, a literal interpretation of the Gentleman’s Agreement. Or again, failing to gain Shaun’s co-operation or, worse still, pushing Shaun to outright violence, would have invited criticism of the two defending fishermen because they were unable to secure a workable resolution to the conflict. James, as an older and long-established fisherman, certainly had more economic and political power than Shaun, yet his ability to throw his political weight around, as an office-bearer of the EGEFA, was limited by the normative values of gentlemanliness that he, himself, helped maintain.
The imbalances that exist between Shaun on the one hand, and James and Damian on the other, suggest neither James nor Damien should have accepted the outcomes of the encounter described above. James and Damien were both economically secure, and could have afforded to sacrifice money by interfering with Shaun’s fishing operation (by net-interference, for example) rather than fishing effectively themselves. But this would have entailed unproductive time on the water, and this was more problematic for them. Both were married with families. For them home-life was as important as fishing, and they fished in a way that maximised time spent at home. They could have afforded the loss of money, but not the time it might have taken to fend off Shaun. Shaun, on the other hand, was a younger man, with less money and much to learn, but he had all the time in the world to spend negotiating. In fact this was only the beginning of a stretch of five nights and four days spent working and sleeping on the lake. Shaun had no family expecting him home. Thus, following Gulliver’s point about negotiations, the outcome of this negotiation was not predictable on the basis of economic or physical criteria alone.

Ultimately, the dominance of Damien and James was re-established by the actual process of negotiation. And, similarly, the normative values of what it means to be a fisherperson, that is, a gentleman among gentlemen, was reinforced. The broader nature of Gentlemen’s Agreements as played out on the water, is reminiscent of that described by Williams in her seminal article concerning land ownership amongst Yolngu people of Arnhem Land (Williams 1986). Williams describes the way in which the act of giving permission to use land, although almost always bestowed when requested, is an act of empowerment that reinforces a heterogeneous distribution of rights while acknowledging the essential relationship of mutual personhood between the recipient and the giver. Similarly, Gentlemen’s Agreements serve to highlight the potential for relations of property in the lake but also, by confirming the mutual personhood of those who are bound to them, contain promises that reach beyond their apparent strictures and facilitate negotiation. In this sense, Gentlemen’s Agreements simultaneously deny and reveal the central process to which they contribute, that of generating and maintaining particular values and expectations concerning interpersonal relationships between fishermen.
All negotiations, as well as all the conflicts that precede them, take place in the context of prior encounters between individual men on the lake. Thus, the moments of negotiation observed above must be understood in terms of past experiences between particular individuals and expectations of individuals generated from past encounters. Men are always on the lookout for signs of other fishermen doing the right thing by them or doing the wrong thing by them. For this reason, one can view all interactions between fishermen as kinds of negotiation since there is a sense in which all men meet as potential or as past adversaries.

During a fishing trip, Allen candidly discussed the interactions between himself and two other fishing crews who worked a similar region of the lake. He talked of a recent episode when he had shot his seine net around Larry as the latter hauled in his mesh net. Larry, partly encircled by Allen’s seine net, and obviously feeling humiliated, was not happy and let it be known. Allen retorted that he should be happy because, if anything, his [Allen’s] seine net would frighten the fish into Larry’s net as the latter hauled. Allen’s construction of the episode as ‘helpful’ to Larry belied his intentions, which were to cause offence that would be difficult for Larry to articulate. Regardless of whether Allen handled the moment as adroitly as he explained, his construction of the moment as ‘helpful’, despite its true meaning, presents it as analogous to the case in which Shaun resolved a difficulty while avoiding challenging another fisherman’s autonomy and equality.

Later Allen explained, with distaste, that Larry was the kind of fisherman who would ‘just pass by without a word’ if he saw Allen shooting a net where Larry had recently shot. That is, in Allen’s opinion, Larry did not act as if they were moral equals. And so Allen was quite happy to be extraordinarily disrespectful in the process of catching the morning’s fish. By contrast, Allen felt that Russell did treat him as an equal yet autonomous agent because as Allen explained, Russell would make radio contact if he saw that Allen was about to shoot his net in a place that had been fished too recently for
It is this ability to negotiate, to work towards a mutually beneficial outcome, that fishermen value. Short of this, it is the ability to represent an outcome as mutually beneficial, even when it is not, or to smooth an episode of conflict by joking or clever deflection, that fishermen consider virtuous. All these endeavours seek to uphold the value of the inherent equality and autonomy between fishermen. A man who can do this adeptly and inoffensively is a man to be admired. And it is these styles of interpersonal relating that Gentlemen’s Agreements, through the moral language and the scope for censure that accompanies them, actually enable.

Canny social skills that maintain dialogic play, like those demonstrated by Shaun in his encounters with James and Damien, or as shown by Allen as he provocatively netted Larry, have the effect of maintaining a lightness and movement to competitive relationships so that men do not get weighed down in intractable competitive or violent disputes. In fact, when I recall the way in which fishermen encountered each other on the water, or down at the Co-op, what I remember most is the way in which they enjoyed each other’s company. I vividly recall a fishing trip with Damien that was interrupted one evening by a mobile phone call from Shaun. Damien had been quietly and patiently explaining to me what he was doing and why, when the phone rang. On answering the phone he transformed. Laughing and gesturing, he bellowed jovial insults and recounted shared jokes down the phone line, his voice carrying kilometres out onto the expanse of blue lake. Shaun, who was elsewhere on the lake, had ‘just called for a chat’. Despite their competitive interactions, discussed earlier, these two men clearly relished each other’s company, and it was the fact that they were competitors together that added frisson to their relationship and that saw them sparring about catches and knowledge.

As all the portraits I have offered illustrate, a gentleman is a person who opens up relationships – who engages; he may dispute your claims but he is there, in your face, talking, responsive, seeking ways through the social impasses generated in competitive
encounters. Fishermen are recognised by other fishermen as behaving in socially appropriate ways – as gentlemen – when they seek to use these dialogic strategies. For this reason, being a gentleman is more an ongoing process than a type of person. This kind of sociality, understood as process and not category (see Chapter 2), is reminiscent of what Bird-David has written of so-called band societies, where immediacy of relation is emphasized and people are less subject to the rigid social categories that can position people in other societies without them actually ever having negotiated a relationship with one another (Bird-David 1994; 1995).

Bird-David writes that for the Nayaka, of the Gir Valley (South India), relationships are understood ‘neither by blood ties as in Euro-American culture nor by obligations as in traditional systems’; Rather, it is through being together, sharing the same places and foods, that people understand that they are related. In this conceptualisation of sociality relationships are never ‘pre-given’ but are formed and reformed in the process of everyday life (Bird-David 1994:595). A gentleman treats others, then, and expects to be treated by others at each encounter, as if he were independent of any prior social categories constructed by the family tree or, for that matter, by the structure of the EGEFA. In this way, gentlemanliness emphasises that all persons have an equal potential to become fishermen.

It is this style of interpersonal relating that ‘gentleman talk’ seeks to engender and that leads to what might be called an ‘antagonistic community’; that is, a community formed by the shared thrill of interacting in highly ambiguous, possibly dangerous, conflict situations. In the antagonistic community the ability to maintain equanimity while remaining competitive is highly esteemed. In coming to this conclusion I am indebted to Herzfeld’s exquisite account of the way in which Cretan shepherds ‘steal to befriend’ (1985). Herzfeld’s ethnography illustrates, vividly, how competitiveness between individuals within a community need not block inter-personal relationships but might, with certain constraints, be their well-spring, because this particular style of inter-personal relating actually affirms underlying shared values (Herzfeld 1985).
**Attending to Irony**

Consistent with ‘gentleman talk’ and the value of participatory modes of belonging is an interpretive mode that fishermen employ which seeks out the irony in situations, and invites others to do so too. Because an ironic turn of mind allows for multiple points of view, and because it values inconsistencies and enables indirect criticism in moments of conflict or their aftermath, directing people’s attention towards the irony of a situation is, I argue, often a balm. For this reason, fishermen identify gentlemanly comportment with ironic interpretations of inter-personal relationships.

On a late Sunday afternoon, when the sun was still high, Shaun, Damien and I watch as another man sets his nets more than an hour before sunset – illegally. ‘Well, looks like Russo’s already shot *The Fence*’, remarks Shaun wryly. ‘Yeah, thought he’d stopped that!’ drawls Damien with bone-dry wit, knowing full well that Russell would be shooting *The Fence* before sunset each Sunday for the rest of his life. Both men chuckle, drawing immense pleasure from the shared moment. The little splint of shared irony before work was intended to protect Russell and, through him, the group, left vulnerable under the outsider’s eyes (my own). The comments were intended to indicate to me that his offence was, at worst, funny while, on another level, the moment had the effect of reproving Russell’s behaviour. The situation was made even more amusing by the fact that Russell was well aware of us watching him and most probably, amusing himself by imagining the kinds of remarks being made about him by the watchers. In many ways the joke was shared by the occupants of these different boats. Despite the distance between us, no one was completely unaware of the irony of the situation.

‘Irony is … a capricious term’ but is well described by Baldick as ‘a subtly humorous perception of inconsistency, in which an apparently straightforward statement or event is undermined by its context so as to give it a very different significance’ (Baldick 1990, quoted in Fernandez and Huber 2001:2). In this conversation Damien and Shaun urge me to look for the ironies in the situation before I pass judgement. Lake fishermen are
attentive to the ironic potential in situations and utterances and seek to take advantage of these as a means to build relationships and diffuse tension.

Indeed, Gentlemen’s Agreements are inherently ironic institutions because of the way in which, to ‘work’, their structure (the specific rules of the agreements) must be transcended in practice (negotiation). In more reflective moments fishermen explicitly invite others, including myself, to attend to the irony inherent in Gentlemen’s Agreements. Inevitably, these stories entail humour because, when people mistake Gentlemen’s Agreements for actual agreements – that is, when people take Gentlemen’s Agreements literally – they lead people to ludicrous and, therefore, anti-social behaviour. These stories serve as lessons about how to go about interacting with others in conflict situations and strongly express the way in which fishermen experience literalness as antisocial.

**Failure of Irony 1: Going too Far**

Gentlemen’s Agreements, in their everyday operation, counterintuitively tend towards flexibility because their discursive content invites men to conceptualise, and engage with, each other as particular people whose relationships are based upon the cumulative significance of particular moments spent in each other’s company. Fishermen are alive to the ironic potential of the everyday practice of Gentlemen’s Agreements. And they are happy to alert other fishermen to this structural irony, through the stories they tell, in an effort to edify and amuse. The way in which fishermen emphasise that Gentlemen’s Agreements concern expectations about personhood, rather than being rules themselves, is conveyed in stories told about the farcical outcomes of actually focusing on agreements rather than on being gentlemen. These stories warn fishermen not to go too far in their interpretation and implementation of agreements.

I was told the following story in response to a question about Gentlemen’s Agreements. The man pointed out to me that ‘things could be taken too far’, and told me this story to illustrate what happens when you miss the point of a Gentlemen’s Agreement.
One morning, over fifty years ago, two fishing crews arrived at the same fishing shot at the mouth of the Mitchell River. They tossed a coin, in keeping with the Gentlemen’s Agreement pertaining to this situation, to decide who would shoot the shot. The loser decided he would have a shot after the winner, which is perfectly acceptable. However, as the winner began to set about casting his net his boat began to take on water and, together with the fisherman’s gear, very rapidly sank. The fisherman who had lost the toss was quick to point out that, since the other man’s nets were wet (the definition of having had a shot), it was now his turn to fish there. ‘So he did!’ laughs the raconteur, incredulous that someone could have been so ruthless, so unsympathetic to another man’s difficulties. In telling this story the fisherman is censoring one man’s inability to live ironically. That is, he is admonishing the literalness with which the second fisherman in the story approached the interpretation of Gentlemen’s Agreements.

The story, of course, is intended to show that being a gentleman is a matter of character and not of rule following; to show that it is not necessarily in abiding by an Agreement that one is recognised as being a gentleman. A man is recognised as such when he treats other men as his moral equal. Other stories highlight how silly a man could look if he mistook a Gentlemen’s Agreement for the law or for some other unquestionable and fixed social institution. This is the ironic potential of the Gentlemen’s Agreements: the inconsistency contained within its structure is that it is a rule that engenders normative values best expressed when the rule is broken.

In a more contemporary example I was told by a highly amused Hugh, as we waited for the arrival of prawns on the outgoing tide, how ridiculous things could get when people took Gentlemen’s Agreements ‘too seriously’. He told me how, a few years back, Parks Victoria (the government body that manages national parks in the state of Victoria) had become annoyed with all the paraphernalia that fishermen were leaving around the places where they fished for prawns, including sign’s like Pete’s Prawn Shot. In an effort to
curb this activity Parks Victoria began to take down the signs. Hugh said that one man had gone to great lengths to preserve his sign by climbing up an enormous tree, sign in tow, so as to place it out of reach. ‘Things got pretty crazy’ Hugh recalled; he went on to say that, at around the same time, ‘some clown’ – he did not give names – had even ‘sold’ his prawn shot to an unsuspecting newcomer. Hugh thought this episode was ludicrous, exclaiming ‘you can’t own them, it’s just our agreement – and this poor guy thought he was getting a really great deal, ‘cos the guy told him he was selling him the best prawn shot on the lake!’

James, who had a fair bit to say about Gentlemen’s Agreements, and who was also a connoisseur of the absurd, fondly recalled a story about a fisherman named Heffa – a tall reed-thin man – who had once prowled the waters of the Gippsland Lakes. James said Heffa had carried with him a ‘cheat’s coin’ with heads on both sides. Heffa had apparently often challenged other men for a shot, forcing them to toss for it in accordance with the dictates of one Gentlemen’s Agreement ‘and’, hooted James, ‘some of them never could understand how he could be so lucky!’

Fishermen emphasise the non-literalness of Gentlemen’s Agreements in both narrative and action. Instead, they point to the importance of negotiation, by downplaying the actual rules of engagement and foregrounding the contextual nature of what constitutes gentlemanly behaviour.

Failure of Irony 2: Assault by Boat

‘Ironic utterance operates on many levels of meaning. Such utterances are alive to context and multiple points of view and actively allow for the co-existence of multiple positions,
including the ironist’s own. The following account explores how fishermen use – and sometimes fail to use – the balm of irony in conflict situations.

Competition and indirect conflict can, sometimes, become violent. When I arrived at the Gippsland Lakes, fishermen were still very concerned about a violent incident that had occurred between two fishermen, Tom and Donald, eighteen months earlier. Many fishermen at the Gippsland Lakes and Mallacoota had opinions and concerns that they shared with me about this incident. The primary combatants, however, remained conspicuously silent; it was an episode they would rather forget.

The conflict occurred at a small inlet a couple of hours drive east of the Gippsland Lakes. This small inlet\(^9\) had been a regular, although seasonal, fishing place for many Gippsland Lakes and Mallacoota Inlet fishermen through the past 150 years and, to some extent, was seen as an extension of these larger fishing grounds. The inlet was also the primary fishing ground for Tom Watts and his son Jeff. The Watts family lived an isolated existence in a house overlooking the inlet. They fished there all year round and occasionally fished the Gippsland Lakes at the town of Lakes Entrance where Tom had grown-up. At some times of the year, however, other fishing crews from the towns of Mallacoota and Lakes Entrance came to fish the inlet. Unsurprisingly, the Watts family, and Tom in particular, were known to have a fairly proprietorial view of the inlet, although they normally ‘worked in’ with other fishermen when the latter did arrive to fish.

Different fishermen had different views about the way in which Tom ‘worked in’ with them. Some said he was helpful and had given basic tips about how to fish that particular place, while others said he could be sullen and cunning. Certainly no one was surprised that Tom and Donald had been in a violent stoush because, as one man explained, shaking his head, ‘you know Donald, he pushes’. He meant that Donald had a reputation for directly goading people and, by implication, inviting retaliation.

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\(^9\) This inlet, along with Mallacoota Inlet, has since been closed to commercial fishing and become a recreational-only fishing haven.
On the day in question, so I was told, Tom had been hauling his seine net when Donald, hurled past at full speed, veering provocatively close to Tom’s boat and, in the process, upsetting his net – and, most likely, the fish encircled within. This occurred after weeks of slow-boiling conflict and Tom now exploded with anger; he drove his own boat full speed into Donald’s, tearing the latter’s boat in two and throwing Donald and his deckhand, both clad in waders, into the water. It takes enormous strength to swim in waders, even if they have not already filled with water. If they have filled with water one can only sink and hope to pull them off on the way down. If they have not filled with water, however, waders are impossible to take off once submerged. Tom, despite knowing full well the consequences of wearing waders in deep water, turned around and left the two men, now both likely to drown, for dead. Donald was able to swim to a fragment of the boat. His deckhand had much more difficulty and would have drowned had not some recreational fishermen noticed the commotion and come over to investigate. Later Tom was charged with attempted manslaughter, spent a year in jail and lost his fishing licence on the grounds that he was not ‘a fit and proper person’10. Donald continued to fish.

Initially, and for my benefit, fishermen were quick to condemn Tom. No doubt they wanted to ensure that Tom’s behaviour was, above all, considered unacceptable. Very soon, however, the story became much more nuanced, in terms of blame. It became apparent that fishermen generally felt that both Donald and Tom held some responsibility for what happened. Both men, it was felt, had gone too far; neither had been witty or wise enough to manage the conflict situation. Greg, for instance, said he felt ‘very sorry’ for Tom because to lose your fishing licence was the worst kind of punishment. He felt that Donald had in someway deserved what he got, because he had been so provocative. By way of illustrating how Donald should have acted towards Tom, Greg recalled some of the encounters he himself had had with Tom when fishing the inlet. Tom had sometimes

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10 Interestingly, the introduction of the National Competition Policy has ruled the notion of a ‘fit and proper person’ obsolete because it raises ‘competition policy concerns’ (ACIL Consulting 1999).
watched him fish from his veranda and had taken much pleasure from his mistakes, later coming up to him and saying, with a twinkle in his eye, ‘better luck next time, mate!’

At another time Greg recalled how he had seen ‘sign’\(^\text{11}\) near to where Tom had shot that morning. He wondered why Tom had missed that place and thought to himself, believing that he had found the fish Tom had missed, ‘ha, ha now I’ve got him!’ He did catch fish that day. That night, however, he got a phone call from a fisheries officer who said that he had been notified that Greg had been fishing, illegally, in closed waters. Only then did Greg realise his mistake. He was sure that it was Tom who had called Fisheries and reported him. But instead of being angry with Tom, Greg was amused. There was no harm done, Greg explained, because Tom knew that – since there was no proof of his misdemeanour – Fisheries would only warn him.

Greg appreciated the way in which Tom had ‘attacked’ via another party, both for fishing illegally and being too cocky. He felt that Tom would have been well aware of the arrogance that had informed his decision to fish where he did. Instead of thinking \textit{why did Tom choose not to fish here}, which would have been both modest and intelligent, Greg thought \textit{I have one over Tom now. He missed the sign!} Tom was able to exploit the ironic potential of the situation by pointing out to the unwitting Greg, via a phone call from Fisheries, that he was not as smart as he had thought. The phone call invited Greg to imagine being in Tom’s place, overlooking the inlet watching the day’s events unfold from another perspective. From this position Greg saw himself approach the shot (in illegal waters), find the sign, stop and think about why the fish were still there, decide it was because Tom had missed them, and then (illegally) shoot his net with enthusiasm. Thus, Greg, seeing his actions from the position of an observer, was able to view his last fishing trip with irony. The significance of his actions thereby changed: enthusiasm became arrogance and intelligence became foolishness.

\(^{11}\)This term refers to signs of fish in the area. For instance, nibble marks in shallow sandy places are a sign that bream are sitting off in the deeper water close by.
Greg, unlike Donald, did not take himself too seriously. He approved of the witty way in which Tom had perpetuated their essentially competitive – and potentially conflictive – relationship in a vein of reasonableness that avoided open hostility. Indeed, it takes a particular genre of community relationship to appreciate Tom’s actions as ironic and witty. Another fisherman pithily commented that Tom was ‘not bad, just mad’. He too was, in many ways, an apologist for Tom. He understood why the incident with Donald had happened but felt that self-restraint and intellect would have been the appropriate response to Donald’s provocation – qualities that are, of course, not available to a ‘mad’ person. Again there was a valuing of careful and witty responses to provocation rather than outright violence.

No one, however, could quite bring themselves to laugh about the encounter between Tom and Donald. In discussing this event it was clear that fishermen felt there had been a failure by both parties to take an ironic interpretive outlook on the situation they had generated and, thus, diffuse that situation. There was a general consensus that the two protagonists had not conducted themselves appropriately, had been too literal and directly personal in their approach to negotiating their conflict and, as a result, had failed to live ironically. They had not been able to live with the inconsistencies generated by their encounter.

