

Stranded Out of Place: Environmental Alienation in Australian Punk

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Attempting to unearth cultural forms better able than the written word to rekindle a sense of our immersion in ‘more-than-human’ nature, David Abram turns, in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, to oral cultures. Influenced by the phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Abram argues that nature is ‘relational and weblike in character’, ‘animate’ and ‘expressive’; language, correspondingly, is an ‘organic, interconnected structure’ that, in speech – away, that is, from the deadening impact of writing – expresses the participation, embodiment, continuity of humanity with this animate world (see 1996: 84-5). This is most apparent in the indigenous cultures Abram describes. Here the ‘rhythms’ of human oral language form ‘active sensuous presences afoot in the material landscape’ (1996: 89): ‘only if words are felt, bodily presences, like echoes or waterfalls, can we understand the power of spoken language to influence, alter, and transform the perceptual world’ (1996: 89).

Abram says little about music but from one telling reference, it does seem to be encompassed in his argument concerning the ecological value of oral, or aural, cultures. Here, in a footnote, he refers to a recording of the songs of the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea ‘rich with onomatopoeic words that echo the speech of animals as well as mimic the diverse swirling, bubbling, and plopping sounds made by water’. The music expresses the interconnection of humanity, nonhuman species, and land: ‘Nature is music to the Kaluli ears. And Kaluli music is naturally part of the surrounding soundscape’ (1996: 290).

The view expressed, that an ecological sensibility can only be located within indigenous, pre-modern cultures, is reinforced in that it runs alongside a declared belief that an ecological sense of human embodiment in the environment *cannot* be captured in the modern, technological, mediated cultures that represent the zenith of our ‘utter abstraction from our earthly surroundings’ (1996: 265). As Abram writes ‘Transfixed by our technologies, we short-circuit the sensorial reciprocity between our breathing bodies and the bodily terrain’ (1996: 267).

I do not dispute the argument Abram makes nor that we can learn much, in this respect, from indigenous peoples. I would argue, however, that this is, precisely, what punk and other contemporary music also does, an argument not as outlandish as it might sound. Two canonical ecological writers, Gary Snyder and Bill McKibben, have both hinted that rap, for example, could be regarded as akin to traditional folk cultures, as built around a sense of belonging in place. As Snyder puts it in *A Place in Space*, rap’s ‘language of heart and ‘hood’ is a ‘Natural Language’, expressive of the vernacular (Snyder 1995: 178; McKibben 1992: 136). Because the urban places often articulated in popular music

are rather different to those described by Abram this requires further theorisation. Consequently, I want to suggest, prior to a discussion of punk, that by aligning recent, post-Romantic ecocritical theory with cultural studies work on popular music and authenticity we can arrive at ways of thinking about ecological ‘soundscapes’ that raise questions in some ways more immediate than Abram’s – of western urban peoples, particularly the young, alienated from a sense of ‘belonging in place’ which even they know constitutes an essential grounding for ‘human being’.

This alienated sense of place resonates, I believe, with the new environmental aesthetics envisaged in Timothy Morton’s recent books *Ecology without Nature* and (especially) *The Ecological Thought*. Morton believes that the ‘Nature’ (with a capital ‘N’) valorised within romanticism is a dichotomous category that in idealising the nonhuman has paradoxically undercut any true ecological sense of humanity’s own natural being. ‘Nature’, he argues, is not ‘a reified thing in the distance’ – on the margins, in the past – but is everywhere. This he calls ‘the ecological thought’ and it has radical connotations for environmental aesthetics:

all texts—all artworks, indeed—have an irreducibly ecological form. Ecology permeates all forms. Nowadays we’re used to wondering what a poem says about race or gender, even if the poem makes no explicit mention of race or gender. We will soon be accustomed to wondering what any text says about the environment even if no animals or trees or mountains appear in it. (2010: 11)

This ‘ecological thought’ does not, however, equate to the extreme relativism it might seem to imply. For Morton couples this with a specific acknowledgement of humanity’s now detrimental impact on the earth’s life systems in which context ‘the ecological thought creeps over other ideas until nowhere is left untouched by its dark presence’ (2010: 2). One result of such a radical realignment of environmental aesthetics is that he offers up some particularly striking musical examples. Morton doesn’t discuss punk but he does discuss post-punk. Suggesting, for example, the ‘uncanny’ as a particularly apt concept by which to describe a now troubled, ominous ecological awareness he illustrates this through The Cure whose track ‘A Forest’, ‘about being lost in a forest, looking for a girl’ is, he writes, ‘disturbingly ecological: “The girl was never there [Morton quotes], it’s always the same/Running towards nothin’, again and again and again and again”’ (2010: 54).

