



Mick Fanning and the shark!

Rebecca Olive

(with Eimear Enright and Michael Gard)

The University of Queensland



Writer. Teacher. Surfer. Dork.

Lecturer at The University of Queensland



Blog: Making Friends With the Neighbours

IG: @osmosis_surf

Feminist cultural studies and sport

‘...people do not exist in the form of thought’

- Nikolas Rose, 1996, *Identity, Genealogy, History*, p.141

‘In an obvious manner, sport highlights that bodies do something’ (Probyn, 2000, p.14).

‘The body... becomes a site for the production of knowledge, feelings, emotions and history, all of which are central to subjectivity [yet] the body cannot be thought of as a contained entity; it is in constant contact with others’ (Probyn, 2003, p. 290).

How do bodily relationships produce knowledge? Actions?

Women, bodies and surfing

How do women understand, experience and negotiate male-dominated cultures of recreational surfing?

Women have an alternative ethics of surfing:

- Don't make things harder for other women
 - Don't 'cross over to the dark side'
-

What other bodies are we in contact with in the surf?

Surfing and the more-than-human

Encounters with the more-than-human are part of what we enjoy about surfing.

Surfing 'is more than human. Dolphins, storms, driftwood, jellyfish, birds, fish, turtles, surfboards, shells, seaweed and the like surf here too' (Evers, 2009, p.898).

Ecological sensibilities operate through relationships and connectivity, 'whereby emotive responses to environmental conditions are attributed a deterministic ethical power: if we feel, we will act in a productive way' (Potter, 2005, p.2).

- Ecological sensibilities: ‘transcends the narrow sense of self and human superiority’ (Satchell, 2008, p.110).
- ‘If our species does not survive the ecological crisis, it will probably be due to our failure to imagine and work out new ways to live with the earth...’ (Plumwood 2007, 1).
- ‘resituate the human in ecological systems’ and ‘resituate the non-human in ethical terms’ (in Gibson, Rose & Fincher, *Manifesto for the Anthropocene*, p.vi).

Sharks and surfing

- “Man-eaters”
- Shark encounters are an accepted part of surfing
- E.g. Gibbs and Warren (2014) found that WA ocean-users strongly oppose shark culling and killing.

(Image: Sean Scott, 2017)



Mick Fanning and the shark!

Not a critique of Fanning's behaviour – an exploration of how people reacted to and made sense of Mick Fanning's shark encounter in 2015

...and what was left out of the discussion?

'resituate the human in ecological systems'

'resituate the non-human in ethical terms'

Part I: The encounter

WSL J-Bay final, 2015

- Mick Fanning (3 x world champ) and Julian Wilson were in the final (19 July)
- Well-loved finalists
 - Conventionally handsome, blonde, white, heterosexual, masculine, hyper-professional, sponsored, successful male athletes
- Live-streamed
 - High visibility including free-to-view web broadcast
- An iconic surfing location and event
 - Accepted knowledge of the presence of great white sharks in SA waters and at J-Bay



WSL J-Bay final, 2015



- J-Bay, 19 July 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrt27dZ7DOA> (0.00-1.00; 3.40-4.17)
 - The World Surf League, which runs the competition, said it was the first time in surfing history that there had been an attack during a world championship event.
- Commentator: 'Fanning shakes this one off'.
- Interviewer: 'Buddy, you wrestled a shark'
- Interviewer: 'Did you get a couple of punches in?' Fanning: 'I punched it in the back yeah (laughs)'

Off the boat...

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EB2jbW9Q3Yo> (Mick Fanning: 31.27-32.05)



Back home, press conference...

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9EaKQT_e4I 21 July (0.00-0.53)
- 'It's more an emotional thing', but he explains that he's recovering with the help of his mates
- 'an emotional, mental trauma ... it'll probably take a couple weeks, months...'

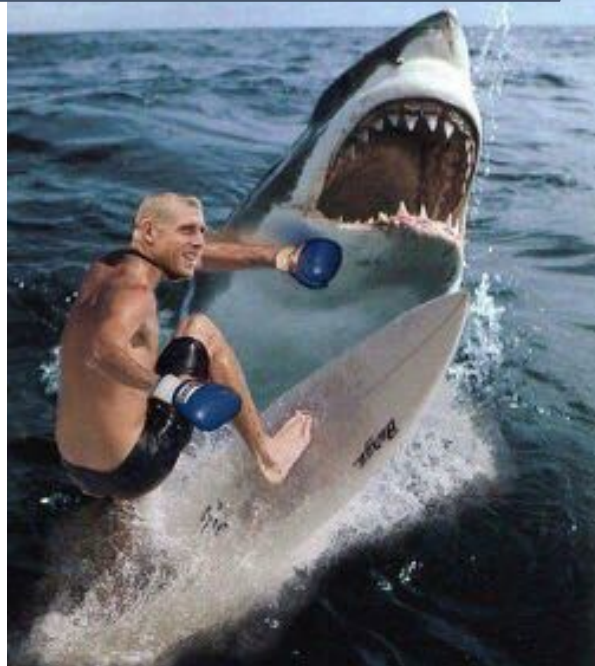


Part II: The public response

Public reactions to Mick's encounter

- Two main public reactions:

1. The immediate narrative taken up on social media and in tabloid press was Fanning punching and dominating a great white shark. He was promoted as a hyper masculine, aggressive role model for boys and young men; for shark punching



Legacy...