The story of the cheat’s coin or the sinking boat are in many ways the flipside to the much less humorous, yet no less edifying, story of the near drowning of Donald. All these stories exhibit a concern for the loss of fluidity and flexibility in intersubjective relationships. Mistaking styles of relating to other people for rules of behaviour is a kind of violence that fishermen find as distasteful, and as unfortunate, as uncontrolled physical violence. Fishermen are aware that the discourse of the Gentleman, established to ease conflict situations and provide men with space to walk away from conflict, can be – if taken literally – just as calcifying to interpersonal relationships as violent assault.
Conclusion

Fishermen invoke the concept of the Gentlemen’s Agreement to understand moments of tension and conflict. The agreements provide a language and a practice that encourages men to find resolutions to their disputes. In practice, Gentlemen’s Agreements underpin the value fishermen place upon autonomy and moral equality; in everyday encounters fishermen impress upon each other the kind of comportment they expect of one another in conflict situations. In fraught and ambiguous situations, where recourse to blood metaphors might prove effective and irrefutable means by which to pursue rights to places and justice, fisherman, instead, enjoy and exploit the ironic potential that the structure of these ambiguous moments present. In these moments fishermen thrill to the challenge of resolving disputes by mining the rich contextual phenomena – social, ecological, technical – with which these occasions are replete, for ways to transcend conflict.

The neighbourhood, then, is forged in the ferment of complex competitive interpersonal relationships. It is through an attention to irony, in the context of the contingencies of everyday life on the lake, that fishermen are able to state and restate their way of being – that they are in competition, but in competition together. In this way fishermen emphasise that it is the movement away from family towards fraught, ambiguous encounters that enlivens the world or, as one fisherman stated, ‘sets [it] on fire’ (see Chapter 2).
Chapter 6
Making Themselves at Home: The Conceptualisation of Place and Possession at the Gippsland Lakes

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Personhood and the Social Basis of Property Rights
Birds as Indices of ‘feeling at home’
Objects and Relationships
Feeling at Home
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Introduction

“Yeah that was Skinny’s Shot. You could send him letters there, no worries!”

In the previous chapter I described how Gippsland Lakes fishermen test and negotiate the claims of others. But how is it that they initially come to be associated, and come to associate others, with places in the lake such that they expect to see certain men in certain places? When Russell heads up Lake Victoria on an autumn morning he expects to see a ‘small dot’ in the distance. He knows that this is Hugh, hauling his nets. And, as the comment above suggests, Skinny was so often sighted at one particular place that it was commonly thought of as his second home. The Gippsland Lakes are not empty of social significance because, here, fishermen create meaningful associations with particular places in the course of their working lives. They do so by searching for fish, setting their nets and hauling in their catches. By creating moments of significance in places, telling stories about places, naming places and using those names with each other, fishermen implicate themselves in the lakescape and, in so doing, constitute the lake neighbourhood.

In this chapter, I discuss the notion of ‘making a home for oneself’ as a way of introducing and exploring the process by which places are appropriated at the Gippsland
Lakes. When ‘at home’ in our surrounds we come to expect certain occurrences – a twist here, a dip there and a rustle of leaves above. As we move through these places we come to internalise their contours and to imagine our lives in terms of them. At the same time, we externalise ourselves in the landscape such that the familiar extent of our bodies and social identities melds with our surrounds, enabling us to move easily through our home-places as we pre-empt the ground of this intimate territory. It is the ability to competently fish a particular place, to be sensitive to its contours, to comprehend its breezes, that gives a person entitlement to particular places at the Gippsland Lakes. Here, property rights are conceived in, and recognised by, the corporeal appropriation of one’s surrounds, expressed through a person’s ability to skilfully fish a particular place.

**Personhood and the Social Basis of Property Rights**

The spectre of property rights lay in the subtext of much of the previous chapter, where I showed that a particular kind of moral sensibility emerged in the negotiation of conflict situations, largely in contexts where rights to fishing places were being questioned. If Chapter 5 illustrated just who, at the Gippsland Lakes, could be expected to be able to negotiate rights to places (among other things) then, here, I concentrate on how, exactly, rights to places are conceptualised. Thus, in designating the kind of person who can claim rights at the Gippsland Lakes, the previous chapter serves as the context for the present one.

Gentlemen’s Agreements, like other social institutions, appear straightforward. In reality, however, they entwine social and ecological problems in complex ways and provide groups with a way to proceed given particular socio-ecological contexts. I made the point in the previous chapter that, although Gentlemen’s Agreements are ecological in character, in facilitating a ‘rational’ distribution of fishermen in space according to environmental conditions, they also express a kind of social cosmology. I stressed the socio-ecological complexity of these agreements in order to avoid the conclusion, that these agreements simply concern the distribution of persons in space according to resource availability.
Although the agreements refer only tangentially to the ways in which entitlements to lake space are to be distributed they provide a good example of a property right system precisely because they are primarily concerned with the constitution of the comportment of persons – in this case fishermen – in relation to one another. They are a good example because, as Hann has stressed, property rights are manifestations of social relationships and reflect ‘the distribution of social entitlements’ (Hann 1998:7, emphasis in original). Regimes of property rights that systematically exclude some, but not others, from resources, or that differentially distribute resources between community members, are founded upon common understandings of personhood and sociality, they do not simply describe a relationship between a person and a thing.

Tenure or property, as Ingold (1986) and Hann (1998) have argued, is to be discovered in the ways that groups conceive of the parameters of social distinction. Fences, in other words, are merely physical manifestations of the way in which some societies conceptualise the basis upon which some individuals are distinguished from others. At the Gippsland Lakes, there are ‘no lines in the water’ that might alert an outsider to the existence of a system of ‘lake tenure’. Instead, notions of rights to water space are expressed in less obvious, though still compelling, ways.

The social basis of property rights in Euro-American contexts have been compellingly elucidated by Macfarlane (1998). His thesis highlights the diversity of ways that property can be conceptualised and the ways in which sociality and concepts of personhood always mediate concepts of property rights. He describes the historical process by which the concept of property in pre-industrial Britain became synonymous with rights of exclusive possession invested in the individual and, arguably, influenced the ‘naturalness’ that early-modern social theorists, such as Locke and Hobbes, found in private property.

Macfarlane argues that twelfth and thirteenth century England, unlike the rest of Europe, remained unaffected by the reintroduction of Roman Law and maintained the traits of feudalism enshrined in Feudal Common law. These feudal characteristics, he argued,
were the basis for the eventual establishment of private property, the sine qua non of capitalist states. As Macfarlane explains, the important difference between Feudal Common Law conceptualisations of property and those of Roman Law was that, in the latter,

lawyers saw the thing as property and it could be divided almost ad infinitum … Feudal Lawyers on the other hand saw the thing as indivisible but the rights in it … as infinitely expandable (1998:113).

The process by which Feudal Common Law established such a pervasive system of private ownership is counterintuitive because the more flexible and abstract notion of property rights that existed under Feudal Common Law appeared to actually solidify the nature of, and prioritise, the thing. Feudal Common Law understood that a range of people could have interests in the one thing simultaneously and, also, that such interests were not a part of a person so could be transferred.

By contrast, Roman Law tended not to recognise the infinite transferability and divisibility of interest in property. Claims to property were understood as a natural right of heirs and, for this reason, it was not possible to transfer land freely outside of families. The object of a property claim, because it was identified with a particular person, was, in many ways, only meaningful with reference to that person. In medieval continental Europe, for instance, as a putative owner grew older his claim to his land became weaker, and his sons’ claims became stronger. Eventually the sons’ claims were made manifest by them taking over the land and dividing it among themselves. Objects, in this conceptualisation of property, were always tangled up with particular people or with groups of people.

Significantly, Macfarlane argues that it was the social context of Feudal Common Law that served to direct people’s attention to the material indivisibility of things and, thus, their solidity. This occurred as a result of the declining importance of family continuity, one aspect of which was the emergence of the principle of primogeniture that was applied
to nobility and ordinary people alike. This type of inheritance, as is suggested in the cases of Japan and England, tends towards disinheritance and the notion of the transferability of property outside of the family. It was the ability to transfer and, thus, alienate things from ‘natural’ owners that led to a trend ‘to translate rights of access into objects of exchange’ (Petchesky 1995:389).

The distribution of property under the institution of primogeniture points to the way that the individual takes primacy over the family in such systems, while Gentlemen’s Agreements point to the wider social context in which moral equality and performance of belonging are crucial to understanding the distribution of social entitlements. Thus, the way in which we engage with our surrounds is always mediated by society and premised upon different ways of conceptualising both persons and interpersonal relationships. We come to understand our associations with places and objects in terms of others.

I turn now to illustrate the social basis of entitlements at the Gippsland Lakes. In the following ethnographic portraits I, perhaps unexpectedly, illustrate this point by describing men alone on the water in the company of birds. The men’s commentary on their relationships with birds and, through these creatures, with places in the lake is premised, however, on their understandings of their place within the wider fishing community. These conversations, in fact, index the men’s interrelationships with others in terms of attachments to places.

*Birds as Indices of ‘feeling at home’*

Tim told me that ‘fishermen are like birds’. He made this comment as we moved about Duke Bay, which lay within sight of his lakeside home and was the place where he preferred to fish. Pointing to the eagle soaring above the bay, Tim explained that, like the sea eagles, fishermen had home territories. He knew the boundaries of the eagles’ territories, he said, because he had often seen them fighting at their aerial boundaries. And he said this eagle knew him.
At the end of the morning’s fishing, Tim called to the eagle while waving a golden-eye mullet above his head. The bird flew over, soaring high above us. Tim threw the fish into the air and the bird plunged towards it, at the last moment flying beneath the falling fish and inverting itself to catch the fish in its talons. A few minutes later it came back and Tim threw another fish to it, after which their interaction was complete.

Tim was a ‘newcomer’ to fishing; he had been fishing for only eight years. He was a first generation fisherman, yet he already experienced Duke Bay as a home-like place just as the eagle did. In fact, he saw himself as the eagle’s co-resident in the Bay. Tim was, for want of a better word, proud of his relationship with the eagle. He cherished its attention because, not only did he find the creature awesome and beautiful, but he clearly felt that its attentions were a mark of his association with Duke Bay. He felt that the bird recognised that he belonged to this place.

Shaun had also befriended some birds. After a night spent moored in the rough open water of the lake Shaun announced that we would be heading to a better spot to make ‘our base’. He began to describe the sheltered arm of the lake, telling me that an older fisherman had once used it quite a bit but because the man now fished here less, he himself was ‘taking over the place’. As seeming proof of his association with the place, Shaun told me that he had made friends with a pair of swans.

We had only just set anchor when, sure enough, a pair of swans flew from the far end of the arm fluting their greetings. The birds seemed indifferent to other boats in the area. Shaun fed them some white bread while he told me about the male swan’s previous female partners, reporting gravely that the previous two females must have died because swans mate for life. The male, he said, was the bigger bird, but I do not know how he told the female swans apart.

In these stories, birds appear as indices of a fisherman’s attachment to an area: firstly, through the actual relationship between man and bird that is based on mutual recognition and ritualistic behaviours; and, secondly, through the way in which each man
conceptualises his relationship to the birds as a sign of the attention they, themselves, pay to place. The men understand that the bird’s attentions are a form of acknowledgement of the fact that they also belong – a form of recognition that sets them apart from other people. I mention these bird relationships because, although by no means common, they provide clear signs of the way in which men understand themselves to have become attached to, and associated with, places.

The conceptual associations which the comment ‘fishermen are like birds’ draws upon are instructive. Using the behaviours of birds to metaphorically explore the themes of belonging, attachment and rights of use, these fishermen’s imaginings explore the ways in which the environment may be appropriated. The subtext to these moments illustrates that both Tim and Shaun understand that their intimate knowledge of place is a sign of their difference from other fishermen. For Tim and Shaun, the lake emerges as a place dense with relationships, relationships that distinguish some here and others there. The way in which these men have implicated themselves in these places is, as evident in their musings and actions, socially recognised; it is expected that they will use those places and, like eagles, defend them against others.

Significantly, it is because fishermen conceptualise sociality as premised upon participation, and upon performance expressed through the notion of ‘becoming a fisherman’, that they understand that they are entitled to use particular places. Through their actions it is understood that they have distinguished themselves there in particular, socially recognised, ways. These stories are also clearly redolent of the way in which fishermen conceptualise their relationship to the object of a property right claim. In the following section I explore the notion of ‘feeling at home’ to better explain the way in which property rights emerge in dyadic form as person-acting-in-setting. It will become clear that knowledge of ‘how to’ irrevocably implicates a person in their setting and establishes the basis upon which right to place can be recognised.
Feeling at Home

‘Don’t worry James, they’re not going to touch your little pool!’
‘Those guys never leave sight of the pub when they’re fishing.’
‘You can tell I’m an old man cos I work the quiet corners’

‘Feeling at home somewhere’, a state of proficiency that comes via learning and experience, may well be the primordial ground of possession which, in certain circumstances, turns a sense of belonging into a sense of belonging to or ownership (Edwards and Strathern 2000). We might describe a person as ‘feeling at home somewhere’, or say that he or she has ‘made a place for himself/herself’, to suggest that somehow his or her relationship to that place has changed as time has passed. For example, when I say that I feel ‘at home’ in many places in Australia, what I mean is that the feeling I associate with those places – a feeling of being orientated – is just like the feeling I have when I am at my ‘real’ home in Melbourne, Australia. I know what to do if something goes wrong and will be able to recognise something amiss if it occurs. The above quotations about associations with fishing places illustrate the ways in which fishermen think of the lake as home-like, if not as an extension of their home. They show also that this everyday notion is not just a personal sensibility but, rather, is a community-wide understanding of the way in which people are implicated in places; fishermen recognise the ‘home’ places of others. In their relationships with birds, fishermen express a similar understanding of the way in which they have come to be associated with a place. It is through their particular knowledge of how to engage a place, to read its happenings and quirks, that fishermen understand that they have come to make themselves at home there.

The use of the word ‘home’ in academic (Ward 2003), as well as lay, understandings is more often than not metaphorical; it does not necessarily refer to the shelter where one

1 All fishermen have spent many consecutive days working on the lake – sleeping on their boats, or camping on the shores of the lake when the day’s work is done. Many live in houses that directly overlook the lake or live a few hundred metres from its shores. At times when the lake flooded water literally lapped at the doors of some of their homes.
cooks and sleeps. Commonplace understandings of the relationship between people and places (in Euro-American contexts) that are evoked by the phrase ‘feeling at home’, appeal to the conceptual links that exist between place, emotion, learning, knowledge and, I argue, possessiveness. To feel ‘at home’ somewhere, or to ‘make a place for oneself’, describe processes that begin with discomfort and lead to ease, competency and pleasure. There is good reason to argue that the ability to make a ‘home-place’ for oneself is a pan-human process.

As we become orientated in a place we learn to competently use it, pass through it, read it and expect happenings there. And thus we become, to an extent, attached to it. We learn to associate ourselves with that place by feeling change as we pass through it to lesser-known places. Likewise, others may begin to associate a place with our presence, and expect our presence as a likely ‘happening’ in that place. The observation that we ‘feel at home’ points to the sensual-emotional dimensions of this processual attachment to places, indicating the way in which place entails perceiving, thinking bodies (Casey 1996; Tilley 1994). The phrase ‘to feel at home’ describes knowledge, by way of sensual exploration and experience, of place. Thus, when we say ‘I feel at home’ we invoke the sensual ever-learning-body-in-its-surrounds.

Place is no longer understood as the static backdrop once imagined to be the setting of social life. It is now generally understood as a relational field, constituted by human agents in the course of everyday life. It is through individual and collective movements polarised by particular intentions, desires and social positions that places emerge around us (Basso 1996; Casey 1996; Hirsch 1995; Patterson 2002; Ward 2003). Casey has recognised that ‘places gather things in their midst – where “things” connote various animate and inanimate entities … including experiences and histories, even languages and thought’ (1996:24). Places do not gather these things randomly; they hold them in such a way that thinking of, or encountering, specific places evokes expectations, orientations, memories, moods and dispositions that are particular to each of us. It is by dwelling, fighting and fishing in places that the particular dimensions (topological, environmental, social) of these places emerge. And it is by naming them, longing for
them and imagining them that we represent places to ourselves and others and, in so doing, leave traces of particular experiences in those places.

Knowing the particular dimensions of places, and thus knowing ‘how to go on’ (Tilley 1994:26), forms part of the way in which people come to be associated with, even implicated in, places. Time spent in places, and knowledge gleaned through bodily acquaintance with the physical dimensions of locales, ‘give rise to a feeling of belonging, rootedness and a familiarity, which is not born just out of knowledge, but of concern that provides ontological security’ (Tilley 1994:26, emphasis in original).

Read (2000) has explored place-making in his book *Belonging: Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership*. He addresses the important question: what happens when people from entirely different cultural backgrounds, and thus place-making epistemologies, love the same land? Read’s exploration of migrant, farmer, Aboriginal and literary narratives of places in the Australian landscape suggests that there is a universal sensual-emotional basis for people’s sense of identification with place that is grounded in a sense of concernful belonging.

Concern, he shows, can invite, but does not need to entail, the corrosive aspects of possessiveness that may lead to the desire to exclude others. Fundamentally, Read implies that Australian people’s relationship to the landscape is always particular, wrought through contact and time spent in place and not necessarily reliant on the exclusion of others. He suggests there is nothing absolute about these relationships to land. Exclusion of others can be understood as an aspect of a basic relationship human beings have to places only in as much as it is the fate of all of us to know the world only as ourselves and not as anyone else.

The subjective and idiosyncratic way in which familiarity is wrought, which has its basis in a personal embodied perspective on the world, ensures that places come into being in different ways for different people. An elderly fisherman does not like to fish the exposed shore, for instance, since his balance is not as good as it once was. For a younger
fisherman, however, an expanse of rough water poses little challenge. For a novice fisherman, like Simmo, one place seems as good as another to set a flathead net when a light easterly wind is forecast. For a more skilful fisherman, experience has transformed his understanding of some places with regard to flathead nets and wind direction. A fishing place in the same geographical location is entirely different for each man. Thus, when Allen uses his modified fishing net in the same place as one of his competitors his interaction with that place is very different. He can say, quite logically, that he and his competitor are fishing different places, despite fishing at the same geographical location. Thus, the object (place) of a property right claim is, to some extent, shaped according to who we are and what we are doing.

**Objects and Relationships**

The relations that are imagined to exist between a ‘thing’ and those who hold rights in it are many and varied across the world. Barnard and Woodburn (1991) suggest that the most common forms of right have been the rights of possession, use and disposal. The ways in which these relationships are manifest in particular socio-cultural settings affects, to some extent, the way in which the objects of these rights are understood. In most industrialised societies the archetypal expression of property right is an exclusive, and private, relationship between the owner and the object of this right. This particular kind of relationship between possessor and possessed has come to emphasise the ‘thingyness’ of property (Hann 1998) in the ways outlined by Macfarlane (1998). Rights of possession may, however, have more abstract qualities that emphasise exclusivity not in terms of practical contact with the object of property but in terms of identification with that object. This is particularly true of Australian Aboriginal conceptualisations of property rights in land where physical exclusion of non-owners is rare (Rigsby 1998).

Recent public anxiety over whether or not embryos and cell lines should be considered ‘objects’ or ‘subjects’ for the purposes of making property determinations has highlighted the way in which concepts of property right and ownership in Euro-American societies draw attention to the ‘thingyness’ of property. Pottage (2004:4) points out that aspects of
Roman legal tradition still inflect our conceptualisation of society through the idea of a basic division in the world between persons and things – *Persona* and *Res*. The task, for a legal critique of property, was to identify which category – person or thing – an entity belonged to. It has become clear, however, particularly since the recognition of hybrids and cyborgs, that the categories themselves do not represent an ‘embedded feature of the world’ but actually emerge in the processes of legal manoeuvring (Pottage 2004, Strathern 1995). The division is clear in both Roman and Common Law examples given by Macfarlane (1998). And yet, as outlined above, *Res* is clearly an aspect of particular *Persona* for the Roman legal institution illustrating the way in which the two categories are already unstable. Legal institutions in Euro-American settings now find themselves making determinations on whether embryos are persons or things, or whether gametes should be treated as persons or things, in family law disputes. ‘Now, the problem is that humans are neither person nor thing, or simultaneously person and thing, so that the law quite literally makes the difference’ (Pottage 2004:5 emphasis in original).

The social anxieties that emerge in the process of these kinds of determinations are due to the way in which Euro-American formulations of property rights often objectify, discipline and decontextualise objects of such rights, and transform them into graspable, transferable, inert objects. It is just this kind of thinking that has left many feminists apprehensive about the claim that a woman can “own her body”, as if it were a lump extractable from the self, society and place – and rendered entirely independent of others (Petchensky 1995). In general Euro-American formulations of property rights tend to suppress the character of the object and, at the same time, elide the social institutions that simultaneously produce owners and the excluded. In these societies, the object of proprietorial rights becomes subject to, rather than constitutive of, the formulation of rights.

At the Gippsland Lakes, fishermen take part in a tenure system designated by the nation state that defines property rights in the manner common to most Euro-American societies. As participants in this ‘social contract’, fishermen assume that because of their capital investment, only they can use or dispose of their fishing gear or catch; that is, they
assume that their rights in property are exclusive and private. A person who holds a licence to fish the Gippsland Lakes must adhere, by law, to certain spatial and temporal limits, the most important of which are as follows: first, fishermen are not allowed to fish in rivers or any other tributary of the lake system; secondly, licence holders may not fish within 400 m of a river mouth; lastly, all nets must be out of the water by 12 noon Friday and cannot be set again until an hour before sunset on Sunday.