Following the logic of this single, pervasive ‘ecological thought’, one might describe punk, or post-punk, as an authentic expression of an absent, troubled or crisis-ridden sense of place. One cannot really do so, however, without first submitting that hypothesis to debates in popular music studies where, to say the least, authenticity has been a heavily contested concept. Key critics – Lawrence Grossberg, Allan F. Moore, Johan Fornäs – have established a broad consensus that authenticity, rather than being intrinsic to the music itself, is *ascribed* by communities of musicians, critics, subcultures, the music industry, and fans. In popular music it has generally been conferred upon those rock bands whose music has been perceived as articulating a sense of (urban) place as experienced by an alienated working-class (though sometimes those places are also romanticised). One thinks, perhaps, of The Rolling Stones, The Sex Pistols, Oasis, even

the rapper 50 Cent. If the general idea within this critical consensus is that one cannot simply declare, as Abram seems to do with the songs of the Kaluli people, that a particular sound expresses an inherently authentic sense of place – if, that is, authenticity is conferred on the basis of critical evaluation and/or personal opinion – nevertheless an argument by Fornäs that technological music can, with such qualifications in mind, embody its own form of authenticity does open up the idea that popular music might articulate for its creators and listeners alike an authentic sense of place.

Fornäs writes ‘A seemingly artificial text may also be an authentic expression of true life experiences in an artificial society’ (275). In another book, written with Ulf Lindberg and Ove Sernhede, punk is described in precisely this way, as expressing ‘experiences of the negative sides of modernisation: unemployment, economic crises, *environmental destruction* and threats of war’ (*my italics*). An experience garnered at ground level, on the ‘streets’, this ‘engenders a localised crisis awareness – within particular geographic and class-defined areas (for example, working-class neighbourhoods in England or small towns in Sweden)’ (1995: 151-2). Focusing here on the Australian punk band The Saints, I will argue that punk furnished authentic examples of a ‘dark’ environmental aesthetic, examples which articulated an experience of alienation from the essential ecological notion of belonging in place.

Punk evolved two distinct but complimentary aesthetics. Often separated on broadly chronological lines, first wave punk, a bricolage of different styles and iconography, appeared consciously to represent, as Iain Chambers has described it, ‘the death of an aesthetics based on [...] stable referents of the ‘authentic’’ (1986: 8). The second, ‘new wave’ evolved a very different aesthetic. Jude Davies has argued that first wave punk was limited in its ‘ability to envision social change’ and so there evolved ‘a second wave of punks who were concerned with the communicative and the consensual—possibilities opened up but not explored by their predecessors’. This engaged more directly in social debate. Song lyrics, Davies writes, ‘became concerned overtly with political and quasi-political themes and [...] began to be reproduced on record sleeves’ (see 1996: 16). Very much engaged with the city, new wave comes closer to the English critic Sara Cohen’s notion, developed in work on Liverpool, that popular music offers ‘an alternative discourse to everyday speech and language’, new ideas, thoughts and feelings, that constitute both a ‘precious resource in the production of place and local subjectivity’ and a means to ‘provoke or shape social action’ (1998: 286-7).

Australian punk, it seems to me, is more illustrative of the first wave, as can be inferred from Vikki Riley’s argument that ‘Political activism or ‘linkage’ with social issues like Britain’s Rock against Racism never gained currency in Australia’ (1992: 115). Yet, notwithstanding this apparent lack of direct social engagement, the music did serve as a resource in the production of place, albeit in a rather different way. First wave punk has been routinely described as nihilistic. However, in his analysis of the Sex Pistols, Greil Marcus argues that nihilism – ‘the wish to become nothing’ – co-existed with a more politicised ‘negation’ which by exposing that ‘the world is not as it seems’ had the potential, at least, to call others into action (1989: 9). Rendered in what Chambers calls

its ‘ruptural aesthetics’ (1985: 181), this was a conscious response to the city – a semiotic disruption of everyday reality, seen to exclude the young or working-class – that ‘extended our world and sharpened the comparative sense of the immediate, the local and the particular’ (1986: 187). Significantly, Chambers describes the signs generated by punk as ‘inhabited’. What emerged, in aesthetic terms, was something akin to what Lawrence Buell calls ‘toxic discourse’.