"Mick, I Owe You A Beer." Fanning Shark Punch Legacy

14 NOV 2017

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Image: News.com.au

2. Mick also became a (red bull sponsored) male/masculine role model:

- <http://www.mamamia.com.au/mick-fanning-is-a-role-model/>
- <http://www.mouthsofmums.com.au/what-my-sons-can-learn-from-mick-fanning/#ZOvmgKU1siAeQted.97>

‘So thank you Mick, in your moment of horror, you have inspired many boys to grow into men, just like yourself. You have given many of us watching a lesson that no matter who you are or what you do, you can still be scared, you can still cry and you still need your friends.’

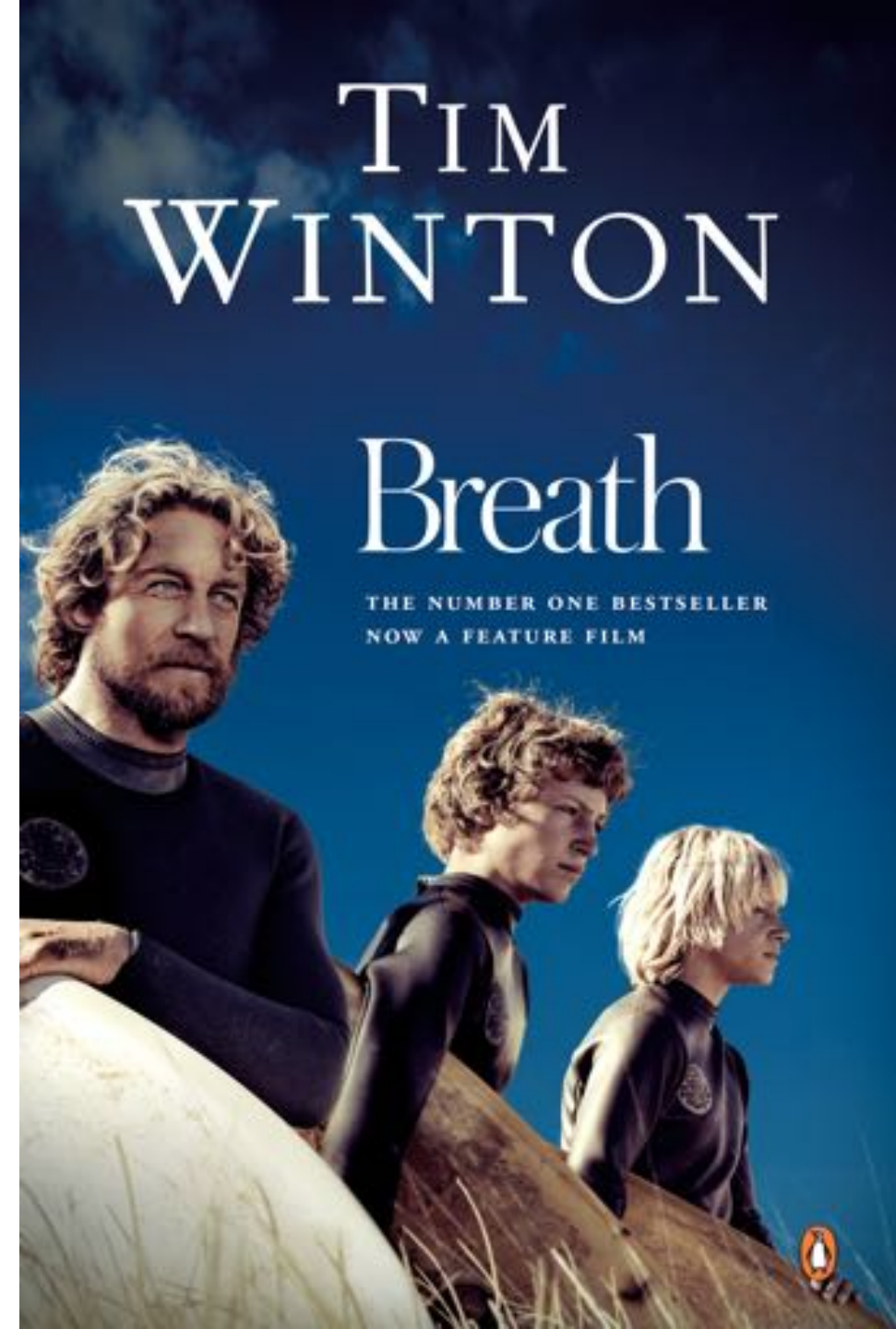


Role-modelling masculinities

- Sporting 'heroes' have traditionally been held up as epitomizing masculine values, virtues and ideals, 'and as embodying values which learnt on the playing fields will readily transfer into everyday life' (Lines, 2001, p.286).
- Leadership, courage, toughness, intellect, physical strength, psychological resilience, loyalty...
- Fanning's response to his encounter with the shark, WSL, friends and media reinforces and disrupts the narrative of masculinity associated with surfing (and sport and Australia)