The assumptions contained within these licensing arrangements have two decontextualising effects that are classically associated with property right systems in Euro-American societies. In the first place, access licences, by excluding rivers and tributaries from their purview, sever the lake system from its ecological context because they pertain only to a particular part of the lake system – the 360 square kilometres of water at the bottom of the catchment. This arrangement means that fishermen, having access rights only to waters within 400m of the river mouths, have little or no statutory rights to influence decisions concerning the fate of the enormous amount of water in the upper and middle catchment despite the fact that the quality and flow of these waters has a significant impact upon fish populations in the lake.

In addition, the fact that anyone who can afford to buy a licence can enter the fishery completely undermines the fishermen’s own assumptions about the very particular way in which one comes to belong at the Gippsland Lakes. In this way, licensing arrangements established by government ensure that the object of property rights – the lake system – has a minimal influence upon the kinds of rights and duties that are brought to bear upon it. In effect, these entitlement arrangements create an artificial entity that is cut-off from the landscape that surrounds it, and the community that uses it.

Embryos, cells and Lake systems seem to defy notions of property rights due to their apparent dynamism and permeability. Such defiance, however, is not necessarily the purview of a special class of ‘things’. Instead, I suggest that across cultures, and through time, systems of property rights can differentially capture and suppress the various characteristics of the things to which they pertain and do so according to ideological
purposes, needs and interpretations. Certainly, the extensive literature on systems of
rights, rules and responsibilities that guide the social appropriation of natural resources
suggests, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the character of the resource itself often shapes the
bundle of rights and duties that are brought to bear upon it.

The licencing arrangements for the Gippsland Lakes fishery that are sanctioned by the
Victorian government draw on concepts of sociality and ownership that have a long
history in Euro-American societies. In the context of the everyday practice of fishing at
the Gippsland Lakes, however, more localised ways of conceptualising sociality come
into play and form the basis of very different ways of conceptualising rights to place.
This regime, as I will explain, is embedded in the local environment and, unlike the
notion of ownership underwritten by the state does not suppress but, rather, reflects
qualities of the local environment – the object of the property right.

The way in which Gippsland Lakes fishermen actually conceptualise property rights in
places lies beyond the purview of the nation state in that it embraces the social and
ecological context in which those rights are produced. I will begin to explore the concepts
that are manifest in these use right frameworks by way of a story told to me by an older
Lakes Entrance fisherman. The story concerns a snag; that is, a submerged log or tree.

Allen told me the following story when I asked ‘how many fishing places do you know?’
He did not answer my question directly because it was not the right kind of question to
ask. The assumption that framed my question implied that a person can know ‘things’ in
the same sense that he or she can buy and own ‘things’. I assumed, unlike Allen, that
places are entities that exist separately to a person’s experiences in them and their
knowledge of them, and that, as such, places can be quantified and accumulated. Instead,
Allen began cryptically by commenting that he had knowledge of some places that was
much better than that of other men …
On one occasion, Allen came across a big school of bream on his depth sounder. The fish were stationary, just behind Raymond Island, opposite the town of Paynesville. He decided that he would take the shot even though he had never attempted to fish there before.

Half-way through winching the net back into the boat, he realised that it had become caught on a snag. He tried to reverse off it but the net had caught fast. Knowing his $10,000 net would now be ruined beyond repair, he thought well since I’ve got nothing to lose, I’ll see if I can tow the whole lot out. He succeeded in this and found that he had netted an entire tree. After an enormous effort he finally pulled the whole thing up onto the near-by bank, and was relieved to find that he wasn’t the only one to have had a go; the huge snag was covered in old nets of many different colours and ages.

The next day he came back to the newly cleared spot because he knew, bream being creatures of habit, that it was likely that the fish would still be there in the deep water, snag or no snag. That day he caught the school of bream, and the money he received almost exceeded the cost of his lost net.

Not long afterwards, a local Painesville fisherman, accosted him as he was about to shoot his net in this same place. In a high-pitched voice that Allen found hilarious and memorable, the Paynesville man urgently warned him that he would never make the shot because there was a huge snag in the water on which he, himself, had lost many nets. ‘Oh, right’ said Allen playing dumb ‘I don’t seem to be having any trouble here’. The whole conversation, he recalled gleefully, was proceeding within sight of the infamous snag adorned with the colourful remnants of the duped man’s nets. The local fisherman watched, mystified, as the other pulled in his net without a scratch.
From then on, whenever the Paynesville fisherman saw this place being fished he expressed his disbelief. Apparently he never attempted to fish there again, despite what he had seen with his own eyes. The snag remained on the opposite bank, a testament to the peculiarity of the relationship between people and places.

At the beginning of the narrative the Lakes Entrance fisherman understands himself to be an interloper to the area. By the end of the narrative his outsider status had been eroded. Thus, rights to fishing places begin as potentials, and can be increasingly strengthened in each instance of the successful use of that place. The story of “The Snag” shows that rights in particular places are recognised to exist when a person can demonstrate an ability to successfully use that place. The deception of the Paynesville fisherman by the Lakes Entrance fisherman, and the former’s continued credulity, could have occurred only within a context where it was understood that fishing knowledge, and the rights that accrued from it, could not be abstracted from a particular fisherman’s engagement with his environment. If it was not the case that doing was more important than seeing or hearing, then the credulous onlooker would surely have had a go.

In the narrative of “The Snag” the fisherman and his environment meld, each into the other, attesting to a conceptualization of possession that flows from one’s ability to engage a place in the lake like no one else, tracing out an achievement immanent in the person and their environment. Like Bateson’s blind man and his stick, no boundary is understood to exist between the mind and its environment (2000:318). The fisherman’s body/mind is understood by both the fisherman and the onlooker, to be ‘out there in the world’. So too, is his claim to that world. The formulation of rights to place, in this case, point to both the environment and the person to whom the claim relates; as such, these ways of formulating rights to places embed particular subjects in particular locales.

In a similar way, when fishermen are with birds in particular places a whole cluster of reinforcing identifications emerge from the triad fisherman-with-birds-together-in-place. When Shaun greets the two resident swans of Breakfast Arm with a little bread, or when
Tim calls the sea eagle to his boat both men through the inter-agentive relationships they pursue, extend themselves into their surrounds and by this movement simultaneously appropriate their surrounds.

The interactive constitution of ownership that exists at the Gippsland Lakes sits uneasily alongside the overarching Euro-American legal concepts of property rights institutionalised by the Australian Nation. The latter concepts tend to focus on the object of those rights and not on the field of relations in which that object inheres. The object is thus ‘magically’ construed as both apart from the society in which it derives meaning, and apart from the identity and capacities of the person who makes the claim. This formulation elides the fact that the phenomenon of ‘property, is actually the expression of a network of social relations that governs the conduct of people with respect to the use and disposition of things’ (Hobel quoted in, Hann 1998:4).

Humphrey (2002:69) writes that ‘the massive presence of private property inflects the possibilities available for imagining possession’. Looking beyond state-sanctioned property rights regimes within Euro-American societies it is clear that divisions between persons and things need not form the basis for conceptualising possession. Indeed, as I have discussed, at the Gippsland Lake, the conceptualisation of ownership merges persons with things by assuming that the-person-acting-in-setting can be understood as both the possessed and the possessor.

To illustrate her point Humphrey explains that, for Mongolians, it is understood that in death the soul seeks out one particular object in which to dwell – the ‘refuge object’. It is here that the deceased attempts to cling to his or her former life. The deceased person’s family must determine which object this is. It is usually a mundane but intimate thing that the deceased used every day of their life – a thimble or a glasses case, perhaps. Once the determination is made, the burdened object is given away to a stranger, to encourage the detachment of the deceased’s soul. The giving away enables the soul to let go of its former life, and self, and to await reincarnation.
The Mongolian conceptualisation of property imagines objects *through* their associations with people, much in the way that, under Roman Law, as Macfarlane (1998) explained, land could never be alienated from family members since it was a part of their person rather than being attached to their person. Thus, within the Mongolian and ancient Roman contexts, extracting an object from one individual, and attaching it indiscriminately to another, is inconceivable because the possessed object is understood as being a part of the person who possessed it and, as such, is already embedded in a web of social relationships. In these examples, therefore, objects are identified with an individual and are understood to always have been a part of them.

In their work, Humphrey (2002) and Read (2000) have explored what might be understood as the benevolent side of possession, where concern, attachment and knowledge of, for example, a personal object, a landscape, or a building turn into identification with that thing. Humphrey (2002:65) argues for an alternative epistemology of possession imagined ‘more in terms of human attachment to objects than as exclusionary relations *vis-à-vis* other owners’. Although she makes an important point, I would argue that a property right system that emphasises that rights emerge from a person-acting-in-setting is still exclusionary, though not in an arbitrary manner. In such a system, rights of use are never transferable, because of the way in which people and the objects of possession constitute each other.

*Ownership and Knowledge*

As the previous discussion has illustrated, there is a relationship between knowledge and ownership. For the Evenki, a reindeer herding people from Siberia, ownership is experienced as entitlement through knowledge. An Evenki person must be knowledgeable to seize the opportunities the land offers. When an opportunity presents itself to a particular knowledgeable Evenki person it is always unique because it is understood to belong to the person for whom it is realised (Anderson 1998).
Here, ownership points to the attributes of the person – the history of their hard won knowledge gained through particular experiences – and of their environment. Evenki presume that people and aspects of their surrounds are linked because of the way in which the unique abilities of the person foreground certain aspects of the environment. Thus, entitlement to cut down a tree and use its wood is given when that tree, with all its particular qualities, stands out to you.

Anderson writes that:

> Evenki notions of appropriation suggest that in order to understand the legitimate entitlement of a person to land, one must consider how that person attends to the landscape. A proper Evenki entitlement reflects not only a lifetime of contact with territory but a proper way of knowing all sentient persons on that landscape (1998:82).

Anderson notes that attempts, by the Russian State, to de-collectivize land tenure and encourage private land ownership are very much at odds with the way in which Evenki conceptualise their environment and their interactions with it. Significantly, the Evenki are resisting the central government’s attempts to represent the notion of property in land as being like ‘a thing’ (1998:67). For Evenki, privatization is experienced as theft because a person’s ability to achieve ‘enskilled entitlement’ is being eroded (1998:65). The concept of privatization suggests that any person can possess any place.

Significantly, it is only through ‘competent performance of one’s knowledge’ that a person becomes ‘entitled to enter into a relationship with the land as an independent person’ (Anderson 1998:70). Thus, here, possessing is a sign of status, a sign of being a skilled and independent person. This complements Humphrey’s, suggestion in relation to Mongolian concepts of property, that personal possessions may be not so much an expression of a desire to surpass others as a desire for social recognition, a desire that arises ‘not out of vanity, but because our accession to humanity consists in the acknowledgement we accord one and other’ (2002:69). The notion of exclusion – so much a part of the Euro-American definition of property – becomes, in some sense, a
moot point in these considerations because of the way in which who you are, and what you can do, specifies what belongs to you. In this sense associations between the possessed and the possessor are never arbitrary in the same way that they are under capitalism.

**Mesh Netting with Damien and his Father**

In the following ethnographic ‘miniatures’ I illustrate the merging of knowledge and place, and the subsequent feelings of, and recognition of, possession at the Gippsland Lakes. Just as the stories concerning birds and snags illustrated, these portraits point to a kind of property right that is produced when knowledge of how to competently fish a place is transformed into a right to fish that place free from interference.

Damien talks to his father about what happened at his daughter’s play-group that day as we drive to the boats. Damien and his father Patto move on to talking about the weather forecast for tonight. Both feel that there will not be too much wind, despite the fact that the sky looks black with rain. Father and son moor their boats in the same place. They work contiguous regions in the lake and split their income, and have done so since Damien began fishing over five years ago. Patto works a smaller, though probably more lucrative area, which Damien calls ‘the Old Man’s sheltered work-shop’, since it is a calm sheltered bay.

Patto has told me proudly that Damien himself learnt all he knows about fishing. I have argued that, in part, comments of this sort should be understood as downplaying traditionalist discourses, which would stress the importance of family in the production of fishing ability, in favour of discourses that value participation and performance. It is true, however, that Damien has learnt an enormous amount about the small region (about 10 km$^2$) that he consistently fishes.

Damien tells me that one of the important benefits of always working the same area is that you actually know when and how shots are producing. Shots are highly localised
and, therefore, knowledge of ‘what’s going on in a place’ are similarly localised. He tells me, ‘you might have people like Eddie come and flog [steal] your shots but they’d only be able to get two bins [of fish] off it when I can get eight. You have to know how to shoot a shot. It’s local knowledge.’

The conceptualisation of possession at the Gippsland Lakes is a function of, and therefore merges with, knowledge. For Damien, and as acknowledged by other fishermen, his shots are understood as being ‘flogged’ when another man, who is less knowledgeable, tries to fish the area. The thief is shown to be the man least competitive in an area, which means that less knowledgeable men are often on the back-foot when attempting to fish in places identified with another. It is Eddie who, when hoping to effectively and ‘peacefully’ fish in this area, asks Damien which shots he is working that week, and not the other way around.

The old fishing adage ‘you can’t catch yesterday’s fish’ is a common explanation of why it is folly, when you hear other men are catching fish, to follow them and ‘flog their shots’. The aphorism captures fishermen’s sense that knowledge is always incomplete and that fishing grounds change from one day to the next. It alerts men to the value placed upon independent and localised learning. ‘But’, says Damien, when analysing this received wisdom ‘you can catch yesterday’s fish if you know how!’

Damien catches fish by returning to places that are productive. By fishing intensively in a small region he is able to learn how fish are using that area in particular weeks and in particular seasons. Importantly, he will know which places have been fished and when. Another fisherman coming into ‘his area’ will not know which shots have been fished or how much time it will take before fish re-establish at a particular place. All the things an intruder doesn’t know about a place ensure that he cannot perform ownership there.

Damien has made particular kinds of mesh nets to fish particular places. For example, he has made a net that, when set in the water, reaches to – but not beyond – the sharp drop-off where the lake turns from shallow to very deep. Fish lay just off the shallow in the
deeper water by day and swim onto the shallows at night to forage. Fishermen generally set nets to ensure that one end falls off into the deeper water, so that when the fish swim onto the shallows they end up following the line of the net, eventually becoming panicked in its twists and turns and, finally, enmeshed. But other creatures also come up from the drop-off; these include spider crabs that, when present in large numbers, infest nets and slow down the process of extracting fish. In one particular place Damien knows that, because of the way the lake bed is shaped, fish regularly follow a particular route from the deeper water. Here, he can set his special short net and avoid an infestation of spider crabs. This net, developed through knowledge of place, makes Damien more efficient and enables him to catch more fish than those who are less familiar with this place.

As Lave (1993:8) has commented, ‘knowledge and learning [are] distributed throughout the complex structure of persons-acting-in-setting’. In Damien’s case, and as illustrated by the story of “the Snag”, knowledge of particular places is found to be distributed across nets and bodies, among other things. That is, particular places are found to be associated with particular bodies that use particular nets. The efficacy of these associations, and their recognition as relationships of ‘enskilled entitlement’, are evident in the unelaborated substance of Gentlemen’s Agreements that contain the injunction ‘stay away’ from places that other men use. It is also seen in the notion that it is folly for the unknowledgeable to pursue ‘yesterday’s catch’: Only men who ‘know’ can, and deserve to, catch ‘yesterday’s fish’.

Knowledge of how, and where, to fish is contextual. Because this kind of knowledge is processual, or located in the moment, it cannot be understood apart from particular human-environment interactions. Places, therefore, invoke particular bodies in motion while particular bodies in motion point to certain places. Fishermen need only hear the sound of a motor, or see a dot-like figure on the horizon, to confidently say ‘oh, looks like Tim’s working Little Spoony this week’. The referential nature of bodies in places is a kind of possessive action. So to be working a place competently and frequently is to be recognised as claiming that place.
Russell’s Map

Among fishermen of the Gippsland Lakes performance of ‘know how’ and claims to ownership are interchangeable. But knowledge claims, or the performance of knowing how to use a place, may take on diverse forms. On a fishing trip one day I asked where we would be going. Russell pulled out a small, tattered and soggy notebook and flipped it open to a page on which was drawn, in wavering lines, what appeared to be a map of a fishing shot. Russell said his father had drawn it for him. He said we would be heading up to Wallace Channel to ‘check out’ this shot because he thought it might be time for the garfish to show up in the vicinity. Depicted in the map was what appeared to be the locations of such things as gutters, sand bars, snags, an old fence and other submerged objects. The intriguing little map, Russell explained, was a result of decades of hard work that saw his father rip many seine nets in order to get an accurate picture of what lay below in the murky depths. Russell commented proudly ‘we know all the shots in Wallace Channel’.

The map was a valuable ‘piece’ of knowledge. If this little treasure map fell into the wrong hands, however, it would be of no value to the thief since it was not made for just anyone. It was a map that made sense solely to Russell and his father. It was analogous, in many ways, to the maps of country created by Aboriginal Australians which make-sense only to the intended readers – for the rest of us they are simply ‘art’. Russell’s map did not make sense without the practical and conceptual skills of Russell, who had himself been orientated, and situated, in relation to this map and the environment by his father. The map was part of the array of ‘know how’ distributed across nets and boats that was place specific. It made sense only when the exploratory movements of practical fishing that had bought it into being were again performed, this time by Russell.

Russell might well have told me, ‘we own all the shots in Wallace Channel’. But he did not proffer the map as an object that documented evidence of ‘heritage’ in fishing to authenticate a knowledge or ownership claim. Instead, the form of the claim lay
implicitly in the biro tracings of the map. Because the map provided no key, no orientating features and no clue as to what it was for, it existed as a manifestation of the value fishermen place in performance over representation and becoming over origins. The claim to place-knowledge that Russell’s map, in its representational form, constitutes is only ever a potential. To become a claim proper it must be actualised by use.

Family Background

Behind two of these stories, though indirectly acknowledged, lies family. Family it seems influences performance. Initially, I had thought that a family history in the fishing industry would directly determine a man’s ability to claim places in the lake, as is the case, for example, in the lobster fishery in Maine described by Acheson, (1979, 1987, 1988). This was not the case at the Gippsland Lakes because inclusion and exclusion from the community is not determined by family background per se but, rather is constituted by one’s willingness to pursue relationships with others. This is despite the fact that – indeed probably due to the fact that – genealogical inter-relationship among fishermen is relatively high.

Family, then, influences one’s ability to claim places in the lake through ‘enskilled entitlement’ in as much as family has influenced one’s ability to fish with skill. Further, fishermen who can skilfully fish are likely to be equally able to skilfully negotiate the use of other men’s fishing places, or defend their own places, using the idiom of the Gentlemen’s Agreement. But fishermen tended not to mobilise the discourse of family tradition to strengthen their claims to place, despite the fact that such claims carry a certain amount of cachet beyond the fishery. When Joseph challenged Shaun’s use of a fishing shot, he used the angry words ‘I’ve been fishing here for 40 years!’ He could well have said ‘my family has been fishing here for three generations’ but he did not, because this was not the salient aspect in the ‘debate’. Nevertheless, because most fishermen are educated by others – though not necessarily by kin – the decision to fish one particular place over another, and a fishermen’s ability to hold a place through competent
performance against the incursions of others, does reflect earlier relationships of apprenticeship. That is, fishermen’s associations with places reflect social connections.

Together these portraits of place-possessions on the lake show fishermen to be concerned with each other’s performance of possession as reckoned through use and competency – what Anderson has called ‘enskilled entitlement’ (1998:83). Staying away from other men’s places, either permanently or as a general rule, is a recognition of their superior ‘attachment’ to those places. This is not to say that performance claims are not tested. Other men can and do ‘push the boundaries’ of place claims, as described in the previous chapter. But it is the way in which fishermen conceptualise knowledge as ‘getting into the blood’ through processes of skill acquisition that forms the basis for contesting entitlement claims. Such claims are never absolute, they are determined through performance and recognition rather than through heritage or family entitlement. Damien did not inherit the right to fish the region adjacent to his father, he earned it.

Conclusion

Property relations are embedded within fields of social relations, and it is for this reason, Strathern (1998) argues, that when one ignores the social context in which claims to ownership are being made it is impossible to make sense of the diversity of logics people bring to bear upon objects with which they claim an association. Without this recognition it would be difficult to understand why it is that a human embryo can be, simultaneously, a person and “a bunch of cells” such that the language of ownership could entail either the responsibility of guardianship, or rights of use and disposal, respectively (Strathern 1998).

The constellation of exclusionary principles at work in the Gippsland Lakes that shape an individual’s ability to access fishing places, and, thus, to conceive of an association with them, is complex. Fishermen’s own concepts of property rights exist alongside, and contrast with, formal state-sanctioned rights of ownership. The way in which these different regimes of property rights coexist can be conceptualised as a set of nested
arrangements that flow from the broadest, most explicit, state directives concerning the
ownership of fishing licences, and the parameters associated with that licence, to largely
unarticulated notions of rights acquired by association and knowledge to particular sites
in the Lake. In this sense, access to resources is a result of a combination of normative
arrangements established and maintained by the state as well as by the Gippsland Lakes
fishing community. Some of the processes that determine who is excluded take place at
sites well removed from the geographic and ecological locality of the Gippsland Lakes.

