A Huon Dialogue
Re-presentations of a Truncated River

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The experience of the Other as a void or an absence is a prelude to invasion and instrumentalization, whereas the experience of the Other as a presence is the prelude to dialogue.

Val Plumwood (1998: 681)¹

It's dark,  
depth down in the gorge  
where the Huon River runs.  
Where I took this image,  
traced in light.

Where the water swirls and darts,  
forms and disperses,  
creating and reconfiguring  
the messages it carries  
for those (things) that can sense them.

It’s here I’ve come to listen  
to the Otherness of place,  
to perceive if I can,  
and re-present  
the stories,  
the poetry,  
the dialogue,  
of a river excised from its headwaters.
The air over the river smells old:
not miasmic or putrid,
just... old.

Like it needs a good flooding
(like that's likely to happen soon).
That, of course, is my own interpretation.

I know that smell.
It's a river-bottom smell,
like you get in the Gordon River:
downstream of its dam,
when the power station is off,
and no discharge is allowed to escape;
to flow to the sea;
to be wasted.
You'd think the Huon would be over it by now.
It's been more than 40 years, after all.
The Scotts Peak dam has captured
all of the Huon's upstream flow:
appropriated it; diverted it;
purloined it; stolen it:
aqua nullius.

We did that, you and I,
in our desire for eternal energy:
for the hydropower we found in the water,
and coveted.

Only a small trickle escapes the dam:
leakage by another name;
an uncontrolled, wild incontinence.
Measured at a purposefully built V-notch weir,
as if turning it into data
could somehow return it
to the commodifying paradigm
from which it is fleeing.
You can see the joy, the life dancing within the surface-tensioned constraint of the coherent outflow. Green ribbons of algae proclaim a return to vibrant life from the realm of rusty iron and cloud-grey concrete.

Life begun with the subversion of a paradigm, splattered in expressive and enthusiastic greenness. Gathering itself for the task of river regeneration.

If only there were more flow, to supplement this vagrant incontinence. Perhaps even an environmentally relevant discharge, deliberately (and regularly) released. To give substance to the paper-thin simulacrum termed ‘renewable energy’.

For the joy of respectfully giving back some of the water we have stolen: to flow to the sea; to be ‘wasted’.
The diminished river in its downstream gorge reeks of this hoary human parsimony.

It’s a river-bottom smell:
   a desolation;
   a destitution;
   an orphaned child sitting,
   in need,
   dark eyes glaring accusatively,
   from a gutter of its own creation.

You’d think the river would be over it by now. Instead, it continues offering its olfactory oratory. To anyone who’ll listen (or smell).
   These days, there’s only me
   (and my complicity).
Upstream, it’s different.

Beyond the wall of concrete and stones and electrical desires,
beyond the flooded plains that used to emerge,
drying (that’s a relative term!) in the summer sun.

The plains are still there,
continually submerged these days,
resolute in their peaty denial of the bleeding obvious.
The Huon’s flow still directs, before it is totally subsumed.
The flood-deposited logs are ordered just so,
as they always have been,
even when they bordered a riverbank
rather than a lake.

Even in the long-ago time
when the Other humans used to sit on them
with their sharp sticks
and bark-fibre nets,
and talk about the fishing,
and tell, and re-tell, their old, old stories.

The logs remain,
Occasionally re-arranged, or added to.
Always aligned,
as time and tradition
and flood-current dictate.

Shags now sit (and shit) on the logs,
drying their wings,
discussing the fishing,
and telling their old, old stories.

As is only proper.
Further upstream, above the flatland swamps, with their biofilms and organic acids, bogs, and button-grass, primaeval quickly becomes more personal than its definition at first suggests.

Upstream, in the hills, where gravity and slope limit the young Huon’s meanderings, while empowering its adolescent exuberance.

Where the air is charged with ozone dashed from the water as it cascades over and under the logs that would impede its path.
Upstream in the deep forest
where the Horizontal grows thickly,
maze-like,
defiantly blocking the passage
of anything taller than a pademelon.

Veiling the stream, protectively.
Offering mud and bog in its place,
with a silent, green-whiskered smirk,
and a knowing wink to its interlaced neighbour.

Here the air has the metallic tang,
the anaerobic-clay smell,
of pure rainforest.

It’s cool in here.
Some might call it cold.
And humid.
My camera lens fogs instantly.
My GPS won’t work under the thick forest canopy.
My watch has the wet-battery blues.
And as for mobile reception…
I could be lost here, where the sun’s direction is well obscured by thick foliage and thickening clouds.