Buell defines his term as an ‘expressed anxiety arising from perceived threat of environmental hazard due to chemical modification by human agency’ (2001: 30-1). Punk was more concerned with a generalised environmental alienation than with any specific risks or hazards (though that too was usually attributed to ‘human agency’). Yet in all other respects it went further. For whereas Buell primarily envisages toxic discourse in terms of the themes raised in literary or other texts, first wave punk was almost literally poisonous in the revulsion generated in the majority of listeners. Punk developed, Dave Laing argues in *One Chord Wonders*, a form of environmental aesthetic akin to Brechtian alienation. A conscious refusal of communication and audience identification designed to convey an acute sense of environmentally experienced alienation, this was captured within the music’s generic features – speed of delivery, sound distortion, brutally simplistic three-chord structures, overamplified bass guitar and drums, and harsh, one-note, characterless vocals which, augmented by snarls, grunts, and abusive or nonsense lyrics were frequently, deliberately indecipherable. It was a form entirely appropriate to the experience of place articulated within Australian punk.

In an overview of Australian pop music, Graeme Turner argues that popular music is difficult to contextualise – socially and culturally speaking – because it ‘really is a sign without a referent’. He attributes this to a lack of ‘the cultural and epistemological function serviced by narrative’ which connects film, for example, to its formative context (1992: 11). This appears to be an argument engendered by his specific subject matter. Routinely, critics have suggested that Australian popular music lacks what Turner calls a distinct ‘indigenous flavour’ (1992: 11). Philip Hayward, writing in the same collection, argues, for instance, that the primary punk scenes in Brisbane and Melbourne never achieved a degree of critical mass ‘sufficient to produce specific ethnic music forms’ (1992: 4-5). More generally, Australian music is characterised by a ‘pronounced diversification’ that blurs any distinctive national characteristics (1992: 2) and is principally defined, if at all, by the prevalence of ‘imported models’, mainly American ones, ‘imitated, inflected or developed to produce ‘Australian music’’ (1992: 6). Turner concludes that there is no ‘local ‘sound’’, no ‘audio equivalent of the ‘Australian look’ in film’ (1992: 13). However, though writing as a (British) outsider, it seems to me that the very act of ‘inflection’ surely indicates that *something* must have been articulated. In punk, that something included a marked – albeit negative – sense of place.

What distinguished the Brisbane punk scene, from which The Saints emerged, is that it was created, performed, and experienced in the context of the extraordinary control over place exercised by Joh Bjelke-Petersen’s National Party premiership of Queensland between 1968 and 1987. Andrew Stafford’s *Pig City: From The Saints to Savage*

Garden, details how Bjelke-Petersen's Calvinism drove a volatile cocktail of right-wing politics and economics – most notably, an encouragement of unrestrained infrastructure and property development – with repressive law and order policies. Gradually ratcheted up, throughout the 1970s, to include, in 1977, the banning of demonstrations and street marches and brutal police action against the resultant Right to March campaign, this was eventually transferred onto generalised attacks on minorities and dissenters including, fuelled by a media panic, punk.

The Bjelke-Petersen administration's actions can be regarded, literally, as an attack on punk's space within the Brisbane environment. Examples include the demolition in November 1982, without permit, and for a proposed property development, of the Cloudland, the iconic National Trust listed concert hall whose arched entrance had stood above Brisbane since 1940. The Cloudland had recently hosted punk gigs, including those of imported British bands such as The Clash. Likewise, the 'Task Force', a squad of (uniformed and undercover) police officers, with a remit to roam the streets breaking up supposed trouble spots 'more or less as they saw fit' (Stafford 2006: 102). The task force orchestrated a number of raids, arrests and physical attacks on punk events, notably, writes Stafford, when they 'ruthlessly targeted' the 'Great Brain Robbery' gig of June 1979, featuring the Leftovers and resulting in 25 arrests (109-10).