The way in which rights to place at the Gippsland Lakes are expressed and experienced
by fishermen captures, in many ways, the characteristics of the object to which the claim
relates. Their conceptualisation of possession foregrounds a person’s skill in, and
knowledge of, a particular place. Ownership imagined in this way is inherently a socially
and ecologically embedding institution, because it interweaves not only the dynamism
and idiosyncrasies of memory, self and community but also those ecological processes of
order and flux that trace out landscapes or lakescapes.

Fishermen do not use terms like ‘ownership’ or ‘property’ to describe their associations
with places, perhaps because of the absolute and over-determined nature of ownership
rights sanctioned by the Australian state. The social bases of property rights at the
Gippsland Lakes were revealed in the previous chapter, where it was made clear that, in
conflict situations, protagonists and bystanders alike recognised that a man’s claim to a
fishing place was being tested. As revealed in this chapter it is the fact that these claims
are socially recognised, and, further, that they point to a particular notion of personhood
and sociality, that defines them as property rights. The normative vision of ‘property’
enshrined in Australian law does not recognise the processual and contextual way in
which possession is experienced on the lake. Certainly, a fisherman would never claim to
own a place, or even say that his associations were ‘like’ ownership because of the
narrow way in which Euro-American’s in general imagine possession (Humphrey 2002).
Yet if, as Hann (1998:7) has proposed and I agree, ‘property rights [are] the distribution
of social entitlements’ then fishermen’s collective conceptualisation of entitlement to
place through skilled performance is clearly a system of property rights.
Chapter 7
Calling the Shots: Topographies of Intimacy at the Gippsland Lakes

Introduction
Sites, Clusters and Regions
Mapping the Shots
Mapping Attachments
The Social Life of Fishing Places
Permanence and Change: The Stones and other Places
Beginnings
Stout Little Names

Introduction

Fishermen implicate themselves in the lakescape by skilfully engaging sites in the lake. These places are founded by the everyday movements of ‘enskilled entitlement’. Through these appropriative movements, places emerge as points of significance in the lake. Fishing places gradually begin to enter society as people fish there, meet there or fight there. And in the course of social life, as they are discussed and remembered by fishermen, whether in conversations down at the Co-op or between elderly fishermen recalling old times in conversations over the phone, these places acquire names. Here, I explore how places enter, remain in, or disappear from, society over time and, how throughout these transitions, they are represented in language. In this way, I illustrate how the intimate topography of the lakescape forms in the presence of Gippsland Lakes fishermen.

The jostle of places known of, spoken about, and named in common by fishermen are shown in map form on the following page (fig. 7.1).
The place-name map, compiled in conjunction with a number of current and retired Gippsland Lakes fishermen, presents a forceful statement of togetherness. I use this map and, importantly, the process of its construction, as the primary ethnographic data in this chapter. As the fishermen helped me to map their places, it became clear that the task itself brought together the two forces of movement and fixity upon which, I have argued, belonging at the Gippsland Lakes is constituted. As they mapped the shots for me the fishermen grappled with the contradictory forces of, on one hand, traditionalising discourses that would fix people to sites in the lake and, on the other, more processual understandings of relationships to places and people.

In this chapter I begin by discussing the way in which space is conceptualised as it is entrained by the property right system outlined in Chapter 6. I build on the idea that fishermen recognise possession as manifested in a concernful and skilful appropriation of fishing places and show how, given this, places emerge as sites that can be, and often are, represented in language. The map I have produced, however, remains a static representation that does not sufficiently capture the processes by which these names came into existence. Taking the fishermen’s cue, I will seek to explain the movement behind the names – a movement that holds places in locations and sees places emerge from, and dissolve into, the background. In the final section of this chapter I apply a kind of genre analysis to the place names at the Gippsland Lakes and explore the possibility that the style of these names is itself an expression of fishermen’s local interests and values.

**Sites, Clusters and Regions**

Ingold (1986) has proposed an insightful typology of land appropriation styles that draws upon the ecological psychologist Gibson’s (1979) theory of direct perception, a typology that can elucidate the shape of belonging at the Gippsland lakes. The underlying theory posits that, contrary to Cartesian philosophy, we do not move in, and perceive, abstract space upon which meaning is secondarily inscribed. Instead, as ‘one perceives the environment, one co-perceives oneself’ (Gibson 1979:126). That is, the values, meanings or information that one perceives in the environment are simultaneously aspects of
oneself – of one’s interests, skills, capacities, social position and so forth. The nature of our tasks, our intentions and, in turn, our place in the social milieu shapes those intentions and leads us to perceive the edges of our world in particular ways and to appropriate them accordingly. Ingold (1986:147) explains that ‘we speak of surfaces rather than planes, paths rather than lines, and places rather than points’, because it is upon surfaces, along paths and at places that we occupy the world. Ingold proposes that, given the way that surfaces engage us, there are ‘three logically distinct kinds of tenure: zero-dimensional (of places, sites and locations), one-dimensional (of paths or tracks) and two-dimensional (of the earth or ground surface) (1986:147). Ingold has limited his application of this approach to hunter-gatherer societies. Gibson’s ecological psychology was, however, always pan-human, and Ingold’s typology may be used to elucidate ways of conceptualising space in other kinds of societies; in this case, a fishing community within the Australian nation state.

In Chapter 4, I described a fishing trip with Allen that began with the crew ‘going for a wander’, searching out a place to fish that morning. It culminated in us reaching the place Allen called Newman’s. For Allen the place called Newman’s was defined by relationships to surrounding aspects of the landscape, including distant mountain peaks that formed the foothills of the Great Dividing Range. He used these landmarks to orientate himself in the lake, and he cast his net accordingly. Thus, Newman’s was a place surrounded and constituted by its relationship to other places. There was no point at which Newman’s began or ended, there were simply degrees of being near or far from Newman’s. At the Gippsland Lakes, belonging has a particular shape.

It is through the process of ‘wandering’, the open-ended searching movement compelled by the socially constituted working principles of incomplete knowledge, being there and raw fishing that the place called Newman’s emerges as a particular, yet unbounded, site in the lakescape. Thus, fishing shots, as the description of Newman’s indicates, form focal, yet unbounded, points in the lakescape and, as such, are zero-dimensional. At finer spatial scales, towards the ‘centre’ of this focal point, we find that Newman’s is configured by particular, socially ‘informed’, bodies and nets in motion that are
responsive to local environmental parameters, including the configuration of the lake bed and the schooling behaviour of fish.

In Aboriginal Australia, as Tamisari (1998) notes, country is similarly constituted by sites (0-dimensional). In addition, these sites maybe linked by dreaming movement to form paths (1-dimensional). The originary principle of these sites and paths arises from the activities of Dreaming beings who, in their journeys across the landscape, leave traces of their passage at sites. At larger spatial and temporal scales these sites, linked by the passage of Dreaming beings, emerge as tracks. For Aboriginal Australians, it is the movements and actions of Dreaming beings that form the basis of conceptualising the human appropriation of the landscape. A person’s identification with places and paths, and therefore their rights in them, radiate out from the sites where Dreamings occur; the rights and identifications gradually become weaker as the distance from a site increases. For Gippsland Lakes fishermen, it is not the actions of mythological beings, but the day-to-day activity of fishermen at sites throughout the lake, that forms the geometry of belonging. But the shape of that geometry resembles, in some ways, that of Aboriginal Australia.

As Ingold has pointed out, albeit with reference to hunter-gather societies, many an anthropologist has been met with a blank look when he or she has asked an informant ‘to indicate whether they are in one estate or another, or to specify whereabouts the transition occurred …’ (1986:149). Gippsland Lakes fishermen, too, seldom conceptualise their places in terms of boundaries, as earlier accounts of ‘the Snag’, Russell’s map, and Damien speaking about his fishing places, suggest (see Chapter 6). There was no mention, in these stories, of where one fisherman’s place ended and another’s began. For Gippsland Lakes fishermen the lake is constituted by an amalgam of known sites. In most cases these sites are named. In both practice and representation, then, the shape of fishermen’s primary association with their environment is zero-dimensional.

Fishermen did not conceptualise the lake in terms of paths connecting sites as Aboriginal Australians do or in the way that Hviding (1996) has described at the Solomon Islands –
where fish follow consistent routes through the reef system. Gippsland Lakes fishermen explained that sites in the lake could never be linked in this way because fish were unpredictable. Sites, here, are linked by contingent habitat similarities rather than environmental consistency. For instance, if a fisherman caught bream on a shallow sandy bank with medium seagrass cover he might hope to find the same species of fish in a similar habitat at a different place the next day.

Anthropologists have noted that although Aboriginal Australians may appear to talk in terms of a two-dimensional bounded space when discussing land appropriated and named at a regional scale, they are, in fact, referring to constellations of sites in close proximity (Ingold 1986:148-151; Myers 1986:58). Thus, the term ‘country’ refers to land within which one has intimate associations to sites and paths that together effect a regional association. That region may appear to have definitive boundaries, but in practice does not. In a similar way, one can point to degrees of boundedness or degrees of boundary-like thinking at the Gippsland Lakes. Yet, as in the Aboriginal Australian example, boundary concepts among Gippsland Lakes fishermen are more temporal than definitive since spatial regionalisation emerges as a result of long term use of contiguous, clustered 0-dimensional sites. By contrast, Dominy (2001:144) vividly describes the bounded shape of farmer’s attachments to place in New Zealand’s High Country, where mosaics of paddocks form the ground of farmers’ primary emotional attachments, practical thinking and representational practice.

Therefore, just as sites become associated with particular people at the Gippsland Lakes through, what I have termed, ‘enskilled entitlement’, so can constellations of sites. Fishermen tend to think in terms of regional associations in restricted circumstances, however, usually when imagining themselves according to topographical inter-relationships across the whole community. Nevertheless, even when thinking regionally, they do not think in terms of ‘lines in the water’. They do not imagine boundaries, because the momentum created by the principle incomplete knowledge always points to the possibility of new horizons to be explored and the value of pursuing, and renewing,
relationships. The desire to open up fields of social and ecological relationships entailed by the open-ended movement of wandering could never be fulfilled in bounded spaces.

**Mapping the Shots**

Fishermen use names to refer to their zero-dimensional sites of attachment in the lake. Being a participant in conversations in which places were referred to by name aroused my interest in this aspect of fishermen’s lives, and led me to spend time with ten current and two retired fishermen collecting place names and representing them in map form. My methodology was simple; I asked fishermen to recall place names and write them on the very basic (i.e. no bathometric lines, and broad in scale) blank map I provided. I never intended the map to be particularly accurate; my intention was to get an idea of the approximate whereabouts of places in relation to other places – and, of course, to develop a record of the place names themselves (fig. 7.1). The map represents a moment in time – spring 2003. As will become clear, that the map is somewhat misleading because it fixes, in representational form, a set of socially mediated relationships to places that are, in fact, often changing.

When I set about mapping the place names of fishing shots at the Gippsland Lakes I was surprised by fishermen’s willingness to tell me the names, and show on a map the whereabouts, of fishing shots. Initially, I had thought that mapping place names would reveal, for public consumption (both within the community and beyond it), too much of fishermen’s hard-won knowledge of fishing places. For this reason, I was very reluctant to begin enquiring about them. Another concern was that, while it is a truism that the map is not the territory (Bateson 2000:408) there is always the potential that the map itself makes the territory (Gow 1995; King 1996). Finally, I was very much aware that the fishermen’s place names overlay the place names of the Kurnai people of East Gippsland, whose own place names were largely silenced at the time these people were dispossessed in the mid-nineteenth century (see Grimshaw and Nelson 2001; Howitt 1896, 1906; Lydon 2005)
Despite the amount of fishing I had done, however, I had not realised just how recalcitrant fishermen’s places were to being mapped. Even on the most detailed map available, the actual physical and ecological dimensions of fishing places – not to mention the social dimensions – could simply not be captured and made available for public use. As the following account of fishing at the place called Newman’s illustrates, place names never refer to an exact location in isotropic space. Newman’s did not refer to a definite point in the lake that could be consistently returned to (using a GPS reading, for instance), because it was defined by fixed (mountains) and shifting (sand) aspects of the environment. When Allen cast his net he ensured that particular points of the net were in alignment with the underwater topography of the shot (where the weed was and where the sand lay) and certain sightlines to the distant mountains. Thus, the shot was constituted by a unique relationship between the fisherman, his net, underwater topography and distant geographic features in the landscape. It was the way in which these elements came together on any particular day that defined Newman’s. Clearly such a place could never be precisely located using a map.

As Allen talked about Newman’s, he said that only a few days before he had been driving in the very foothills he was now reckoning by. He had gone there, curious to discover whether there had been much new growth after the severe bushfires of the previous summer; those fires had burnt out a substantial part of the Gippsland Lakes catchment. Allen was concerned that any heavy rainfall on the denuded ash-packed earth might adversely affect the lakes.

I asked Allen if he often reckoned shots by the foothills. He replied that his grandfather and father had grown-up on the Mitchell River, in view of the same foothills, and had fished there most of their lives. He was saying that, in a sense, the foothills had always surrounded him, even though he had not grown up within direct sight of them. There had once been a homestead on the point off which we fished, he said, that was owned by the Newman family. There was no need to add that this family was, and remains, a prominent fishing family. Our short conversation about Newman’s had called forth an enormous diversity of information – from concerns about the effects of last summer’s bushfires to
reminiscences about family and the wider fishing community. And it is this distinctive constellation of social and ecological associations that orientates a person at each known place, giving rise to the uniqueness of place for each fisherman.

While many fishermen referred to the place called Newman’s, and located it in roughly the same region of the lake, I have no doubt that all orientated themselves there a little differently – perhaps using different geographic or bottom features – and, as a result, worked their nets there differently as well. I never fished Newman’s with another fisherman, but the way in which Allen conceptualised the place suggested that, though it was known to many, it was particular to each. Thus, despite my initial apprehension, there was no way that my cartographic representation could reveal to another how to successfully fish at the place called Newman’s. Rather than being simply a location in abstract space, Newman’s was a place that emerged in Allen’s presence as he went about the task of fishing. The size and peculiar dimensions of Allen’s net, its interaction with the topography of the place, and the way in which he orientated himself there using particular sight lines to distant mountains all combined to resolve a very particular version – Allen’s version of Newman’s.

I discovered that it was a mistake to assume that knowing the location of the shot was essential information to a fisherman. This information is only code with no context. The location is a suggestion that fish do come here – at times. In fact, knowing the location of these shots tells a person nothing of the way fish move through them in time. Nor does it tell how a person should orientate himself there, using his surrounds in order to cast his net appropriately. A person must be fully immersed in the signs of the lake, both social and ecological, and be well versed in their interpretation, to be able to actually catch fish at these locations. Knowing a point at which the stylised movements of casting and hauling a net took place cannot provide any clues as to how particular nets moved across the unique configuration of shallows and gutters, how a snag felt when it caught the net, or how the wind on someone’s cheek told them to haul the net faster.
We are reminded by de Certeau (1984) that by mapping paths and points we are merely recording the relics of past acts, the location of which tells us nothing of the acts themselves. For this reason, many of the fishermen I asked to ‘map their shots’ were initially quite bewildered by the request. To some, textualising this practical information in map form seemed staggeringly stupid, because so much would be lost when such knowledge was transformed into crude representation. Some fishermen dutifully and efficiently went about inscribing the blank map, while others were much more reluctant to put pen to paper. Knowing they would inevitably misrepresent the lake, they all hesitantly went about the task but at each step added comments to remind me that my map was ‘flat’ and devoid of context. As some remarked: ‘But you can’t see the contours of the shallows so I can’t really say where the shot is’; ‘this place you only ever use in an easterly’; ‘I never fished here much but my father does’; ‘We can’t fish here anymore because the epiphyte algae is too thick, it’s a mess’; and ‘I used to like fishing here but now there are too many people watching; they’re the kind that call the water police, because they’ve never seen a fishing net before’.

Just as they were keen to point out the loss of complexity that accompanied the transformation of practical knowledge into a two-dimensional representation, fishermen made a point of deferring to the knowledge of other fishermen as they recounted the place names and their whereabouts. This was made apparent in comments along the lines of: ‘that’s Henry’s country after that’, ‘oh, you better ask Allen about those parts’ or ‘well, that’s my arc of influence!’. These comments illustrate how, at broad scales, fishermen’s place knowledge is understood as regionalised and, by corollary, the conceptualisation of ‘enskilled entitlement’ to sites in the lake becomes, to an extent, regionalised. That is, fishermen become associated not just with sites – as Skinny had been when it was remarked about his favourite place that ‘you could send him letters there’ – but with suites of sites that, together, constitute regional associations. These regional associations were strongly brought out by the mapping exercise, probably because its apparent permanence made the exercise appear politically salient.
The way in which Larry responded to the mapping session illustrates the above points well. I arrived at Larry’s home on an extremely windy day. After passing the seine net, apparently being mended, laid out in his bare front garden, I tapped at the front door of his house. All the curtains had been drawn and Larry’s son peeped around them before welcoming me in. I walked into the lounge area, where Larry was ensconced in semi-darkness in front of an enormous television. He beckoned me to sit down, peering over his feet – as he lay fully reclined in his easy-chair – at the maps and pencils I had laid out on the coffee table. ‘You’ve bought your pens and books have you?’ he asked dubiously, still watching the television. I began to explain what I had in mind. Larry was not convinced, explaining that it would have been much better to show me the places because it was too hard. But then he conceded that ‘it would take all day’ to show me the places in the lake so perhaps I had done the right thing.

After quite a while he picked-up a pencil and began to mark in the shots he knew. The fishing shots that Larry wrote down for me appear with a black ‘X’ beside them on the fold-out map (fig. 7.1). Initially, he was at pains to describe the many facets of each shot, what season he shot it, where the shallows were, if you had to use it discreetly, at night, who had used illegal nets in that place, and so on. As we moved about the map Larry, indicating areas east and west of his places, urged me to speak to other named fishermen in order to find out about those places. Larry, like other fishermen, only ever spoke about the places he associated with other men; he knew some of the places by name because he had fished some of them, but he would not use a pen to mark them on the map.

Fishermen were most concerned not to misrepresent themselves and their knowledge in relation to other fishermen, since speaking for another’s place was tantamount to making a knowledge claim about that place and, thus, a claim of possession. Fishermen consistently used notions about knowledge and skill to differentially attribute regions of the lake to some fishermen and not others. Arguably, fishermen wanted to avoid speaking for others for the same reason that they wanted to avoid directly invoking the rules of the

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I was able to convince only one man, James, to mark and name what he thought of as other fishermen’s places. He did this reluctantly, all the while alerting me to the fact that I really should be speaking to another man about this or that particular region.
Gentlemen’s Agreement. In each case they would be speaking in advance of performance and, thus, would be denying the cut and thrust of negotiation in which the values of equality and autonomy were made manifest. Of course, by urging fishermen to commit ‘their places’ to paper I was effectively undermining their own attempts to maintain looseness and defy the kind of historical permanence – the basis of much traditionalist discourse – that textual representation brings.

*Mapping Attachments*

Figure 7.2 is based on information contained in the map described above. It provides a visual representation of fishermen’s attachments to fishing places at the Gippsland Lakes. In this extract from the complete map I have left out the shot names in order to make the map easier to read. Illustrated here are the locations of fishing shots associated with three fishermen – Allen, Larry and Damien. It is clear that each fisherman has a preference for a particular region in the lake – a region that, although not clearly bounded, comprises a cluster of known places that is distinct from the others.

Allen and Larry, for instance, fish a similar body of water. But Larry, represented by a black ‘X’, concentrates on areas centred around Metung, and is well known for his preference. Allen, represented by a green ‘O’, likes to ‘wander’ and has a wider range; he fishes east and west of Metung. The area where Damien, represented by a green ‘▲’, fishes is focused upon the area where waters from the mouths of the Tambo River and Mitchell River (immediately south of Jones Bay) converge. Damien has explained that because fish are plentiful in this area he has no need to travel elsewhere to find them.

The existence of these attachments is acknowledged by fishermen. For example, when Larry mapped the shots he advised me that for knowledge of places further down towards Lakes Entrance I should ‘ask Old Henry’, and for knowledge of places west of Metung I should ‘ask Old Brian’. In this way Larry indicated his own judgement that, relative to Brian and Henry, he had closer association with places around Metung.
The Social Life of Fishing Places

‘Oh yeah, every stump’s got a name’ remarks Shaun, bemused, when I ask him about the names fishermen have for their fishing shots. In fact, as I was to find, even stumps that have long ago fallen into the recesses of the lake are memorialised in the names of fishing places like The Tree or One Tree. Fishermen refer to fishing places by name in a variety of contexts: to communicate the whereabouts of nets to trusted others seeking to avoid fishing nearby; to share information about fish movements – again with men they trust not to steal their shots; to create misinformation; to lie; to recall and place events in conversations about the lake; and, more generally, to put into context the stories that emerge in the day-to-day practice of fishing.

Speaking with names and recognising names was an expression of belonging to the neighbourhood. When fishermen used names with each other it was a sign that they recognised each other as being members of the Gippsland Lakes fishing community. The fact that in the early stages of our acquaintance, fishermen generally used the government names for places when speaking to me is testament to the insider status of place names. Usually fishermen would use a place name in conversations with me, only once I had been to a place and taken part in a fishing operation there.