I could be lost here, in the middle of a pictorial sentence, searching for a visual predicate upon which to pin my punctum, and thus my photographic thesis (for want of a lucent apostrophe, a nuance was lost...).
With syntactic aplomb, I besit a mossy log, 
bum-wet from the moss community 
that suffers its indignity in forbearing silence; 
a resilient soft-green hospitality.

Leeches materialise: 
beginning their anticipatory peregrinations 
towards the warm, if inadvertent, 
invitation of my body.

Their presence is forborne with less equanimity 
than that shown by the mosses on which I sit. 
Inhospitably, I refuse them their blood meal, 
denying their future generations.

I return them empty-stomached 
to the surrounding bush. 
It’s a personal thing: 
a biological separation, 
instinctively enforced.
Upstream, in the hills,
the river is fast and shallow.
Clearwater, full of logs and forest debris:
captured and pinned by the current;
held in store
to feed the grazers and shredders,
which feed the bugs,
which feed the fish,
which feed the fishers.

The stream bounces in its green-banked bed,
reciting a poetry of cascade and swirl;
at times linear and forceful,
at others indolent and wandering;
arcing its surface toward the light and air,
before swooshing it down,
with vertiginous vehemence,
at the stern insistence of gravity.
Downstream once again, in the depths of its overshadowing gorge, the river carries other messages, other poetry.

My photographs show the river’s tracings: enigmatic, alien, mostly incomprehensible, though not entirely.

I can see the colour of the water, and the effect that depth has on it.

I can trace some of the forms in which the water dances and cavorts.

I can explore its luminous pathways.
These are messages of fluidic diversity,
velocity, and turbulence,
that I'd need to hear if I lived there,
in the water column:
like a bug on a rock,
or a fish,
looking to eat a bug,
chance-found and rock-bound.

If I lived there, in the water column,
balancing buoyancy with gravity;
flow velocity with tenacity.
I might taste the chemical signature of riverbed,
or feel the electrical impulses
of potential prey,
or patient predator,
or hear the tonal soliloquy of rain
falling on the surface.

If I lived there, in the water column.
The water carries messages, to me (and my complicity), as well as to other biota. And I wonder…

Does the water provide this service under duress: in the mechanistic thrall of gravity, and volume; of slope, velocity, and turbulence?

Or is it just dancing? Skipping its way to the ocean, and the devil take the hindmost. Inviting other waters to join in: rain, snow, and tributary flows, nascent bankside ice. Join the mix. Come dance.

And fuck this misbegotten, human-centred notion of commodification and its so-called waste. Come feed the sea with balance for its salinity, with sedimentary grist for its oceanic mill. Come feed the atmosphere with evaporated mist, a latent storm; celebrating a completion, and a beginning: a cycle even.

As is only proper.
I can withstand the river’s flow:
deny its errant invitation,
its liquid lasciviousness.
I can stand, here,
in my waders:
withstanding.

Separated by more than a thin plastic membrane.
Separated by a rational mind, that knows things
(or thinks it does);
that counts and categorises, catalogues and commodifies
(is that binary, or decimal?).
By an imagination that conjures and conjectures
(or imagines it does).
By my instincts as a terrestrial organism that wants to survive
(or thinks it might not).
Encapsulated in plastic
(and parentheses).

That rationality knows,
with a surety that needs no elaboration,
that it cannot inhabit the stream;
cannot dance the river’s dance;
cannot withstand the river’s entrainment.

That’s a separation of deeper-than-biological significance.
My photography may facilitate a closer dialogue with the river; a clearer perception of its messages, by re-presenting those dynamic fluvial aspects that the unaided (human) eye cannot perceive.

I’ve displayed the aquatic calligraphy and its (imagined) messages. I’ve intimated the turbulent causality of the liquid gesture that makes the mark. And I wonder…

At the *gesture* that makes the mark. And its significance…

My camera is a physical intrusion into the corpus of stream flow. Could it deflect that gesture? (Of a surety!) Could my presence: my very being, physical or otherwise; (here-now, there-then, surely-possibly) deflect the gesture that makes the mark?

Is my representation more a delinquent graffito? A foreigner’s garbled mispronunciation of the river’s liquid language?
The beauty that I see,
that cohabits with my complicity;
in the dark-light of the truncated Huon:
that I consider to be natural in its implicit indifference.
Is this beauty simply the river’s complacency at my intrusion?
Ever-responsive, sensitively chaotic, able to flow around, or over, or under,
as it chooses?
As gravity dictates?
Move along! Nothing to see here!

That's an astounding freedom,
for a slightly smelly, water-starved,
human be-dammed stream.

And I wonder…
Could forgiveness be written amongst the messages it carries?
In the imagery that my camera records?
In the dialogue of the Huon’s Otherness?