A further dimension to that experience is evident in The Saints' guitarist Ed Kuepper's contrast between the band's emergence from and articulation of their working-class background and the predominantly middle-class provenance of U.S. punk (65). On that basis, Stafford describes The Saints' 'raw fury' as 'closer in spirit to the English bands than to anything to come out of New York' (65). Yet it should be said, speaking again as a Brit, that the concrete reality of Bjelke-Petersen gave Brisbane punk an experience of class, place-based repression to which its U.K. equivalent could only ever really pretend. As Shane Homan writes 'the performance of marginalised sounds [...] was simply enough to be political acts in themselves' (2008: 51.2). It is no exaggeration to suggest, in this context, that the music itself was experienced as a temporary space in which a sense of 'belonging in place' was claimed, if only for a song's duration, and however alienated that sense might have been.

The police repression in Brisbane largely occurred after The Saints left for London in 1977. Nevertheless, singer Chris Bailey's description of having grown up in 'a police state, a fascist state' (53) does convey an equivalent sense of displacement and alienation. I have focused on The Saints because – as surely Australia's primary punk band, and with a longevity unusual in their peers – their music articulates an evident but also sustained connection to place. Songs characterised by a sense of vacancy and stasis, which does at one level indicate the groundlessness Hayward and Turner find in Australian pop music, nevertheless amount to acts purposely designed as negational embodiments of the Brisbane environment of that time. Hence, the band's music reveals a profound environmental aesthetic, of alienation rooted in a discernible feeling of *not* belonging in place.

The band's signature single, '(I'm) Stranded' (1976), has been described by Riley as 'a simple gripe about alienation within one's own country' (114) which at one level is true. Familiar punk themes of alienation do indeed run through The Saints' music with the lyrics expressing this often, indeed, 'simple', even disappointingly mundane. A somewhat conventional signifier on this particular track – 'A subway light, its dirty reflection' – is more than matched by the banality of the B-side, 'No time':

Hey baby, there's a brand new sound
Called people living underground

On occasion, such simple lyrics do allude to something more environmentally suggestive. Two separate lines on 'All times through paradise'

The moon it don't shine and the sun it don't call
The night is a dark sign it takes the light from the day

convey simultaneously both an urban sense of risk and something akin to Morton's unsettled environmental aesthetic. Yet, overall, the music offers, in my view, something much more complex than simply a vague alienation.

Having released their first single even before the Sex Pistols, The Saints helped generate first wave punk's generic features. Accordingly, both the power and meaning of '(I'm) Stranded' are conveyed sonically and experienced aurally, in which respect it captures the feeling of placelessness perfectly. We feel this immediately in the relatively long intro that holds the listener in a state of ignorance as to where the narrative may go. When Chris Bailey starts to sing, his indecipherable, aggressive vocal does little, at first, to enlighten us. However, as the song continues it does, gradually, reveal the nature of the experience of place held within the sound. Sonically speaking, the track embodies the familiar hallmarks – fuzzy/distorted guitar, heavy, pounding bass line, vocal character – of first wave punk, aesthetic features which in their ruptural quality signify 'a sense of the immediate, the local and the particular', that has been 'sharpened' by a feeling of alienation. Here, though, the precise experience being conveyed is not environmental injustice but a perceived condition of placelessness.

October 2001's *Mojo* magazine lists '(I'm) Stranded' at number 7 in its all time 100 greatest punk records: 'Out of the cultural wasteland that was mid-'70s Brisbane, Australia came this kinetic howl of suburban frustration'. Lacking, as Hayward writes, specific ethnic form, the track does fall back on certain generic Americanisms. The vocal style, accent, phrases, and music are all evocative of American punk, the snarling voice and injunctions to 'Come on!' or 'Aw-right!' most obviously reminiscent of Iggy and the Stooges' pre-punk (1973) album *Raw Power*. In this context, Stafford argues, 'The Saints weren't inspired by Joh, but by The Stooges' (cited Homan 2008: 51.2). Yet elements in their music do express precisely the alienated sense of place that characterised Brisbane punk. Riley points out that in the video 'the band [is] positioned in an abandoned factory site, Chris Bailey literally hemmed in by industrialised consumer society, shot from a distance with band members plastered motionless to the corners of the frame/factory site' (1992: 114). While there is (implied) social critique in this interpretation, more relevant is the sense of stasis visualised in images of abandonment and alienation induced by a