The names of fishing shots in the Gippsland Lakes have, until this time, only ever been orally transmitted. The fold-out map of place names (fig. 7.1) is thus a strong – though not fixed – expression of community, because it suggests a communal conversation about places that has lasted across several generations of fishermen. Although fishermen did not believe that knowing place names was particularly important to fishing success (they did not consider the knowledge secret), particular place names or suites of place names tended to remain partly or wholly concealed from certain segments of the fishing community. Thus, as I mapped the fishing shots with a diverse range of fishermen, and accompanied them on fishing trips, I came to see that place names were often indicative of fishermen’s relationships with each other.
Knowing ‘how to’ fish particular places at the Gippsland Lakes is central to expressing who you are within the community. What one knows about a place is an expression of ‘who’ you are because what one knows often points to kinship ties and almost always points to connections with people that have been achieved in an individual lifetime. Likewise, when fishermen call the same shots by the same names it is indicative of who they speak to about fishing and fishing places. Often, but not always, fishermen called the same place by the same name. The fishing place called Newman’s, for instance, was called this by all five fishermen who recognised it as a fishing place.

I will use the term shared name to denote a name that was used by two or more of the fishermen who contributed to my mapping exercise. These names have, to some extent, ‘entered society’ and have begun to form part of a language of place that combines and separates members of the lake fishing community according to alliances, apprenticeships and hostilities. The fold-out map captures these groupings by depicting which members of the community used names in common and which did not. Beside each shot name, is a symbol, or set of symbols, that indicate(s) who my source was for the shot name. Where more than one fisherman has called the same place by the same name two or more symbols follow that name, and it is this category of names that I class as a shared name.

For a fisherman to speak and write the name of a place was a knowledge claim, and meant that he had fished there more than a few times. The value fishermen place upon contextualising fishing knowledge is extremely high. To learn the shared name of a place a fisherman would need to be in that place. It would not be enough for an experienced fisherman to point out a slight indentation on a map and explain to a novice that that place is named Tom the Ducks, though I had assured them that it would be enough for the purposes of my mapping exercise. To really know what the name referred to, a fisherman needed to have been shown the place by another who then went on to introduce the name of that place at that locale. Thus, instances of names known in common were instances of socially situated learning, where fishermen had been orientated in a particular place by a more experienced man; seeing that place through the
more experienced fisherman’s eyes, the novice was given a name for what he experienced there.

The way in which places are revealed to novice fishermen by more experienced fishermen is consistent with Ingold’s argument that:

Our knowledgeability consists in the capacity to situate information, and understand its meaning, within the context of a direct perceptual engagement with our environments. And we develop this capacity, I contend, by having things shown to us (2000:21 emphasis in the original).

The fact that names are introduced at places during intermittent pedagogic moments is one reason why younger fishermen like Tim, Shaun and Damien (fishing for less than ten years) knew far fewer shared names than those who had been fishing longer. The social efficacy of place names, and their concealment from newcomers, is illustrated in the following conversation between myself, Ronald, Brian and Charlie,

Simone: Do you think it is important to know the names in the lake in order to fish?

Brian: [laughs] Well I don’t know if it is important but it helps …

Ronald: It helps …

S: How does it help?

R: Oh well if someone tells you they were at so and so, you know where they were.

B: Go up there and look for them.

R: They start telling you these new names [Charlie laughing], we don’t know where they’re talking about. Of course, we can tell most of the new one’s our names and they don’t know where they are so …

B: The other Sunday night when I went across to the back lake, oh, it must have been a bit late because Heathcoat [Tim] had fished his, was coming out as I was going in. I stopped him and said ‘where you got ‘em?’ ‘Oh, in that bight I got a fleet, around that point over beside there somewhere and round there’. I didn’t have a clue, when he finished, where he was. We never got a name out of him!
It is clear from this conversation that Tim is being ridiculed for his inability to call the shots with the other men. His lack of words for places has left him on the outside, unable to participate effectively in the little social moments that arise daily on the lake. The passage also shows that older fishermen choose where, when and to whom they will impart knowledge. But, as I will discuss in Chapter 8, these rare and socially valued pedagogic moments are becoming even rarer as fewer fishermen remain to fish the lake.

Foi men, of Papua New Guinea, become knowledgeable about places and, thus, attain rights to them (Weiner 2001) in a process reminiscent of the way in which Gippsland Lakes fishermen do. In both communities, it is through consistent and competent use that men gain proprietorial primacy there. As well, in each community there is an emphasis upon the value of transferring place knowledge by showing the novice, directing his attention to the salient aspects of the place. Weiner comments that Foi men never said that they had been ‘given’ or ‘loaned’ a place but that they had been ‘shown’ a place. As Ingold describes (2000:21), it is in the act of, ‘caus[ing a place] to be seen or otherwise experienced – whether by touch, taste, smell or hearing – by that other person’ that it becomes known and, in the case of Gippsland Lakes fishermen, becomes entrained in the ongoing process of ‘enskilled entitlement’.

When Ronald once said to James ‘when I retire I’ll show you what goes on up around Paynesville’ he meant that he intended to show James, and cause him to experience, those places where he himself had skilfully fished all his life. And, Ronald understood, in showing James those places he would be passing them on to James.

The orientation in places of a novice by a more experienced fisherman may amount to just a glimpse, or it may result from a more sustained tutelage. For example, Damien recalled how he had learnt a new shot (along with its name) when he had come across another older man fishing there one day. The older man had talked to him about the place – The Stump – where there was a submerged log on the edge of a very good, deep fishing hole. He explained to Damien how to lay his net there in a particular way, in order to avoid ripping it when he hauled it in.
Orientation may be more detailed, however, and could be the result of accumulated moments in place. This was the case for James’ deckhand Jason, who had learned many place names from James over the many years he worked for him. The two men used place names to decide where to fish. James took into account Jason’s opinions on the matter, suggesting that Jason had a very good knowledge of the region that James worked; he had paid attention to James and learnt the dimensions of fishing places to which names referred.

Thus, knowledge of place names is founded upon experience in place and, very often, that experience involves some amount of emplaced social orientation. Place-name knowledge, then, is a sign of past acts of communication among fishermen, within fishing crews (often synonymous with families) and beyond. This is the reason that fishermen who fished one region tended not to know the names of places in other locales. For instance, with the exception of James, almost all the fishermen I spoke with asserted the following pattern of place knowledge: specialised knowledge of one region, general knowledge of the region contiguous to their region of speciality and no knowledge of regions beyond these.

Learning from others can often be clandestine, and it is for this reason that some fishing shots are known by different names by different fishermen. These place name divergences are indicative of the way in which some fishermen, particularly new comers, watch other, more experienced men as they fish, without the latter’s knowledge. Where a fishing shot is known by different names by different fishermen its alternative names appear in red on the fold-out map (fig. 7.1). For example, the place called Top Shot by one fisherman was named Tom the Ducks by another. The mix of shared and alternative names for fishing places is suggestive of the dynamics of social relationships at the lakes, where places and their names emerge and disappear in the process of pursuing knowledge, relationships and fish.
The fact that so many fishermen recognise shots in the same location suggests that, for many fishermen, shooting a particular fishing shot becomes the re-enactment – albeit approximate – of movements made by generations of fishermen beforehand. The way in which the contemporary fisherman lays his net traces out a configuration reminiscent of thousands of nets before. These configurations may be based on sets learnt from family, friends, allies, covert watching or a combination of all of these. Alternatively, and as I will discuss in more detail below, a fisherman may have learnt to shoot a shot alone, without reference to the actions of any other fisherman. Generally, however, a person’s unique cache of shots is a record of his previous social associations and an indication of his competence in particular regions of the lake.

The names of fishing shots are not, and have never been, readily available to fishermen. Only those who have been interested and willing to spend time working the lake have had these names revealed to them. When Shaun commented in a bemused way that ‘every stump had a name’ he was pointing out the way that, to a young fisherman, so much of the lake is experienced as impenetrable, not because he cannot fish these places or learn them himself but because his ability to participate in the social life of places is limited, since he has no language with which to refer to them. For a novice like Shaun, listening to others conversing about the shots is like white-noise. Only when a place has been shown to him does it emerge from the background hum of meaningless chatter. When older fishermen repeated the worn adage about new comers – ‘don’t tell’em anything, don’t take’em anywhere!’ – they too were alluding to the different layers of knowledge, personal and social, that reside, latently, in places. The old saying is a warning that, even though names are codes with no context, the knowledge of shot names may provide traction to a tenacious young novice.

Knowledge of place names permits fishermen to participate more fully in locally valued modes of sociality, allowing a fisherman not only to discuss the whereabouts of others, but also to engage in negotiations of a moral kind in places at a remove from the lake. For instance, the ability to refer to places allows a man to ask another where he was fishing or intended to fish that week. Knowing where in the lake another fisherman is fishing allows
a man to choose whether to make the other his competitor. In fact, the ability to inquire and, perhaps, find out where someone is fishing and to act on that information by not fishing there, is another example of exemplary gentlemanly behaviour that will not go unnoticed. In this way, the referential power of place names enables fishermen to exhibit trustworthiness. Thus, ‘Gentlemen talk’, while constituting persons, also constitutes places because in everyday practice these agreements invoke named places, in the lake and invite listeners to imagine these sites in the lake as points of conflict and negotiation.

Place name knowledge also enables disinformation, subterfuge and teasing, while allowing the potential hostility in such acts to be tempered. By using shot names one can provide apparently accurate information while lying. For example, on returning to the Co-op after one very successful fishing trip the fisherman I was with, knowing that everyone would be asking us where we had been, was anxious that we ‘get our story straight’. We decided that we would offer one shot name in our account of the trip, to demonstrate a willingness to offer clues, followed by a general account of our movements after this point so as not to raise suspicions (since no one would expect to be told the whole truth). In fact, as the fisherman had wanted, everything we said was untrue. The inclusion of a particular name added a much needed ring of truth to our story. When we retold our story to some interested parties who had come seeking information – including another commercial fisherman and a Co-op worker lovingly called Women’s Weekly because of his inability to keep a (fishing) secret – both the fisherman and I found it much easier to lie because we appeared to be being helpful. Whether used to inform or mislead, place names allow fishermen (and myself as per local protocol) to engage in a kind of meta-communicative event (Bateson 2000:178) whereby one tells another of his willingness to communicate despite the varied content of the communications, thereby confirming the value in being competitors together.

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2 The Women’s Weekly is a widely available women’s magazine that trucks in (celebrity) gossip.
Permanence and Change: The Stones and other Places

It is through the daily round of fishing that places, as aspects of fishermen’s own capacities, interests and social relationships, emerge from the lake and later dissolve or become overlaid by the interests of others. So, as Tilley writes, of our everyday terrains:

rather, than being uniform and forever the same, [they are] constituted by differential densities of human experience, attachment and involvement. [And they are] above all contextually constituted, providing particular settings for involvement and the creation of meanings (1994:11).

The way in which names come and go traces the inherent tension between movement and fixity that lies at the heart of the constitution of the lake neighbourhood. In the following analysis, it will become clear that the pedagogical practices that lie behind the formation of places are inherently destabilising, because these processes invite men to deepen their understandings of places and overlay former understandings with new interpretations. These destabilising processes are indexed by the instability of names. The social context of these pedagogical moments, however, provides a background stability that allows changes to be perceived.

The apprenticeship relationship is one of the most important ways that fishermen come to know places and, thus, forms one way through which the ‘differential densities’ of permanence and change are constituted. Although fishing place names change and disappear, many place names remain stable across a number of generations of fishermen. The endurance of place names over generations is due to the social context of learning to fish. That is, names have traceable genealogies and often point to successive generations of fishermen who have learnt from one another. In what follows, I describe the elements of structure behind the process of revelation discussed above and, later, go on to describe how the deepening of a fisherman’s own experience of place, following these revealing moments, may be reflected in changes to place names.
The fishing shot called *The Stones* was known by this name to four fishermen (none related by kinship) who have all, successively, been in an apprenticeship role to another of the four. *The Stones* is highlighted in the top right-hand area on the fold-out map. Knowledge about *The Stones* began with Reg, who grew up overlooking the bay where the shot is found. Reg’s family were farmers, but his mother spent much of her time hooking fish in the bay for the family to eat. According to Reg, it was her passion. When he grew up, he bought a licence and taught himself to fish with nets. A decade later, Skinny came from the ocean fishery to the lake fishery knowing nothing about the lake. He proposed to Reg that they should work together. Reg (who was younger) would teach Skinny how to fish the lake and Skinny would invest some much needed capital into Reg’s operation. Thus, Skinny learnt most of the place names he knows from the time he spent fishing alongside Reg. Skinny, now a very elderly man, was able to recall, with difficulty given that there were no contextual memory triggers on my map, nine place names, five of which coincided with the fifteen that Reg recalled. One of these names was *The Stones*. When Reg decided to leave fishing for a time, Skinny took on James as an apprentice after he heard good words about the young man. When James mapped the shots for me, he too recalled *The Stones*. Of course there are other names that are common to all these men, most of which are known through wider social circles. *The Stones* is special because this place stands alone as a trace of an unbroken line of (non-kinship) cross-generational social relationships among these men. The name connects Reg, Skinny, James and, now, Jason (James’ deckhand) through time.

The way in which fishermen conceptualise places, however, means that the conservation of names across time is less than might be expected despite the fact that fishermen learn names from more experienced men and use them, in the various ways outlined above, to communicate with other fishermen. Names are often ephemeral because fishermen, as they learn, begin to perceive places according to their particular interests and capacities. That is, in time, fishermen learn to orientate themselves in places according to their own experiences there. Thus, what they have learnt from others becomes overlain by what a fisherman learns about, and brings to, that place, himself. This overlay of new knowledge wrought through experience is often expressed in successive changes to place names.
I was able to take an archaeological approach to the name of the fishing place *The Stump* because it was spoken about at length by different men at different times, each account adding new strata of personal memory to a collectively known place. Damien told me, when we were out fishing one day, as mentioned above, that an old fisherman, Ronald Gilligan, had explained to him how to shoot his mesh net there so as to avoid a big submerged log. Later, when Damien was recalling the names of fishing places he called this place *The Snag*, explaining ‘that’s the one Ronald told me about’. James, instead, referred to this place as *Gilly’s Snag* after the fisherman who had told him about it (Ronald Gilligan’s nickname is Gilly).

The new name given by Damian, unlike the one given by James, tends to negate Ronald’s presence. I asked Damien more about his relationship with Ronald: ‘what else had Ronald shown you?’ Damien replied, amused, ‘oh, nah nothing much, my family name isn’t held in great regard around Paynesville!’. He went on to tell me about the time his father and uncle went to the Paynesville pub to incite a brawl with the local fishermen there because they had found out that the Paynesville fishermen had been taking their seine net at night in order to steal its design principles. The brawl, Damien implied, did some lasting social damage. I understood from his account that it would be difficult to rename a shot after an old enemy of his father’s, particularly when it was with his father that Damien spoke most about fishing.

The way in which this particular place has been renamed memorialises a great wealth of social knowledge. The fond regard with which James views Ronald is recalled at each return to this place, while memories of the events that created the difficult relationship between Ronald and Damien’s father linger at this site. Thus, *The Snag* and *Gilly’s Snag* are new names, given by fishermen based upon personal experiences in place. Within each of the secondary names are traces of these learning encounters with Ronald Gilligan, one paying more explicit tribute to the man behind the event than the other. It is clear, however, that in each case the place has been reinvented. Thus, *alternative names* often
continue to indirectly recall the fishing community, and, to this extent, it is possible to suppose that many have actually been co-authored by the community.

Ingold (2000) and Weiner (2001) use the notion of ‘revelation’ to describe the way that knowledge of places in the environment is transferred between people and, as a consequence, transformed. It is apparent that both the Foi of whom Weiner wrote and Gippsland Lakes fishermen consider there to be value inhering in the space created in the dialectic of concealment and revelation, not simply because the process expresses the deepening of becoming a part of something greater than oneself (the community) but because of the way in which the very process invites the novice to combine new ways of thinking about places, and to overlay past common understandings with alternative understandings. Thus, the pedagogical process of revelation is a process that encourages creativity.

Places emerge from, and are transformed by, these creative encounters between fishermen. Revelatory moments in places draw those places into society, establishing them as points of attention upon which other such moments can be overlaid. Fishing shots, then, can be understood to be co-authored by fishermen. In this way, place names are like Bahktian utterances (Bahktin 1986); being a particular speech genre on the lake they imply a whole world of past, and possible future, conversational moments. The Stones remains fixed in place by the convergent conversations and overlapping interests of Reg, Skinny, James and Jason. On the other hand, The Snag exists as an expression of the divergent interests of Damian and Gilly. The Snag is a transformation of, but remains a memorial to, The Stump and, in this way, the former can be understood as having being co-authored by Gilly and Damien in the process of their inter-personal history.

Names tended to change not just upon transmission of knowledge from one man to another but as events punctuated by a man’s experience of a place. James, for instance, had a secondary name for the place he usually called Above Little Cut. That name was The Doodle Shot – ‘doodle’ is a gentle, nursery school term for the penis – and referred to an infamous time when a nudist had set up camp on the shore where this fishing place is
found. James was fond of this name because it recalled his son, who had been fishing with him at the time; the boy had been particularly captivated by what he saw as hilarious and strange events taking place on shore.

The double identity of the place called Above Little Cut or The Doodle Shot illustrates how novel experiences in place can also change our understandings of, and responses to, those places. The Doodle Shot, unlike Above Little Cut, reminds James of his son when the latter was young and impressionable. It is the pedagogic process, outlined above, that establishes a form of attention to one’s surrounds and encourages this deepening, and overlaying of place knowledge. Thus, the social context of learning produces a certain amount of consistency to place name knowledge that sees fishermen learn the names of places from others. Yet, because fishermen learn that they can only ever have incomplete knowledge of their surrounds, inherent in this learning process is the movement towards new knowledge – the very process by which places are transformed.

Fishing places are named (and re-named) as invitations to other people to imagine them, discuss them and possibly even use them. These little invitations are partly motivated by the instrumental reason of territoriality; that is, to communicate to others your whereabouts in space and time in the hope that they will then avoid fishing where you are (cf. Ingold 1986). Knowledge of place names has the effect of embedding people in local ecological worlds because allowing fishermen to specify locations though names facilitates the distribution of fishermen in temporal and spatial patterns that sort by particular environmental circumstances.

Place names, however, act primarily as intimate memorials to events that encompass local social worlds. When an experienced fisherman tells a novice the name of a place it is an invitation to participate with him, and through him, in the constitution of community. Facility with these names, then, becomes an entrée into an enormous amount of context and a powerful expression of the achievement of belonging. The changeability and idiosyncrasies of places and their names are, counter-intuitively, an artefact of the way in which fishermen conceptualise belonging at the lake. By emphasising the
achievement of identity forged through being there, fishermen are forced, by the communal cold shoulder, and encouraged, by the cryptic clue dropping of more experienced fishermen, to make their own way on the lake.

The very existence of prior places in the lake actually brings about place name changes because, as I will argue below, as a place is given a name it becomes more believable, and makes itself available for others to imagine and, eventually, to make their home there by overlaying it with a whole new stratum of memory. Thus, in the context of revelation, structure invites, energises and is maintained by movement. It is from novel interpretations of old places and discoveries of entirely new ones that, over time, places dissolve without resistance and new places come into being.

**Beginnings**

Many fishermen, including some who did not put pen to paper in the mapping project, said they had ‘discovered’ or ‘learned’ shots known only to them, and had subsequently named them; the shots named The School Camp, The Rock and The Bonsai are examples. Fishermen always alerted me to the fact that they had ‘made up’ this or that shot and its name. They did this with a sense of humility, wondering if I really wanted to record these ‘made-up’ names. (I point this out to avoid speculation that fishermen, out of bravado, claimed that they ‘discovered’ and named a place when they had not). I will call these names *idiosyncratic names* because both the place and its name are peculiar to only one fisherman. *Idiosyncratic names* appear in black type on the fold-out map and only ever have one source. This relatively small class of names is distinguished from those in which the names and/or locations of shots are common to two or more fishermen. *Idiosyncratic names* and the places they name are entirely personal, whereas other names are expressions of the social context of learning.

*Idiosyncratic names* and the places they indicate are concealed from all community members but the fisherman who has found them, named them and used them. These names, and the way in which they came into being, are suggestive of the beginnings of all
named places at the lake. The idiosyncrasy of names and places is necessarily a transient phase, however, because, in time, such names are either lost or become ‘shared’. Hugh, for example, had been fishing the lake for the last ten years and was reasonably well liked among the lake fishermen, yet he still had not learnt any of the common names for the places he fished in the lake. This suggested that moments of knowledge transmission were uncommon, and very uncommon in the places Hugh fished. One reason for this was that when Hugh began to fish ‘up the lake’ none of the older fishermen who had once fished those places regularly fished there anymore; now, they were all over 65 years old and stayed closer to home, out of the wind.

