



# Blue Crush Cinema

## Oceanic Feeling and Settler-Colonial Women

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**Abstract** This article discusses the settler-colonial femininity at work in two films that foreground the Pacific Ocean, *Blue Crush* (John Stockwell, 2002) and *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993). With these film readings it offers a critique of the feminist new materialist turn toward water. The feminist hydrological turn aims to amplify the oceanic sensorium's potential to dissolve the always-already-illusory boundedness of Western subjectivity into a recognition of watery enmeshment, and it aligns, though does not often directly engage, with Indigenous Pacific and trans-Pacific anti-colonial hydropolitics. This article brings feminist hydrological writing into conversation with psychoanalysis and explains that *blue crush cinema* has the following elements and functions: (1) it tells of a settler woman with a powerful draw toward the water—here *crush* is polyvalent; (2) the ocean is at once literal and psychic; (3) the film camera allows water's diffractive animacy to distort human form, a distortion that hydrological feminists associate with dissolving Western subjectivity, and that psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva associates with "oceanic feeling"; but (4), in the end, the blue crush enables the settler woman to return to colonial work. This final function has critical implications for feminist readings of water, which, as this article's central speculation goes, may work paradoxically to recuperate Western thought.

**Keywords** water, settler colonialism, new materialism, psychoanalysis, film

In the "hydrocommons of wet relations," the always-already-illusory boundedness of Western subjectivity would dissolve into a recognition of the fact that, "as bodies of water," Astrida Neimanis writes, "we leak and seethe, our borders are always vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation."<sup>1</sup> The anti-imperial ontologic of water is its "dissolution of knowability, or containability, or mastery."<sup>2</sup> For Melody Jue, the way to access wet relational possibilities is via sensory immersion in the ocean.<sup>3</sup> The oceanic sensorium—its pressure, eyes surrendering to skin as the preeminent sense-maker, up mixing with down, the way sound is "heard" by your bones because wet eardrums

1. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 4, 2.

2. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 22.

3. Jue, *Wild Blue Media*.

get overwhelmed—works as a “disorientation device” against what she and others call terrestrial bias.<sup>4</sup> As it disorients that bias, water “erodes the dream of a master language that would be totally objective, distant, and adequate to articulating the world in its entirety.”<sup>5</sup> A person underwater is pressed by the particular, not global or imperial, emplacement of the body. Jue’s work on the oceanic sensorium puts particular emphasis on the way the ocean is seen or, as her case makes it, not-seen, and ways of seeing it as epistemological thresholds.

Following Jue’s interest in the politics of oceanic vision, this article studies a cinematic way of seeing water offered by two melodramatic films featuring white women on the settler-colonial shores of the South Pacific, *The Piano* (1993, dir. Jane Campion) and *Blue Crush* (2002, dir. John Stockwell). These two films represent what I am calling blue crush cinema, which is less a genre than a curious coincidence of form and function, *The Piano* being a critically lauded New Zealand art film set in the 1800s and *Blue Crush* a sun-crusted millennial blockbuster. The chief formal signature of blue crush cinema is that it contains, in Vivian Sobchack’s words, “relatively rare instance[s] of narrative cinema in which the cultural hegemony of vision is overthrown.”<sup>6</sup> Sequences saturated with roiling Pacific blues address the viewer primarily through a sense of touch: although you are watching, you feel something of the oceanic sensorium, the body sinking or rolling at the mercy of waves. The central characters are diffracted by wet waves of light in images too slippery to hold human form. Contra popular underwater documentaries in which objects in or under the water are sought out to be known via a clear, stable image, the blue crush camera is interested in the water itself, in what the water is or does to form, a visceral rather than scientific depiction of the oceanic.<sup>7</sup>

Although blue crush cinema presents a formal undoing of its protagonists, they survive. With this narrative intervention the films’ endings betray the potential of their wet visual form. Connecting this to the psychoanalytic theory of oceanic feeling, I read blue crush cinema as a cautionary tale about how, where, and for whom ideas about radical elemental force are used. Juxtaposing the anti-imperialist project that feminist scholars find in the oceanic dissolution of humanist subjectivities, these films stage a renewal of those subjectivities, a renewal that works precisely through a settler woman’s contact with the disassembling force of the ocean. Thus the films allegorize a potential for the feminist new materialist philosophy of water to trope paradoxically toward healing coloniality.

### Ways of Seeing Water

To establish the stakes of this before turning to my films, I first want to situate feminist new materialist water scholarship in relation to key Pacific theories of vision: some

4. Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 10.

5. Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 10.

6. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 64.

7. See Natasha Starosielski’s political history of scientifically driven underwater cinema in “Beyond Fluidity.”

Indigenous Oceanic and trans-Pacific work on ocean media, vis-à-vis colonialist infrastructures of seeing these same waters. In its protest against colonial capitalism, the feminist new materialist vision of wet relationality has many points of alignment with these Pacific projects, although the former rarely engages explicitly with the latter.

Drawing on Stacy Alaimo's idea of transcorporeality, Jue writes that the human is "held, but not held up," in the water.<sup>8</sup> The underwater body's discrete objectivity yields to a more unified mass in which it is but a strange coagulation—a part-form, and one made largely of water that drinks and expels water across its life in order to live. There is no "distance" from which to perceive the "world in its entirety";<sup>9</sup> here Jue is remembering that the act of perceiving "the" "whole" "world" is inextricable from the histories of imperialism, where trader-conqueror-sailors mapped that entirety and thereby brought it into being. This feminist thinking thus tackles a core premise of imperial epistemology and seeks to offer new ways to decolonize thought and structure. And it is corroborated in many ways by Oceanian thought, including Epele Hau'ofa's classic essay "Our Sea of Islands." "There is a world of difference," Hau'ofa writes, "between viewing the Pacific as 'islands in a sea' and as 'a sea of islands.' The first emphasizes dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from centers of power. . . . The second is a more holistic perspective, in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships."<sup>10</sup> Hau'ofa explains that the European habit of seeing the Pacific as "islands in a sea" allowed colonists to "transform a once boundless world into the Pacific Island states and territories we know today."<sup>11</sup> Erin Huang calls this process "islanding," and for Huang, twenty-first-century ocean media such as undersea cables and satellite imaging networks continue this work, "transform[ing] the element of water into a new medium that transmits sovereignty and territorial claim, geopolitical imaginary, and the socially constructed boundary between land and sea."<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Elizabeth DeLoughrey describes the way that imperial projections of islands as "isolates" enabled them to be used, in the mid-twentieth century, as laboratories for nuclear testing.<sup>13</sup> I will return to this example.

In other words, the imperial splicing of the ocean into islands was and is still achieved through ways of seeing it. Hau'ofa's Oceanian vision articulates a perspective long central to Indigenous Pacific thought. Viewed from a canoe, water connects rather than isolates. Islands appear, as Vicente Diaz and J. Kēulani Kauanui write, "on the move" toward the voyager, not as the static entities pictured on imperial maps.<sup>14</sup> The imperial map distinguishes the point of view of the colonist, who translated the watery tissue and moving islands he saw into static, as-if-from-above images long before (but

8. Starosielski, "Beyond Fluidity," 19.

9. Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 10.

10. Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," 31.

11. Hau'ofa, "Our Sea of Islands," 34.

12. Huang, "Ocean Media," 178.

13. DeLoughrey, "Myth of Isolates," 167–84.

14. Diaz and Kauanui, "Native Pacific Cultural Studies on the Edge," 315–42.

as the blueprint for) the invention of vertical technologies Huang discusses. By stressing that water renders nothing bounded, Oceanian ways of seeing destabilize imperial projects of possession.

An interest in water as boundary-dissolving, or as an element that renders apparent boundaries illusory, is also central to the feminist new materialist writing about wet relationality.<sup>15</sup> One crucial thing that (immersion in) water dissolves, especially for Jue, is the Western ontology of the senses: the idea that vision is distinct from and superior to sound and touch. The terrestrial system aligns vision with the Cartesian mind, touch and sound with the (feminized, object) body. Because, for sighted beings, vision is enabled by physical distance between the sensing person and what they see, the terrestrial sensory taxonomy that exalts vision allows the Western subject to maintain the idea that it is a distinct entity, distinct because of the gap between it and the beheld world. Only by being bounded can it possess technologies of mastery such as property rights. For Eva Hayward, closing this gap by merging seeing with touching is particularly important.<sup>16</sup> In her queer-animalities studies of coral and jellyfish, their visual-tactile-sonic amalgamated sensoria innervate her own “fingeryeyes” so that her “moving and touching body becomes a visual apparatus, or the visual apparatus is the touching body.”<sup>17</sup> A body with or of fingeryeyes is, for Hayward, a figure of the posthuman, positioned against the Western (humanist) episteme, where you cannot touch the art at the museum because your fingers are oily, and we do not permit contact between the possessive subject and the valuable object where either the object or the subject are changed by their encounter with one another, as happens when wet things meet. Thus poet and literary scholar Lisa Samuels celebrates artists who want their work to be touched, such as, in a rather extreme example, a spa pool installed by Stella Brennan at the Auckland City Gallery in 2006, *Wet Social Sculpture*.<sup>18</sup> Guests could sit in the pool together, provided they had had the forethought to bring a swimsuit to the gallery. “Wet contact is more facilitating than dry contact,” Samuels writes. Here everyone is in touch with the animate matter of the world, proverbially em-pooled with all the planet’s steamy strangers.<sup>19</sup> Samuels’s “membranism” calls attention to “the literal level of encounter [as] a physical intervention, an activity of your interpreting self coming like a membrane into joined contact with the membranes of its encounters.”<sup>20</sup> This meeting of membranes erodes the subject that relies on dry contact—that is, on gaps between people, and between people and their environments, and between objects that need to be distinct from subjects if they are to be owned.