Tim Winton: 'toxic masculinity'

- (26 April 2018, *Hack*, from 17.45: <http://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/hack/9682770>)
- “It’s just sad to see the tenderness and openness and vulnerability and gentleness of boys, just seeing it squeezed out of them. Or shamed out of them. Or beaten out of them.”
- “I stopped surfing during that time because I got embarrassed about the culture (...) it got more stupid and more misogynistic.”



Part III: The hypocrisy

What if his bodily contact with the shark meant he was too rattled
and never surfed again?

Was not surfing again an option?

- 16 April 2018, shark attack at a beach near the Margaret River Pro (WA, Australia)
 - <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/apr/16/shark-attack-closes-margaret-river-pro-surfing-event>

 **gabrielmedina** ⋮



   ⋮ 

Liked by **beach_grit** and **142,579** others

gabrielmedina Today they had two shark attacks on a beach next to which we are competing. I don't feel safe training and competing in that kind of place, any time can happen something with one of us. I hope not. Leaving my opinion before it's too late! 🙏

[View all 4,849 comments](#)

sophiamedina10 Vdd

16 APRIL · [SEE ORIGINAL](#)

 **italoferreira**
Margaret River, Western Australia ⋮



   ⋮ 

Liked by **beach_grit**, **otishopecarey** and **15,605** others

italoferreira ⚠️ two shark attacks in less than 24 h here in Australia, detail, just a few km from where the event is being held. Very dangerous, don't you think? Even so, they still insist on taking steps where the risk of having this type of accident is 90 % there i ask: is the safety of athletes not priority? We've had multiple alerts. Life is worth more! I hope it doesn't happen to any of us. I don't feel comfortable training and competing in places like this!

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filipetoledo And lsssssssssoooooo!

16 APRIL · [SEE ORIGINAL](#)

Tim Winton. Again.

<http://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/hack/9682770> (26 April, 2018, from 27.52 - 28.43)



“As someone who’s surfed all over the world and had to deal with the machismo and bravado of Brazilians in particular I through it was amazing how cowardly those guys were. Look, not everyone wants to be in the water the day after two guys have failed the taste test around the corner, but I just thought it was a low act. ... conniving.”

Part IV: The shark

What about the shark?!

- What can this question tell us about broader attitudes and fears about sharks, shark encounters and attacks – about surfers' bodily relations to sharks
- Sharks are a threat to be overcome or a part of surfing ecologies we learn to live with?
- Many surfers in Australia oppose shark culls and nets, others are advocating for them.

Shark attacks, culls and nets



Surfing and the more-than-human

- How we respond to shark encounters and attacks focuses on human fear and safety – nets, culling, spotting, etc (Gibbs and Warren, *Killing Sharks*)
- Surfers and the media have ignored or laughed at the violence enacted against the shark, as well as the WSL's lack of concern for it's welfare – understandably?
- The WSL did not call for a cull, but instead has increased aerial spotting and surveillance, as well as heightened readiness in the water
- Surfing is more-than-human but are there limits to what we want this to mean – is this only acceptable as long as humans are/feel safe? Mitigated risk taking.

Surfing and the more-than-human

- Tim Winton. Again, again (28.43)
<http://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/hack/9682770>

Locals only!

- Who gets to speak for places, animals and plants?
- ‘Nobody owns the waves, it is said. ... [But] Many surfers who’ve spent years of their lives learning the curves and moods of a powerful and alluring surf spot feel a sense of ownership that makes land-based property rights seem feeble in comparison’ (Nick Carroll, 2000, p. 60).
- ‘Surfing is a territorial form of pleasure, dreams, and nostalgia. Postmodern surfing thus becomes a fantasized last frontier for sometimes anxious men and youths’ (Henderson 2001, p.329).

Who decides who is local in colonised nations?

(Photo by Tom Milledge)



Re-thinking our place in ecologies

The ongoing narrative of Fanning's encounter is human (white, male) centered: his dominance over the shark and the terror of the encounter, rather than interaction with the more-than-human world

'When recreation is prioritized over the necessity for marine species to exist in their own realm, humans project a deep disconnection and misunderstanding upon nature about the interconnection of life' (Hammerton & Ford, 2018, 290).

- DH surfs 1 hr after: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyuA8qr_5QE