Hugh, therefore, found his own places and sometimes he named them. One night while Hugh and his wife Em prepared dinner, we spoke about place names. Hugh laughed and said he knew nothing about this stuff, implying that it was only the old fishermen who had names, not young people like himself. Pressing him further, he mentioned that he had his own names for places. But it was clear that he thought of these as being distinct from the shared names about the lake; he assured me, embarrassed, that I did not want to know his names. I urged him: ‘but they are still names, could you tell me them?’ After trying to dismiss the topic once more, Hugh sheepishly told me about the places called Wombat and Fox – in both places his children had watched, from the boat, ‘for hours’, the respective animals go about their morning snufflings. Each place was named after these events by Hugh’s children. Warming to the topic Hugh said ‘then there’s The Tree, that I used to tie my boat up to’. He described the deep rub mark that developed around the tree’s girth from repeatedly tying his boat to it. ‘I made a lot of money from The Tree!’ And he added: ‘everyone’s got a Tree!’ With The Tree remembered, Hugh and Em relived some of its big catches. It was clear that The Tree had taken on a life of its own within the family.

Hugh’s initial embarrassment and reluctance to talk about his idiosyncratic places and their idiosyncratic names was an indication of their deeply personal significance. These were names used by, and associated with, his family and not the communal world of old

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3 No one else in Hugh’s family had fished.
fishermen. Hugh’s first reaction was to background the place names forged in family life, thus making a distinction between the names I was collecting and the names he had bestowed on places.

The naming of a place, its ‘debut’ in society, enables it to gather communal narratives, memories and traces of past actions. In fact the naming of a place foreshadows its reinvention, just as in the various transformations of The Stump. As de Certeau has suggested, place names:

… slowly lose, like worn coins, the value engraved on them, but their ability to signify outlives its first definition … [T]hese names make themselves available to the diverse meanings given them by passers-by; they detach themselves from the places they were supposed to define and serve as imaginary meeting-points on itineraries, which, as metaphors, they determine for reasons that are foreign to their original value but may be recognized or not by passers-by (1984:104).

And

… by emptying themselves of their classifying power, [place names] acquire that of “permitting” something else; they recall or suggest phantoms (the dead who are supposed to have disappeared) that still move about, concealed in gestures and in bodies in motion; and, by naming, that is, by imposing an injunction proceeding from the other (a story) and by altering functionalist identity by detaching themselves from it, they create in the place itself that erosion or nowhere that the law of the other carves out within it (1984:104-105).

While I do not agree with de Certeau when he suggests that a name marks the commencement of place I am attracted to his suggestion that place names make places ‘habitable’ and ‘believable’ (1984:105) if, by ‘believable’, we mean that it is by being given a name that places enter society. The amused reaction of older fishermen at the inability of younger fishermen to specify places illustrates de Certeau’s point well. One man recalled how, upon asking a younger man where he had set his nets, he had been informed with clumsy gestures and inarticulate directions that it was ‘up round that
headland, in that little corner, and over along the beach down past that headland’. ‘He was talking about Little Sandy and Big Sandy and Buffalo’s Rut’ laughed the older man. The inarticulateness of the younger fisherman left him referring to unbelievable places. Because they were unable to co-habit, through imagination, the places referred to, these places were rendered somewhat unbelievable and unhabitable despite the fact that the young man clearly knew them and knew how to fish them. Hugh’s, and Damien’s, sheepish mentions of their idiosyncratic places revealed their own continued, if mild, disbelief in the reality of these places.

The examples discussed above, of ways in which places came to be named, discussed and, sometimes, receive new names, suggest that most place names began as manifestations of private experience that gradually became public. This transition occurred as the fishermen who founded these places frequented them more often, began to speak about them in conversations with others and, importantly, began to show them to others. In this way, places entered society. Eventually, the idiosyncratic past of place names is forgotten, as ‘their ability to signify outlives its first definition’ (de Certeau 1984:104). The way that names enable places to be spoken of far from their orientating surrounds actually makes these named places more believable and more grounded.

In a similar way, the names Victorian fishermen give to their boats reveal personal sentiments towards loved ones that become public knowledge at the boat’s launch. Dwyer et al. (2003:10) note that boats are often named directly for a person or persons or a special place. Though ‘there was a rhythm to the names people chose, a sense of names that worked well and those that did not’ (Dwyer et al. 2003:5), choosing a name, they suggest, ‘may be an essentially private act’ (Dwyer et al. 2003:14).

It is clear from talking to Hugh and others that fishing places are focal points even before being named. Because we are social beings, with intentions and attentions constituted in social contexts, our presence in place means that places are always already socialised long before a name is bestowed. Fishermen, like all of us, are always already in place (Casey 1996). The naming of a place neither marks its beginning, as de Certeau
(1984:105) has hypothesized, nor does it ‘schematically image a people’s intentional transformation of their habitat from sheer physical terrain’ (Weiner 1991:32). Instead, the naming of a place represents a stage in the process of making oneself at home in that place and allows the potential to find there a ‘shared existential space’ (Tilley 1994:18).

**Stout Little Names**

There is something compelling about proper names. It is perhaps the understanding that names are given intentionally and, by knowing them, we might glean some understanding of the regard with which the thing named is held. But names do not, in any simple way, reveal the relationship between the namer and the named thing. Nor do they readily reveal the basis for distinguishing the thing named from its surrounds. Here I speculate on the meta-conceptual nature of these names, and how they point to particular local ways of understanding, learning and the constitution of community.

Sapir (1912) has pointed out that environment does not shape language, or indeed any other cultural form, in a direct way. He explains that:

> The mere existence, for instance, of a certain type of animal in the physical environment of a people does not suffice to give rise to a linguistic symbol referring to it. It is necessary that the animal be known by the members of the group in common and that they have some *interest*, however slight, in it before the language of the community is called upon to make reference to this particular element of the physical environment (1912:227, emphasis my own).

As other writers have pointed out, Sapir’s thesis anticipates the contemporary concern with the notion that social contexts shape interest and direct attention to particular aspects of the physical environment (Basso 1988; Gibson 1979; Harris 1998; Ingold 2000; Pálsson 1994; Weiner 2001). The current concern to show how social context shapes interest in, rather than completely constructs, the environment, allows theorists to avoid a social constructivist position that, when taken to its logical conclusion, can lead to a denial of the environment altogether (Milton 1996; Little 1999; Scoones 1999).
Figure 7.3 Casting a net at “Along the Spit”.

Figure 7.4 Enigmatic places: fishing at “Umbrella Rock”.

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Following Sapir’s (1912) notion, I propose that certain classes of place names at the Gippsland Lakes reflect kinds of interest. The majority of shared names and alternative names, and all of the idiosyncratic names, recorded on the fold-out map (fig. 7.1) reflect the particular social, pedagogical and ecological interests of the Gippsland Lakes fishing community. An enlarged section of the main fold-out map – (fig. 7.3) – is included to allow the shot names to be read more easily.

The place names for fishing shots are of three kinds. First, there are names that are obviously descriptive of some environmental or built structure that have, or had, what could be called a kind of universal saliency – names such as Tambo Spit, The End of the Island, The Grange Channel or The Latrobe. That is, names that describe things of interest to most fishermen and non-fishermen alike. It follows that these names are either wholly or partly identical to names given in Port Authority maps because they describe aspects of the place that would be of interest to anyone skippering a boat.

Secondly, there are a number of places named after particular people, usually fishermen – such as Tom Beem’s, Dick Smith’s and Tiny’s Hole – or after family homesteads built on the shores of the lake overlooking the fishing shot – Newman’s, McKenzie’s and Stevenson’s Bight. I include these names together because they point to a level of local knowledge not available to just anyone in terms of comprehending their whereabouts, their derivation or both. It is quite likely, for example, that some local residents, who are not Gippsland Lakes fishermen would also know the general location of these fishing places and to whom the names referred.
Lastly, there exist many place names that are highly contextual, requiring nuanced knowledge of the environment (*The Floating Surface*[^4], *Redfern*), of the communal narratives of events (*The Car Shot*[^5], *The Breakfast Camp*) or simply knowledge of the communal fund of place names, the derivations of which have long since been lost. Within this last group I include names that were almost private, known only to a fisherman’s and his deckhand of family; these were the *idiosyncratic names* that had emerged from personal moments, names like *The Doodle Shot*, *The Bonsai* and *The Tree*.

The bemusement of some of the younger fishermen concerning place names, the pride with which they imparted the names they did know and the fact that they found them difficult to attribute to specific places, led me to wonder about the very quality of the names themselves, particularly the names in the third category outlined above. Did they have a particular nature? Did they reflect fishermen’s own modes of knowledge and practice? The curious featurelessness and anonymity of place names at the Gippsland Lakes seems mismatched in a lake that is teeming with life and stories. But, as I will discuss below, little names point to big context and it is the logic of revelation through performance that supports these stout little names.

It is often assumed that proper names will mark out persons and objects in a manner that will foreground them in some way and thus allow them to be recognised by others – perhaps by their verbosity or exoticness, for example. Upon considering the thicket of names emerging from places at the Gippsland Lakes, however, one is struck by their apparent artlessness. This banality is produced by the fact that most place names fail to direct attention to any memorable feature of the place to which they refer. One wonders how *The Logs*, *The Red Peg*, *The Light*, or *Green Hill* refer to specific places since they appear, instead, to specify the unremarkable expanse of the background. The origins of most names were generally lost; often the camp, the dog or the windmill were no longer physically present. Place names, thus, rarely connoted any useful or distinctive

[^4]: This refers to a small swampy area, overlooking the isolated fishing place, where reed islands float on the surface of a swamp.

[^5]: This refers to a shot close to where Damien and his father park their cars (and launch their boats). Damien’s father does not call the shot by this name but Damien and Shaun do.
information about the place that a casual observer might easily discover. The blunt simplicity of many place names was not lost on fishermen. They laughed, at times, while recounting the names of the shots, wittily adding some kind of laconic explanation along the lines of: ‘yeah, The Logs, there’s some logs there!’

The ubiquitous nature of these names imparts a certain kind of crypticity that, I argue, is intentional. In contrast, it is clear that the origins of place names such as Essex and Norfolk are no longer obvious simply because their distinctive origins have been lost. Sapir notes that:

> Only a student of language history is able to analyse such names as Essex, Norfolk, and Sutton into their component elements as East Saxon, North Folk, and South Town … (1912:231).

The original longer names that once provided distinct geographically descriptive labels, indicating the place of one community relative to another, have gradually disappeared. This process of concealment was, arguably, unintentional. At the Gippsland Lakes, however, because of the way in which fishermen learn to learn, place names are not – and, I argue, never have been – conceived of as being straight-forward descriptions of places.

The feel of names at the Gippsland Lakes is certainly quite different to those of Western Apache people in east-central Arizona (Basso 1988). There, place names are highly descriptive of the particular places to which they refer, so that places are revealed as names are spoken. Basso, using the words of Sapir, has described these names as like ‘tiny imagist poems’ (1988:126, footnote 17). As Basso illustrates, the places Tsé biká’ tů yahilii (water flows down on top of a regular succession of flat rocks) or T’iis bitt’áh tů’o-lii (water flows inward underneath a cottonwood tree) appear to the eye just as they are called. In contrast to the names from the Gippsland Lakes, whose ubiquity conceals great depths of personal and social knowledge, Apache place names form an almost coercive alliance with landscape to ensure that even the most culturally incompetent
Apache person does not pass by places unmoved. Indeed, as Basso has argued, for Apache, the timelessness and solidity of landscape itself – and, therefore, the cultural knowledge sedimented therein – is present in the place names themselves. Thus, when elders ‘speak with names’ they evoke the immediacy and tangibility of places so that the lesson to be learned from the events that took place at these sites will be forceful.

The impenetrable nature of shot names – being as they are, almost empty of contextual information – provides a way of controlling fishing knowledge, a way of making it difficult to tie names to places through mere conversation. The only way one can anchor the name to the place is to actually go there and experience it. This reflects a certain kind of pedagogical tradition among fishermen, which in itself incorporates a particular broader understanding of the environment: that it is unpredictable and one can only ever have incomplete knowledge of their surrounds. Thus, just as Apache names encourage introspection through their externalising labels, the names of fishing places at the Gippsland Lakes encourage *inspection*, inquiry and social and ecological contextualisation to make sense and, thus, to be recallable.

The impenetrable nature of names exemplifies local understandings of sociality in another way. The ubiquity of many names allows one to deceive in indirect and non-confrontational ways. And, this too, was alluded to by Shaun in his comments about every stump having a name. His bafflement came from conversations with other fishermen about where they had caught their fish. These fishermen had offered Shaun valuable information, which they most likely knew would be of little or no use to him. But, still, it was information. The semblance of giving – which, in this case, relies on there being names at all – follows the valued patterns of sociality noted above, whereby fishermen always attempt to maintain communicative relationships with each other despite their essential relationship of competition.

Fishermen are aware that many place names appear relatively meaningless to newcomers and so they use names to reveal and conceal information. For instance, when a novice is told ‘I caught the fish at *Boobyella*’ – boobyella is a common name for a kind of
Eucalyptus tree – is he to understand that the fish were caught at the *Boobyella* shot in Lake King, near Metung or around Syme’s Island? Or perhaps *Boobyella* actually refers to some idiosyncratic place known only to the speaker – as Hugh commented, “everyone has a tree”. Even a novice fisherman with a fairly good understanding of when and where his colleagues tend to fish cannot be sure of where *Boobyella* might be, since people do, at times, fish outside their usual areas. Unless a fisherman is able to accurately read the social and ecological signs that emerge daily in the lake, he will not be able to ascertain which shot is being referred to. The names of fishing places, therefore, encourage people to look below the surface and to deepen their knowledge of place and event. Like the riddles older men tell about fish (see Chapter 4) place names do not give-up knowledge readily.

Other authors have noted how names can exist as referents poised at the interface between public and private knowledge of people (Akinnaso 1980) and artefacts (Dwyer et al. 2003). In these examples the authors show how names used in everyday life to refer to people or things can act, depending upon the contexts in which they are used, simply as labels or as portals to a whole universe of social knowledge. In this way, names that act to distinguish one person, boat or place from another can also refer to hidden meanings, memories, histories and narratives when used among a circumscribed group of knowledgeable people.

Read and Wyndham have written, while reflecting on the capacity of place names, that:

> Very few Australian Nineteenth century songs extol the bushland, nor even mention more than names. Yet the names are important, for these real places link the bushman to shared experiences and real individuals (2000:119)

The following excerpt from a poem quoted in Read and Wyndham (2000) is suggestive of the way in which place names can act, for those who know, as metonyms for personal relationships,
‘I’ve shore [shorn sheep] at Burrabogie and I’ve shore at Toganmain,
I’ve shore at Big Willandra and out on the Coleraine,
But before the shearin’ was over I’ve wished meself back again
Shearing for Old Tom Patterson on the one tree plain.’

Similarly, place names at the Gippsland Lakes are never mere labels because they always point to particular moments of revelation between fishermen, or for fishermen, on the lake. Place names not only specify locations but also, for certain people, recall a wealth of social knowledge and, in their capacity to memorialise interpersonal relationships, can even be constitutive of sociality.

Place names reflect a certain way of attending to one’s surrounds. They may open their arms to novices, as in the case of Western Apache place names, or they may be obstinate and impenetrable, as in the case of many of the Gippsland Lakes place names. The underlying kind of attention that the stout little names of the Gippsland Lakes index, points to a particular way in which Gippsland Lakes fishermen implicate themselves in places through the orientating movements of other, more experienced, men.

**Conclusion**

Knowledge of place names allows a fisherman to contribute to the practical, and conversational, project of belonging at the lake. In the competent use of place names fishermen impart, learn and renew the community narrative through the telling and retelling of events that can be anchored to known sites. In this way, events become available for recollection. To be able to call the shots, speak about them and recall them, is a sign of belonging arrived at by learning to fish for yourself and alongside others.

The style of place names indicates a particular kind of pedagogical inclination whereby newcomers are encouraged to experience, alongside more experienced men, particular, local, dimensions of shared places at the Gippsland Lakes. The way in which stout names conceal big context is an index of the importance placed upon contextual knowledge at the Gippsland Lakes. The experience of mapping the shots alongside fishermen
highlighted this fact to me. During this process it became clear that I had unwittingly foregrounded the conservative aspects of fishermen’s lives and experiences. It was the fishermen themselves who tirelessly sought to enliven my map with process and context, while remaining proud that the familiar names were being spoken of and enquired about. When presented with the mapping task it was the fishermen themselves who urged me not to find there a monolithic community that spoke with one voice. Instead, they urged me to see the polysymy of deviations and innovations that were played out against a background of significant, but not overarching, constancy.

‘It’s a shame to see some of the old names dying’, one older fisherman said (Lee and Ellis 2001:61). The insurmountable fact is that there are few fishermen now left on the Gippsland Lakes to call the shots by their names, let alone conceal or reveal their knowledge of places to newcomers. Names, then, were perhaps for a time when fishermen were more numerous and encounters on the water, and the land, more frequent. I had the opportunity to listen to fishermen use names and discuss their relevance but it was clear that the ‘shared places’ were fading from awareness.
Chapter 8
The Dissolution of the Neighbourhood

Introduction
Conversations in Places
Loss
The Concretization of Performance
Entrainment
Conclusion

Introduction

Fishermen show their commitment to the neighbourhood through the attention they pay to ensuring that family remains back-grounded in the day-to-day round of fishing. Their efforts enable the generation of ‘reliably local subjects’, understandable environments and known places. The attention and commitment they pay to ensuring the maintenance of these things expresses an emotional investment in the neighbourhood and reveals the neighbourhood as ‘a structure of feeling’ (Appadurai 1995:206).

Yet, neighbourhoods, while being constituted by local subjects for themselves and of themselves, exist within wider contexts and can themselves become subject to the concerns of external forces. Thus, after positing the neighbourhood, I turn now to briefly explore its gradual passing. Here I discuss how, as the neighbourhood becomes progressively entrained within the nation state, the generation of local subjectivities becomes more and more difficult to achieve. This is because the nation state has no use for Gentlemen’s Agreements, stout names or local theories of knowledge. The neighbourhood’s dissolution, I show, has emotional repercussions.

I address the dissolution of the neighbourhood from a number of perspectives. I begin with a final portrait of how local subjects generate the neighbourhood through ‘conversations in places’, in order to draw a contrast with the subsequent section in which I illustrate, using fishermen’s melancholic narratives, the ‘symptoms’ of neighbourhood dissolution. Fishermen sensed this dissolution and expressed their distress in statements
such as ‘there are no gentlemen anymore’ or ‘the old names are disappearing’. Their assertions pointed to the gradual disappearance of shared and known places that, in turn, pointed to the slowing down of processes by which local subjectivities were constituted and reproduced.

In the closing sections of this chapter I discuss the ultimate cause of fishermen’s distress – the gradual entrainment of the neighbourhood within the nation state. I suggest that, partly as a response to these intrusions and partly as a result of them, fishermen had increasingly begun to foreground ascriptive practices of neighbourhood constitution. In the process, they have begun to objectify themselves and their surrounds, transforming the ineffable performances of everyday life on the lake into a static artefactual heritage.

I turn now to briefly restate how meaningful places are created at the Gippsland Lakes in order to provide context to subsequent discussion concerning how the lake is becoming a place of absence.

Conversations in Places

Places hold, in particular configurations, all manner of animate, inanimate and disembodied things. Memories and objects emerge for us, in particular configurations, when we are in the midst of known places or when we imagine their contours. It is the sensuality and the immediacy of places that provokes recollection and the anticipation of past and future events. In so doing, places move us in particular ways. Echoing the discussion begun in Chapter 7, which reflected on how place can become a portal to recollection, Casey writes that:

[place] is the generatrix for the collection, as well as the recollection, of all that occurs in the lives of sentient beings … Its power consists in gathering these lives and things, each with its own space and time, into one arena of common engagement (1996:26).
Because the concept of place captures both social and ecological aspects of experience it can accommodate the recursive nature of human-environment relationships. In this sense of place, the environment is not a neutral backdrop to action, yet neither does it explain the meanings peculiar to the direction, for example, of boats or stories. In place, emotional, political and social threads of experience mingle with, and affect, people’s perceptions of, and interactions with, their environments. In turn, environmental states influence people’s own emotional, social and political wellbeing.

I was told a story while fishing in a particular place one day that illustrated the way that fishing shots can be portals to past conversations and, in this way, act as tiny memorials to past intersubjective moments. The fisherman recalled that it was in this place twenty-five years earlier during the last really big flood – before the Thompson Dam was built – that he had caught a most unusual haul. The water was very high and lapping at people’s doors when he left to go fishing. As he wandered around the lake looking for signs of fish, he came across a large flotilla of pumpkins. These had been washed down from the McAlister irrigation district which was starting to become the enormous producer of vegetables it is today. Since he had not found anything better to catch, he netted this unlikely quarry. For him the most amusing moment was when he encountered another fisherman on the way home. When asked if he had had any luck, instead of the classic evasive reply of ‘oh, yeah, not too bad’ or ‘nah, not much going on’, he laughingly pulled back his tarpaulin to reveal the huge pile of pumpkins. Astonished, but always flexible, the other man asked where he had caught them and was directed to the exact spot.

This story had major significance for the fisherman who told it. It illustrated the complexity and density of information held at this fishing site – information that encompasses the politics of water at a regional level and the politics of information and space at the level of the fishing community. It is also clear, from this story, that the movement of water moves men and renews the world in sometimes remarkable ways, while in no way determining the meaning that might be found in fishing places.
For the fisherman telling the story, the encounter with the other man was central to the story’s import. The episode was worth recalling not because pumpkins were involved, instead of fish, or because a reply was forthcoming, but because the pumpkin catcher had replied in truth, revealing his catch for all to see. The story implicitly pointed to the fact that information sharing is often unreciprocated and that non-reciprocation is not detrimental to relationships. Rather, what is detrimental to relationships is to not engage with others at all. It is a reminder that engagement with another is always worthwhile because it is creative, leading to the investment of meaning in places that is emergent from, and coauthored by, laughing, growling or posturing fishermen.