consumer society that has itself disregarded place. This, ultimately, is what is captured in the song where the sense of despair in the line ‘There ain’t a thing that I can do’ is embodied more substantially in the last two verses’ needless repetition of being ‘stranded’ and in the instrumental section, towards the end, where the tune virtually disappears, foregoing even this most basic form of communication. While Bailey sings, repeatedly and repetitively, of being ‘stranded/far from home’ there is no indication as to where ‘home’ is or even that it exists at all.

‘Orstralia’, from the band’s first album, develops the critique, only ever implicit on ‘(I’m Stranded’, towards a more direct engagement with place. It portrays, first off, a complacent nation which has become, furthermore, a ‘willing accomplice to the American suburban nightmare’ (Riley 1992: 115). Hence, American references in the song are both more overt and pointedly sarcastic:

got no problems, got no wars
And you don’t need your brain no more
No sir.

The critique of nation becomes even more explicit as the band subverts the popular cultural environmental image of a sunny, relaxed Australia. The line ‘It’s okay, the weather’s fine’ is related, here, to mind-numbing suburban boredom; the sun itself equated with apathy, languor, and a rootless hedonism – ‘Everybody lazin’ in the sun/Nobody cares, so let’s have fun’. Ultimately, however, this track too offers only the refusal of communication and identification that Laing sees as indicative of an all encompassing social and environmental alienation. There is no real narrative and hence no dialogue; there are certainly no solutions. Instead, the sound of first wave punk predominates over whatever message there might have been. Consequently, ‘Orstralia’ – the ‘Pommie’ mispronunciation seemingly designed to convey the view that Australia, the nation, lacks any non-indigenous ethnic identity – is characterised too by generic features: heavy, repetitious bass lines; the incessant ‘manic whirl’ of Ivor Hay’s drumming which often ‘pushed the band’s sound to the brink of derailment’ (Stafford 2006: 59); Bailey’s drawled, hostile, contemptuous vocals. Indeed, these devices are even supplemented by grating saxophone interludes reminiscent of the London band X-Ray Spex, a gloriously horrible sound which takes the track beyond even ‘(I’m Stranded’ in its attempt to drive the listener away.

At the conference ‘Sounding The Earth’ where this paper was originally delivered, John Bradley took issue with the rather abstract concept of ‘soundscapes’ preferring the more straightforward ‘song’ to convey music’s amplification of an embodied rather than abstract relationship to place. The Saints’ music is clearly diametrically different from the songlines described by Bradley. ‘Orstralia’ is purposely alienating relying on aural shock rather than the communicative possibilities of lyrical narrative. Yet, as with ‘(I’m Stranded’, far from being a ‘simple gripe’ about modernity it offers a quite magnificent, if brutal, embodiment of a modern, toxic feeling of placelessness. My argument is, then, that The Saints’ music constitutes an ‘ecological thought’ albeit one related, in Morton’s sense, to a now pervasive, darkened ‘environmental aesthetic’.

However, while it conveys that lack powerfully, place is kept in mind as the essential root of a satisfactory, fulfilled human being. In '(I'm) Stranded' the connection, once the listener deciphers the lyric, is made directly:

Yeah babe I think I'll lose my mind [...]
'Cause I'm stranded on my own
Stranded far from home.

Literally an amplification, The Saints' loud music is every bit as much an echo of an environmental reality known to and experienced by the band as that of the Kaluli tribe. While Davies is right to argue that first wave punk sometimes fell frustratingly short of engaging the listener in a dialogue about the causes of alienation, let alone in offering alternatives, the negational medium is surely, here, the message. That for ecology to claim its place as a popular movement it must not only reaffirm, as is legitimate, the importance of an attachment to the land but also reach out to those contemporary citizens who, for whatever reason, despair about their lack of place, who feel homeless, 'stranded', and caught in a cultural crisis reflective, indeed symptomatic, of the probable ecological one.

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