For the Western Apache wisdom sits in places (Basso 1996). These hardy narratives, Basso explains, take up residence in landscapes, communicating with all those who can interpret the intimate syntax of particular paths and topographies. For the Apache, place is formed by long ago events that remain emplaced through the retelling of the stories that describe them. At the Gippsland Lakes, on the other hand, place is constituted and enlivened by the accretion and overlaying of recallable conversational moments.

At the Gippsland Lakes, as I have argued in the previous two chapters, places come into being as events take place in their midst. For fishermen, the lake is made vital by the dynamic of revelation, conversation and habitation. At the turn of the 21st century, however, the processes whereby places become habitable and believable are gradually being lost, as fewer men traverse the lake in search of fish and others, grown old, have no newcomers to reveal their common-places to. The loss of these social aspects of the lakescape, social aspects crystallised in place names, has emotional consequences. In the following section I go on to discuss the ‘symptoms’ of this decline, symptoms that were evidenced by a mood of loss that permeated conversations I had with fishermen about their work and the lake.
Loss

A few years before I arrived to do my fieldwork at the Gippsland Lakes the fishing fleet had been reduced by almost a half through a licence buy-back scheme. This scheme had been very much inspired by criticisms from the state’s recreational fishing lobby that commercial fishermen were taking too many fish from the lake. The push to reduce the number of commercial fishing licences continues. Fishermen are becoming resigned to the fact that they are no longer welcome to fish the lake, and are expecting to be summarily dismissed by the government just as estuarine fishermen to the east and north have been.

Hostility from outsiders towards commercial fishing was upsetting to fishermen, yet their responses to these threats were apathetic at best. Most were resigned to the fact that there was nothing that could be done to prevent what they saw as the inevitable banning of commercial fishing at the Gippsland Lakes. Indeed, most fishermen seemed to have little energy to address the political crisis that was emerging at the lakes. At fishermen’s meetings a listless silence prevailed when talk of how to respond to their critics arose. This sense of resignation resounded throughout many conversations I overheard and shared with fishermen, inflecting those dialogues with a negative pall and giving me the sense that what I was documenting was already consigned to history.

I came to recognise resignation in such comments as ‘there are no gentlemen anymore’ or ‘all the names are disappearing’ or ‘there are places in the lake too sick to eat the fish from’. These comments about failed morality, lost places and decaying environments expressed fishermen’s sense that something fundamental was changing. It was not that hostility towards them from recreational fishermen and tourists now disturbed them, since this had always existed. Nor was it that they had fallen on hard times since, by Australian standards, most lake fishermen were financially secure1. Instead, these comments

1 The average annual catch value for the lake fishery between 2000 and 2006 was $A1,746,000 (DPI 2006). Most years there were seventeen to eighteen licence holders fishing thus the average before tax and expenses income for fishermen was just under $A100,000. Since operating expenses for small fishing businesses are relatively low, the net, before tax, income is likely to have been above the average of $A60,000 for Australia (ABS 2006). Further, a recent survey indicated that the average annual capital value
revealed an unarticulated, yet growing, sadness among fishermen caused by a shift in the way that sociality was constituted at the Gippsland Lakes. This sense of malaise I encountered emerged, in particular, in located conversations. That is, this moodiness emerged at fishing places, or in narratives that were located at fishing places. Thus, it seemed to me as if places themselves were becoming stained by the creeping malaise. I came to realise that these discontented conversations were linked by the common denominator of place.

Places may disappear or be destroyed in an instant, or they may slip away almost imperceptibly. Because places emerge in the presence of particular people, or groups of people, and can be understood as aspects of those people, they can be lost just as thoroughly through the inundation of forgetting – when people no longer use them or discuss them – as they can through physical destruction. When Peter Read (1996) researched his book *Returning to Nothing: The Meaning of Lost Places* he was stirred by the intensity of the grief people felt for their lost homes, suburbs and towns, places that had been lost to them because of old age, cyclone or inundation. As one woman, who had worked for many years at a cattle station, told Read when reflecting on her return to that place:

> When I got to the place, I was saddened by what I saw. The station house had been burned down by a bushfire some years earlier. There were a few things still among the ruins. I found an old mincer that I had probably held in my working hands. The old frame of the shearing shed still stood. I looked around me at these ruins and tears welled-up in my eyes … I saw my life pass before me on that day, at that special place. (Rita Huggins, quoted in Read 1996:22).

Indeed, it is because places can become an index of social relationships, and can remain as a link to those social relationships that their loss is felt as traumatic. It is the gradual

\[ \text{of a Gippsland Lakes fishing business (excluding the licence value) was $A250,000 (Schirmer and Pickworth 2005). The distribution of earnings within the fishery was probably very uneven, however. Although I never directly asked a fisherman how much he earned in a year (because it was considered highly sensitive information) one man told me that he had earned $A700,000 in one good year. Most fishermen owned their own homes and carried little debt and many of these fishermen said that they simply fished to make a small wage indicating their general sense of financial security.} \]

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passing of what Basso (1996) has called the inter-animating dialectic between place and person that is producing the mood of apathy and malaise at the Gippsland Lakes. This sense of loss resounds in the following extract. Here, Joseph dolefully comments upon Lake Wellington, a place he has fished most of his life:

> It was a paradise … for bird life and fish. But not any more. It’s soon going to be just tourists, they can turn up, look at it and go home. They don’t know what they’re looking at so they’re happy.

Joseph was suggesting that there were once people – fishermen – who did know what they were looking at: they knew the fishing places, their names and the stories which collected there. These were men who would care about the current loss of social and ecological life if they were still there to observe it. In his words we sense an absence of both people and other creatures – an altered state that is now as blank, and unmoved, as the expressions on the tourist’s faces.

In another reflection we are told explicitly how the lake was once understood as a social place which has now become stilled and almost empty of social life:

> Well when [fishermen] get together in a group the whole lot of them are trying to pick the other bloke’s mind … while the other bloke is trying to keep what he knows to himself and pick the other bloke’s …. They’d congregate behind any point of the lake and spend the day [there, before] fishing of a night. There’d be an unprovoked fight and they’d be all bickering with each other. That’s just the way it was … not like that now. Occasionally we might meet one out on the lake [and] discuss what needs to be discussed. But groups of fishermen getting together, nah I don’t think that happens anymore.

The tone of these remarks which is like many I heard, are suggestive of a stillness and a silence that has descended over places in the lakes, as they are no longer animated by the presence of those who know them.
These comments tell us that, for fishermen, the social dimensions of places are eroding as fewer fishermen interact less often upon the lakes. In the past, large numbers of fishermen sailed or motored across the lake, following fish and the rumour of fish. They stopped at fishing shots. They discussed these places, fought over them, and memorialised these events in the capacious metonymic containers that are place names. Now, however, there are too few fishermen to pass-on these memories and secure them in place.

Often, in conversation about the ‘hows’ and ‘what ifs’ of Gentlemen’s Agreements, I found a similar doleful tone. On these occasions I was told that fishermen no longer behaved as gentlemen towards each other and that therefore the agreements were pretty much defunct. Although I understood these comments as partly censorious, and intended to encourage gentlemanly behaviour, I also sensed that the sometimes wistful tones in which fishermen phrased them were, again, symptomatic of the ways in which fishermen were experiencing a change to the quality and quantity of relationships on the lake.

The lamentation that there were no gentlemen anymore might seem odd since, as described in Chapter 5, conflicts continued to be negotiated according to the idiom of the gentleman. What is changing, however, is that the moments in which places are reanimated through the process of emplaced social engagement – processes by which gentlemen, too, come into being – are becoming increasingly sporadic.

Talk about the lack of gentlemen on the lake, then, was not nostalgia for a more courteous past, but, rather, a commentary on the diminished frequency of the sort of processes through which fishermen acknowledged each other as fellow moral persons, in competition, but in competition together. Further, it was a commentary on the sense that once meaningful places were becoming empty of significance as people no longer held them in place through contestation, dialogue and the telling of stories created by events that occurred there. These changes to the constitution of emplaced personhood were felt as a decline in morality and experienced as loss.
The loss of people from places is hard for fishermen to imagine. It is no coincidence that many of the older men I spoke to shared a common fantasy of sailing the lake system once again, for one last time. They would invite me on these imaginary journeys of revelation, and explain how much more I would understand if only one more journey were possible. These daydreams highlighted the way in which places were being lost to them, not through the physical-environmental destruction that accounted for so much outside concern for the lake system, but through the running down of processes that made places socially believable.

Accompanying these daydreams were stories offered in counter-point about new groups of people, particularly tourists, who were beginning to occupy the lake. Tourists were portrayed as a homogeneous, inept and frustrating group who blundered across the lake unwitting of danger to themselves and of the location of fishermen’s nets. A favourite kind of story about ‘the tourist’ was a slap-stick portrayal of a water skier who collides with a submerged tree and consequently is catapulted through the air. And another – the tourist who gets lost – as Ronald and Brian discuss here:

Ronald: If you see them with a [Captain’s] hat on that’s the end of it! They think they know everything; that’s when they get lost!

Brian: The bigger the Captain’s hat, the bloody dopier they are!

Ronald: Yep they gotta have the Captain’s hat on!

Brian: [They hire a] … boat and since they’d hired the boat their missus would go and buy them a flash hat: *The Skipper*!

The fishermen’s resentment of tourists does not grow from being objectified by the tourist gaze (cf. Puijik 1996). Rather, it comes from the sense of being outnumbered by a group of people who do not know, or care about, the lake in the same way that they do.

The loss of social life from the lake is inflecting the way that fishermen perceive the social and the environmental aspects of places. The disaffection and disorientation that
fishermen felt as a result of atrophied social relationships was also voiced through commentary on the health of the lake.

For instance, one fisherman told me, somewhat ashamed, that he would no longer eat fish from parts of the lake because he thought these places too putrid. Others showed me photos of the terrible rashes they had acquired while fishing in what they thought of as ‘poisonous’ places. And another showed me places ruined by the rapid encroachment of epiphyte algae that clung to the sea-grass and suffocated it in a blanket of darkness. While still others interposed narratives of aging or diseased bodies alongside narratives of the lake’s slow demise. In these accounts the experience of each ravaged body – the man and the lake – seeming to intermingle with perceptions of the other.

At first I assumed that their despondency was a reflection of, and a response to, the nature of the water itself, which had, over many years, become increasingly stagnant, sluggish and barren, as water from the rivers that once fed the lake system had been diverted to the city. I myself had felt troubled by the state of the environment at the Gippsland Lakes and had initially attributed similar thoughts to fishermen. Environmental change was not the primary reason for the fishermen’s sorrow, however.

Fishermen have tended to stress the unpredictability of the lake’s ecology (as discussed in Chapter 4), emphasising the way it has shifted in the course of the past 100 years from a fresh water system to one that is increasingly saline. They understood that these past changes – some of which, to an outsider, seemed less than ideal – had been brought about through human interventions. They did not read them as degradation, however. Nor did they lament them. Rather, they embraced these changes as opportunities to catch different fish or try new fishing methods. This was beginning to change, however. Though segments of putrid water, rapid algal growth and rashes had been common for many decades, these altered environmental states in known places were felt to be the result of pernicious change. Fishermen’s sense that the environment had changed for the worse can be explained by the diminishment of places that were once, and are no longer, animated and replenished by revelatory encounters between fishermen.
Fishermen have largely been the authors of their local world. And, until recently, the ways in which external forces, such as the nation state, have articulated with, and manifested in, the local lake world has not contributed significantly to the production, and reproduction, of that world. Lately, however, it seems that fishermen’s ability to meet these external pressures on their own terms has begun to slip. In fact, often the ways in which fishermen are attempting to meet these intrusions, as I will discuss in the following section, are themselves contributing to the demise of local social and ecological terrains.

Concretization of Performance

In the final months of my time at the Gippsland Lakes a book about the lake fishing community was published: *Where Pelicans Are: A Story of Tragedy and Tranquility* (Seevers 2004). The emergence of a book written by a member of the ‘wider’ fishing community, at a time when fishermen were finding it increasingly difficult to maintain control over the way in which the neighbourhood was produced, was significant. The narrative represented a mid-way point in what could be understood as the gradual reification of fishermen’s understandings of their relationships to one another and their surrounds – a transformation that was being bought about by the continuing entrainment of the neighbourhood within the nation state. The publication in 2001 of *Casting the Net: Early Fishing Families of the Gippsland Coast* (Lee and Ellis), and the Victorian Bay and Inlet Fisheries Association’s (VBIFA) Environmental Management System in 2005, expressed this transformation even more convincingly.

Importantly, the various publications were not simply produced for public consumption, but were also intended as means by which fishermen themselves could better understand and reproduce their relationships to one another, their surrounds or both. This was particularly true of the Environmental Management System (EMS) discussed in the final part of this section. Thus, fishermen increasingly began to reproduce the neighbourhood through text rather than through performance.

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2 Joy Seevers is the daughter of a Gippsland Lakes fisherman.
Where Pelicans Are (Seevers 2004) lyrically chronicles the tragic drowning, and its aftermath, of a young Gippsland Lakes fisherman. The memoir, written by the young man’s aunt, documents the family’s and the community’s response to the death. Joy Seevers and her nephew are from a ‘major fishing family’ that can trace its beginnings back four and five generations, respectively, yet the way the narrative is structured ensures that family history remains as background to, rather than constitutive of, the story of the fisherman’s death. The author uses a particular story-telling style to achieve this sense of fluidity. The memoir unfolds as a succession of narratives told from the perspective of different family members, presenting a shifting play of interpretations and responses to the death that gives the sense of a family in history rather than a statement of family history. In this way, the style of the memoir remains in keeping with lake fishermen’s general mode of conceptualising community and belonging.

The contents of the memoir similarly strives to present the sense of a community constituted by participation. This is particularly true of the way in which the book describes the constitution of the lake fishing community through performative acts of mourning dramatically rendered in different ways throughout. In the story, it is the young man’s grandfather and the latter’s brother, and not the water police, who find his lost submerged body. The author explains, of her father and uncle that:

[their] knowledge of the lakes was so entrenched that it had become almost second nature for [them] to know what could happen at a certain place under certain circumstances. The brothers had fished the waters around Tambo Bay many times over the years, could visualize every channel and weedy sand bank near the river mouth. And they knew exactly what would happen if a man fell over board in that area. (Seevers 2004:99).

She goes on to describe how the men devise a plan to recover the young man’s body, which is rapidly successful:
[They] talked quietly together about how they could use their experience and knowledge to help bring the search to an end …. With this knowledge the elders designed a plan. They would make up a line that was as simple to assemble as it would be uncomplicated to use. The design required a length of lead-weighted rope one hundred and seventy five yards long. One hundred and fifty treble fish hooks tied onto snoods would be attached to the line, one every two feet … when the line was cast out onto the lake and dragged through the water … the line of hooks would snag firmly in the young fisherman’s clothing (Seevers 2004:103-104).

Here we see that it is the old men’s knowledge of place that enables them to perform their last act of love towards the young man. The older fishermen’s intimate knowledge of place is contrasted with the knowledge of expert police divers who search for the young man for days, without success. Thus, it is through performance of fishing skill that the men’s love is best demonstrated towards the young member of the family. Again the author draws our attention to the important identifier of community. It is not simply how much time these men have spent on earth – their ability to act as witnesses to the past, like spectators at a parade – that counts as an expression of connectivity between the young man and his relatives; what counts is their ability to act upon their deeply emplaced experience.

In the context of the death of her nephew, the author describes her story as not about ‘a happy ending, but rather, a new beginning’ (Seevers 2004:7). The narrative ends with the author imagining her parents (the young man’s grandparents), in their old age, taking a final journey through the lake system and visiting the sites in the lake they have known, as if to say a final goodbye. The final sentence reads ‘Above them, the stars shone brightly and the man and woman sat on into the night, at peace on their lake where pelicans are’ (Seevers 2004:167). Significantly we are told earlier that:

There was an old story that the local pelicans were entrusted with the souls of departed fishermen. Helen liked this story and often fancied that she knew which of the pelicans were her relations come to visit her (Seevers 2004:67).
Thus, in the final moments of the book we have an image of an elderly couple at peace after their journey of remembering, communing among the souls of their departed relatives, among them, perhaps, their grandson. Despite the momentum that is implied by both the anticipation of ‘a new beginning’ and the perspectival structure of the narrative, the closing moments of the book evoke a feeling of finality, whereby both the young man and his grandparents lose contact with the lake through death and old age, respectively.

The author’s decision to allow the older generation the closing perspective is perhaps indicative of both an external perception of the way history and memoir should be written, as well as the current state of the fishing community itself where there are fewer young men participating in the fishery than ever before. There is no other young man to follow in the family tradition through whom a ‘new beginning’ might be conceived. Indeed, the profoundly sad story of the drowned young fisherman may be seen as both a metaphor for the loss of young men to the fishery and a metaphor for the loss of the fishery in general.

Having being brought-up in the midst of a family that fished the author is well aware of the emphasis placed upon the achievement of belonging to the fishing community. She herself, however, had not personally achieved this position and thus, ultimately, her story remains a loving memorial to her nephew, rather than a community – constituting performance of grief. And, indeed, when the elderly couple commune among the souls of their relatives, while imaging the new beginning through which ‘the family’ might be reborn, it is the fixed branching logic of descent that we are left with, finally, in the foreground.

Thus, the tension between becoming a fisherman through experience, and simply being a fisherman by birth, so beautifully expressed in the book, is ultimately transcended by the conclusive quality of the book form itself because it allows no re-negotiation of the relationships conceived therein. The very existence of Where Pelicans Are, while
illustrating the tension between the competing discourses of tradition and becoming, represents the loosening of this tension.

The publication of the oral history *Casting the Net: Early Fishing Families of the Gippsland Lakes* (Lee and Ellis 2001) just prior to my arrival at the lake evinced, even more powerfully, the changing nature of fishermen’s understandings of their relationships to one another. This collection compiled memories about the early fishing industry from people ‘descended from original men and women … of the major fishing families of the Gippsland Coast’ (Lee and Ellis 2001:i).

The structure and content of *Casting the Net* hints at the *inevitability* of a future where fishermen no longer fish the lake, but merely remember doing so, and in so doing the text casts the fishermen as historical artifacts. The inevitability of their relegation to history is further entrenched by the way that commercial fishing history is represented as being in a long line of failed, now extinct, fishing societies beginning with the indigenous Kurnai people, followed by the Chinese and, now, Europeans. In this way, the collection gives the impression that Europeans, Chinese and Indigenous people never fished side by side in the early days of European settlement (cf. Synan 1989). And, in so doing, it establishes an artificial, successional framework whereby one failed mode of engaging with the lake follows another, so that it seems only a matter of time, *naturally*, before commercial fishermen, too, become fragments of the past.

All the individuals represented in the book were over sixty years in age. Thus, as in so many books of this kind, there is an assumption that history and genealogy rather than participation, provide the basis for group membership. This, as I have argued, is very different to the ways in which Gippsland Lakes fishermen themselves, including elderly or retired fishermen, attempt to emphasise, among themselves, the achievement of belonging through the acquisition of particular sets of skills, moral attitudes and knowledge of narrative terrains.
Rather than allow these stories to roam free as conversations in places *Casting the Net* judged insufficient the continued efforts of elderly and retired fishermen to involve themselves in the lake neighbourhood through their contributions to the daily round of fishing gossip, ‘weather talk’ and ‘fish advice’. As I have argued, retired fishermen were never happier than when they were able to contribute to the constitution of the neighbourhood in this manner. In occupational contexts they tended to resist being cast as representatives of the group, neither presenting themselves as vessels of timeless knowledge through which the group might be conceived, nor as progenitors of the group. Instead, they looked to the ‘young blokes’ as the primary constituents of the lake neighbourhood and, thus, strived to cultivate relationships with contemporary licence holders whenever they could. Yet the oral history collection challenged, and found wanting, these attempts to contribute.

It is very easy for an outsider working with retired fishermen to collapse the life-world of becoming into genealogical or historical inevitability since, for fishermen, family is only ever just below the surface of all their performances. Because presentations of group identity framed by genealogical depth are well received by the media and politicians alike, fishermen’s participation in a project such as *Casting the Net* – one that objectifies relationships through the lens of genealogy – is understandable.

At the launch of *Casting the Net* the editors made it clear that one of the rationales behind the publication, and its significance to the Gippsland region, was to ensure that the knowledge and stories belonging to those who had contributed to the book ‘were not lost forever’. The desire among editors and contributors to provide these stories as text for public consumption and, more significantly, as somewhat of an *aide-mémoire* for the community itself was symptomatic of the anxiety among the contributors that something was being lost. As I have argued above, the source of this anxiety is the loss of processes by which relationships, knowledge, stories and names were formed and revealed, rather than the loss of these items per se. And because the public itemisation of stories and knowledge could not, by its very nature, restore these processes, it did nothing to allay fishermen’s creeping sense of loss.
Casting the Net (see Lee and Ellis 2001) presents a very different understanding of community, memory, heritage and loss to that of Joy Seevers’ account in Where Pelicans Are. In the former account it is the accrual and itemization of ‘knowledge’ or ‘stories’ that constructs the community, while the content and narrative style of the latter tell of a community constituted through participation. And yet, because both these accounts of community ‘fix’, in book form, what was once performed in and emergent from particular relational contexts, neither can have any reconstitutive effects.

Another more direct attempt to direct the fate of the neighbourhood was undertaken by a number of the fishermen throughout 2002-2005. This effort culminated in the formulation of an Environmental Management System for the Gippsland Lakes fishery (VBIFA 2005). During 2002 a few fishermen had established a Gippsland Lakes branch of the Victorian Bays and Inlets Fishermen’s Association (VBIFA). VBIFA, a new organization conceived in early 2002, hoped to unify and represent all the fishermen who fished Victoria’s bays and inlets including fishermen from bays and inlets further west of the lake at Corner Inlet, Western Port Bay and Port Phillip Bay. In 2004, of the ninety-three bay and inlet licence holders across Victoria nineteen belonged to VBIFA. At this time each bay and inlet fishery was represented by at least one man and five of the nineteen men who belonged to VBIFA were Gippsland Lakes fishermen.

VBIFA had been established because some bay and inlet fishermen felt that the peak commercial fishing body, Seafood Industries Victoria (SIV), was not adequately addressing the specific concerns of bays and inlets fishermen, the most critical of which was to contain the threat posed by the powerful Victorian recreational fishing association – VRFish – who had made it their expressed goal to ban commercial fishing in Victoria’s bays and inlets.

After more than 100 years of opposition to commercial fishing in Victoria’s embayments (Synan 1989), VRFish successfully lobbied in 2003 for the closure to commercial fishing of two large bodies of water in east Gippsland – Mallacoota Inlet and Lake Tyers.
Gippsland Lakes fishermen, working on a theory somewhat akin to the ‘domino effect’, and with a well-honed appreciation of the Realpolitik of their situation, suspected that, because they were now the fishery furthest from Victoria’s capital Melbourne, they were the most likely to suffer the next closure.

The approach of VBIFA was to plead their case to the public and, through the latter, to the government using, unexpectedly, the government’s own language of sustainability. Gippsland Lakes fishermen, in particular, had not used this language before and many were uncomfortable with it. VBIFA had decided to seek environmental credibility by designing their own Environmental Management System (EMS) in conjunction with an independent fisheries scientist (VBIFA 2005). In general terms the aims of an EMS are to identify, manage and reduce an organization’s harmful impact on the environment. In Australia both federal and state governments are supportive of organizations establishing EMS protocols. Thus the fishermen were able to secure a grant from the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation (FRDC), a body funded by the federal government, with which they employed a fisheries scientist to complete the environmental audit that formed the main substance of the EMS.

VBIFA’s EMS was not ambitious. As the members saw it, their main goal was to maintain the status quo because ‘fishing activities in the Victorian bays and inlets generally present low risks to the environment’ (VBIFA 2005:34). The environmental plan they outlined did not recommend any major changes to ways in which fishermen fished the lake. Rather, the approach taken highlighted the fact that there was actually very little fishermen could do to address declining fish populations, because the decline was very much caused by the combined deleterious effect of environmental modifications taking place across the vast Gippsland Lakes catchment. The VBIFA EMS largely confirmed earlier reports, commissioned by the state government, which had concluded that commercial fishing at the Gippsland Lakes did not greatly influence fish populations (WMB Oceanics 1997).

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3 Corner Inlet fishermen had used this approach before – i.e. casting themselves as concerned custodians of the marine environment – in their fight against the introduction of ‘no-take’ marine parks at Corner Inlet.
The EMS was an exercise in formalising and codifying contemporary fishing practice in order that it might be better understood and evaluated. The few Gippsland Lakes fishermen who participated in the production of the EMS contributed to the concretization process of which *Casting the Net* and *Where Pelicans Are* were a part – a process that fixed in text a relational style which had always been fluid and negotiable.

To write their EMS, fishermen compiled a full inventory of their current practices and technology. For example, they catalogued all the nets they used, mesh sizes, and gave detailed accounts of on-board fishing procedures. In doing this they outlined risks their fishing operations posed to the environment and, thus, established a series of events to be mitigated: ‘avoid motoring through seagrass’, ‘release fish away from birds’ and ‘handle fish carefully during sorting, measuring and releasing’ (VBIFA 2005:37). In the attempt to capture the minutiae of everyday fishing practice the EMS transformed practices that made sense in the context of fishermen’s daily pursuit of fish into practices that made sense in terms of the Department of Primary Industry’s (DPI) notion of sustainability.

In producing this document, fishermen had radically restated their understanding of the environment (see Chapter 4). The EMS document suggests that the environment can be understood and managed in such a way as to fulfill particular objectives. In practice, however, fishermen tended to approach the environment according to the principle of *incomplete knowledge* – as if it was largely unknowable and, thus, largely unmanageable; in this way, fishermen strove to be responsive to their surrounds, rather than controlling of them. But the EMS reduced environmental responsiveness to programmatic behaviours.

Further, the EMS document, in counterpoint to the processual negotiations of gentlemanly comportment outlined in Chapter 5, radically reconfigured the way in which fishermen dealt with conflict. For example, outlined in the section headed ‘Non Compliance with Regulations’ are various actions to be taken when a member of VBIFA is found to be flouting the objectives set out in the EMS, or when a member’s ‘continued
commitment to VBIFA’ is in question. In these circumstances the EMS recommends ‘discipline, suspension and expulsion’ (VBIFA 2005:35). There is no ambiguity in these ‘actions to be taken’. The EMS sets out a program for interpersonal relationships that is entirely contradictory to fishermen’s understanding of the way in which conflict should be dealt with. Within the EMS framework there is no room through which to provide censure as well as an acknowledgement of togetherness. It is difficult to imagine how relationships among fishermen could survive this kind of ‘suspension’ or ‘termination’ because the terms of compliance, in their written form and in their content leave no room for alternative interpretations and, therefore, suffer from a massive failure of irony.

VBIFA points out that an important aspect of the EMS was to facilitate and promote communication between fishermen, necessarily because the implementation of the National Competition Policy had abolished the apprenticeship scheme established by the fishermen themselves. This scheme had formerly ‘assist[ed] new and less experienced fishers’ (VBIFA 2005:34) to learn and adopt best fishing practices and had been a valued institution through which the community of practice had been produced and reproduced (see Chapter 3). Thus, the EMS was envisioned as the new way by which young fishermen were to become initiated into the practice community. Again, this initiative was symptomatic of the way in which external bodies were reformulating the terms by which the neighbourhood was constituted. Where once relationships to people and places were fluid and contextual, it was becoming clear that relationships were beginning to be conceived of as inflexible sets of rules to be followed.

Tellingly, only a few Gippsland Lakes fishermen joined VBIFA during the time I lived at the lakes. VBIFA had low support among Gippsland Lakes fishermen because the EMS framework tended to confound fishermen’s understandings of their relationship to the environment and to each other. Most of the other fishermen I spoke to who had not joined the new association were extremely negative about the idea of developing an EMS. Some said it was ‘pointless’; others said it was just an excuse for some ‘lazy’ fishermen to attend more meetings and spend less time fishing. None of these men believed that the
organisation would influence the state government’s wary attitude to commercial fishing in Victoria’s bays and inlets.

Although the older, more experienced fishermen did not readily articulate the basis of their dissatisfaction with VBIFA’s approach, it was clear that they were wary of the way in which VBIFA, far from representing their practices and views, was beginning to imitate the same government bodies that it had been intended to contain and manage. The older fishermen’s somewhat inarticulate assertion that only ‘lazy’ fishermen had joined VBIFA was indicative of their sense of the bureaucratization of the neighbourhood. This is because ‘laziness’ was associated with insufficient and inauthentic fishing practice – the kind of not-being-there-ness that fisheries managers and fisheries scientists practiced. In the opinion of many fishermen the members of VBIFA spent too much time at meetings thinking about the lake in inappropriate ways.

It is perhaps not surprising then, that the men who joined VBIFA were some of the youngest men fishing. And, further, that of the two men who began fishing with no prior family history in the industry, both had joined VBIFA. Arguably, these less experienced men had not come to fully perceive the lake in the way that the older men did. At the same time they were becoming enskilled by the nation state that had encouraged them, through the granting of monies toward the completion of the EMS process, to begin to understand their surrounds and their relationships to one another differently. Indeed, the young fishermen who were keen participants in VBIFA meetings spoke of how they were taking great pleasure in learning this new way of seeing the world.

**Entrainment**

At the Gippsland Lakes the neighbourhood is becoming more and more entrained by the disciplining and homogenizing projects of the nation state. The implementation of ‘recreational fishing only’ areas and the introduction of the National Competition Policy are good examples of this process. Such policies allow only one kind of conceptualisation of sociality and lakescape and, in this way, mirror the flatness of bureaucratic visions and
decisions. In turn, these policies make people and their places easier for bureaucracies to manage.

Through a sense of loss, anxiety and inexperience, in an attempt to contain and manage these alternative visions, fishermen were beginning to employ the powerful concepts and languages through which the nation state itself identifies and constitutes its subjects and places. Elderly retired fishermen attempted to allay the sense that their own ‘legitimate’ modes of social connectivity and attachment to place were being lost by employing the ‘modern’ trope of ‘heritage’ in collections such as *Casting the Net*, a trope through which the nation too establishes its legitimacy (Kapferer 1988). At the same time, in formulating an EMS in order to affirm their own particular mode of conceiving of their surrounds, less experienced fishermen deployed the ‘modern’ trope of ‘sustainability’ – a trope that the nation state utilizes to conceive of its own legitimate environments and legitimate modes of interacting with these national landscapes.

In replying to genial and hostile interventions from outsiders, by fixing their practices in text, fishermen pre-empted their ability to move through the lake in a responsive manner and, in this way, made their neighbourhood easier for the nation state to manage. The cessation of movement that the publication of these texts entailed heralded the attenuation of processes through which ongoing relationships to people and places were formed and reformed anew. Hostile interventions such as licence buy-back policies implemented at the behest of the recreational fishing association continued apace. And so fewer men were able to meet at, and converse in, the lake’s places – processes which, if they had continued to flourish, would have negated the affects of concretization projects such as the EMS and *Where Pelicans Are* and *Casting the Net*. Thus, as time passed the neighbourhood of known places dissolved as few remained to recognize, restate and reimagine the contours of that local world.
Conclusion

Lake fishermen know that it is only by peering across, and through, the lake in a certain manner, learned in the presence of respected, accomplished fishermen, that the signs pertinent to the task of fishing become apparent. As new fishermen become familiar with the lake through different, more codified representations of social and environmental knowledge, it is clear to current fishermen that the lake’s places – dependent, as they are, upon locally constituted ways of seeing, listening, tasting and touching – will slowly recede into oblivion. Older fishermen reflect upon this loss, in their daydreams, when they imagine touring the lake system one last time. On these journeys fishermen imagine revisiting familiar places and, in so doing, they imagine re-animating, by their presence, the memories of events and meetings that have gathered there. Their ‘daydream travails’ reveal their understanding that performance is a crucial aspect of neighbourhood constitution; they know that it is only by returning to, rather than textualising accounts of, places that they can preserve the stout little names that provide a portal back to other times and people.

A change in emphasis, from processual to ascriptive practices of formulating the fishing community, place and knowledge, is now perceivable at the lake. As I have argued there is an inherent value found in the interplay of these contrastive modes of interpretation. The sense of depth this interplay produces allows the limits of locality to be continuously surpassed and redrawn in a shifting play that reveals, reiterates, and recreates anew, relationships, local stories, names and places, while concealing other cosmological terrains. However, the strategy (once considered to be out of place ‘on the lake’) to articulate, and fix in text, contingent aspects of neighbourhood relationships is ultimately flawed, because not only does such a strategy loosen the tension that drives the reconstitution of neighbourhood, but also such discursive articulations of performance are antithetical to the ‘ineffable’ essence of the actual practices they seek to represent. Thus, at the very moment fishermen meet the intrusions of the state on its own terms they become authors of a very different kind of neighbourhood.
Figure 8.1 Working.

Figure 8.2 Resting.
The neighbourhood is not only an idea conceived in the shadow of ‘the other’, it is also ‘realised’ by everyday social interaction. In this thesis, by exploring everyday encounters between social actors, I have sought to re-embed the conceptual and imagined dimensions of ‘community’ in the quotidian social encounters of daily life (Amit 2002). In this way, I have produced an account of localized social relationships that reveal the Gippsland Lake neighbourhood to be not simply a way of conceptualising the collective by reference to an imagined other, but a way of tasting, seeing, calling the shots and attending to irony – a performance of belonging that allows fishermen to speak to and work alongside each other in mutually-understandable ways.

Over the last few decades anthropologists have compellingly critiqued long cherished assumptions within the discipline that posited the homogeneity and boundedness of social formations. In these critiques ‘communities’ were revealed to be imagined constructs that could be described as internally cohesive only in so far as there existed a collective understanding of the symbolic boundary that designated the ‘other’ (see for instance Bohlin 1998; Cohen 1985; 2000; Fernadez 2000). The processes by which this boundary was maintained, these theorists argued, were often contested, leading to a ‘community’ of internal divisions and contradictions. These accounts have been immensely important additions to anthropological understandings of social affiliation. The focus upon ideational aspects of collectivity, however, has meant that expressions of collectivity found in everyday conversations in familiar places, have tended to be overlooked. Further, these accounts of symbolic boundaries and ‘others’ have had little to say about how the contradictions that do exist within the neighbourhood, concerning the meaning of collectivity, are handled or maintained in everyday life.

The neighbourhood is indeed a place of contradictions and tensions. Yet it is seldom acknowledged that, around the neighbourhood, it is the locals themselves who strive to
maintain these tensions. In giving an account of these efforts, I have shown that it is by actively backgrounding kinship relationships ‘on the lake’, stressing the achievement of belonging, conceiving of an indeterminate environment, attending to irony, conceptualising entitlement as enskilled and understanding themselves as co-authors of the shifting narratives of fishing shots, that Gippsland Lakes fishermen reproduce the neighbourhood on a day-to-day basis. These performances ensure that other locally generated modes of conceptualising relationships do not become the only lens through which relationships are understood. By backgrounding genealogy in occupational contexts fishermen ensure that very ‘real’ and affective ties of kinship, depicted in the cherished photographs that adorn so many of their homes, do not determine and, thus, fix the potentialities of encounters that transpire on the lake or down at the co-op.

When ‘young Simmo’ began to fish the lake his own kinsmen made him aware of the importance of attending to the contingent nature of social relationships by, literally and figuratively, turning away from him and averting their eyes. In this way, Simmo was encouraged to understand the lake as a place of passage – a field of potential relationships – composed of multiple overlapping conversations and events. By concealing genealogy in this context, Simmo’s kinsmen educated his attention to a way of being in the neighbourhood which is of value to, and a value of, Gippsland lakes fishermen.

The interplay of these context dependent contradictions motivates, I have argued, the creative rejuvenation of relationships to people and, in turn, the continued transformation of places. It is the dynamic produced by the basic contradiction between the two modes of conceptualising collectivity that provokes the reproduction of the neighbourhood through various mutually-intelligible performances of belonging. Neighbourhoods are generated, therefore, not only by resistance to external ethnoscapes ‘against which local practices and projects are imagined to take place’ (Appaduari 1995:209), but also by internal contradictions that the locals themselves maintain.

Had Simmo’s kinsmen not withdrawn in the way that they did, in the context that they did, it is likely that Simmo would have come to comprehend the lake in the same manner
as his kinsmen. He would never have learned for himself, and, over time, the
neighbourhood would have come to be a very different place – a place where
relationships and entitlement were largely predicated upon genealogy. Without these
local strategies to background genealogy, the lake might have become a monolithic entity
in which the environment was completely knowable, where there was no room to found
and transform fishing shots, and where, because of the lake’s unchanging nature, stout
names no longer existed as invitations ‘to look again’.

It has been the major undertaking of this thesis, then, by following the vicissitudes of
fishermen’s day-to-day life on the lake, to carefully articulate the processes by which this
tension is reproduced. Crucial to this undertaking was an awareness of the context
dependent nature of social actors’ emphasis upon ways of conceiving of social affiliation
and, given this awareness, the articulation of the vantage point from which this tension
was viewed.

Comprehending the context dependent nature of neighbourhood sensibilities and
understandings and then interpreting the neighbourhood on this basis is, as I have
demonstrated here, a vital task for anthropologists working in societies where strong
demarcations exist between, for instance, work and family life. It is not uncommon that
anthropologists are unable to fully participate and observe informants in all aspects of
their lifeworld. When this is explicitly addressed ethnographies are not weakened but,
rather, may be more compelling because an understanding of what is being concealed in
some contexts and not others, and the way in which this is accomplished, discloses the
‘real’ complexity of neighbourhood dynamics. Indeed, such an understanding might not
be possible if researchers had – or, rather, believed they had – access to informants’
‘total’ life-world.

Further, positing a dynamic between movement and fixity that is internal to
neighbourhoods raises the possibility that the residents of neighbourhoods, where ever
and when ever they exist, have always generated and, thus, had to balance contradictory
modes of understanding relationships. If this is the case, ‘negative attitudes [and
responses] towards reified customary regimes’ – attitudes that Thomas (1992:213) identified as being an aspect of the ‘Invention of Tradition’ (cf. Keesing 1989) that are at least as significant as positive ones – may not necessarily have been created by postcolonial encounters. Rather, such ambivalences towards reification, and processes by which reifying discourses are destabilised, may have always been an aspect of, for example, Pacific neighbourhoods (around which this literature is often centered) just as they appear to be in regional south-eastern Australia. Arguably, then, the neighbourhood is made vulnerable to the reifying tendencies of more complex hierarchical organizations because these organizations recognize reifying logics within neighbourhoods and in so doing amplify these logics to the detriment of others. Eventually, as I have shown, this kind of ‘attention’ from external forces leads to the dissolution of neighbourhoods.

Locals, then, have always had the potential to be the authors of the neighbourhood’s dissolution. This is an important point because it suggests that objectifying or reifying tendencies are not necessarily introduced into a previously ‘pristine’ neighbourhood but, rather, that within the field of power relations that defines state-neighbourhood interactions external phenomena articulate with existing modes of constituting relationships. These articulations can, as I have shown in Chapter 8, weaken concepts and strategies that once kept movement and fixity in a dynamic tension.

My research was historically situated at a time when commercial fishing in Victoria’s Bays and Inlets was under threat. It was clear that, more and more, external forces had begun to influence the fishery and the fishermen there. The increasing rigidity of management regimes, creeping globalization and environmental perturbations, were together transforming the neighbourhood. The links between these processes were difficult to observe, however, because of the radical temporal and spatial disjunctures between environmental interventions and their effects. The environmental perturbations that existed at the lake had been caused by practices such as logging and agriculture that were far removed, and very distinct, from those that took place on the lake itself. Yet the environmental problems that had arisen from these interventions were frequently blamed on a local cause – commercial fishermen – because it was politically and bureaucratically
expedient to do so. It was these political threats that began to gradually transform fishermen’s perceptions of themselves and their surrounds, ultimately transforming the significance of local institutions of morality and the consequent meanings found in fishing places. Thus, the narrative of neighbourhood I have told here illustrates well Hornborg’s comment that ‘the destruction of traditional systems of meaning and the destruction of ecosystems can be seen as two aspects of the same process’ (1998:3).

The process that I have described, by which local flexibilities of practice become overwhelmed by local forms of objectifying the ‘life-world’ in the context of powerful reifying institutions, can be understood according to the cybernetic principles that Bateson (2000), and subsequently Rappaport (2000), explored throughout their careers. Using this analytical framework, it is possible to see that the dissolution of the neighbourhood occurs because when fishermen objectify and concretise performance in an attempt to preserve the neighbourhood the regenerative tension through which the neighbourhood is reconceived is lost. The neighbourhood, thus, loses its ‘systemic flexibility’ – the major characteristic of living systems that ‘persist’ (Rappaport 2000:409).

In positing the dynamic tension through which the neighbourhood is maintained, this thesis has indirectly proposed a difficult agenda for anthropologists seeking to support locals in their efforts to ensure the neighbourhood’s persistence. In order to facilitate this aspiration anthropologists would need to discover the indistinct and unarticulated sensibilities by which people attend to, and then seek to subvert other styles of imagining relationships that coexist within the neighbourhood. Thus, anthropologists would need to find a way to empower these ineffable styles of relating and the subterranean strategies that background, contradict and destabilize coexisting ways of constituting the neighbourhood.

In establishing the ways by which locals maintain what Rappaport called ‘systemic flexibility’ I hope to have provided a starting point, grounded in the ‘slow pedestrian rhythms of day-to-day activity’ (Ingold, quoted on back-cover Weiner 2001), from which
to understand how the dissolution of neighbourhoods occurs, and how this is experienced by local subjects. The elucidation of the processes by which systemic flexibility is reproduced is crucial, I argue, to establishing an understanding of the way in which neighbourhoods disappear. Ultimately, then, my project contributes, from a certain vantage point, to the ongoing exploration of the way in which the global articulates with the local.
Bibliography


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