15. Here I should note that not all feminist new materialist writing about water is the same, and this article is limited by treating it as one. This is a gesture I hope will be forgiven as I aim to clear space to introduce new theoretical connections with my film analysis.

16. Hayward, “FINGERYEYES,” 577–99.

17. Hayward, “Sensational Jellyfish,” 174.

18. Samuels, “Membranism,” 166.

19. Samuels, “Membranism,” 160, 167.

20. Samuels, “Membranism,” 167.

In an essay called “What My Fingers Knew,” Vivian Sobchack tenders a theory of “cinesthetic subjectivity,” a film-theoretical echo of Hayward’s fingeryeyes, Samuels’s membranism, and elements of both Jue’s oceanic sensorium and Neimanis’s hydrocommons of wet relations. Cinesthesia, a portmanteau of “cinema” and “synesthesia,”<sup>21</sup> captures a film-watching experience in which film “sensitize[s] the very surfaces of [the] skin [ . . . ] to touch,” so that the image, “in a primary, prepersonal, and global way . . . make[s] literal sense” (a phrase Hayward also uses regarding the jellyfish).<sup>22</sup> Just as wet fingeryeyes destabilize Western sensory ontology, the cinesthetic spectator loses its feeling of discreteness from the film. Sobchack illustrates this with Jane Campion’s *The Piano*, repeatedly emphasizing the wetness of that film, its oceanic book-ends, constant damp and rain dragging on heavy Victorian clothing, “mud and flesh.”<sup>23</sup> Her theory is not, however, offered as a politics. Its resonance with wet new materialism provokes the question whether it could be. What if cinema—a supremely visual form—invites you to feel that you meet it via the sense of touch—if the film is somehow porous because its images are full of water, its objectal forms messed by water’s ontological “dissolution of knowability, or containability, or mastery,”<sup>24</sup> disarming your eyes’ capacity to claim familiar shapes? Could a cinema like this give us a body that “leak[s] and seethe[s]”<sup>25</sup> and thus tropes toward the posthuman, or the queer animality of Hayward’s aqueous fingeryeyes?

### Blue Crush Cinema

*The Piano* is a story of a Scottish woman, Ada (Holly Hunter), and her daughter Flora (Anna Paquin), arriving in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the 1850s to marry a bourgeois settler named Stewart (Sam Neill), so if the film invites something like “wet contact,”<sup>26</sup> it is also about contact in the colonial sense. “However intellectually problematic in terms of its sexual and colonial politics,” Sobchack writes, “Campion’s film moved me deeply, stirring my bodily senses and my sense of my body.”<sup>27</sup> Here Sobchack’s “however” splits the cinesthetic body from the intellect capable of recognizing political problems, for nowhere else does the essay mention politics. This is conspicuous. Stewart turns out to be a jealous brute and Ada has an affair with Baines (Harvey Keitel), another white man but one who speaks Māori language and, “wearing a partial moko, exemplifies the appropriation of Māori identity.”<sup>28</sup> Baines is the locus of Leonie Pihama’s argument that Māori

21. Synesthesia is the experience of sensory melding whereby, for instance, sounds are experienced as having certain colors.

22. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 65, 59, 61; Hayward, “Sensational Jellyfish,” 175.

23. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 53.

24. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 22.

25. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 4.

26. Jue and Samuels both repeatedly use the word “contact” to describe the important qualities of wet epistemology.

27. Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 61 (my emphasis).

28. Pihama, “Ebony and Ivory,” 127. A moko is a Māori facial tattoo, often linked to one’s whakapapa, or ancestry.

provide *The Piano* with both a “cultural backdrop” and a route to sexual freedom from the Victorian metropole.<sup>29</sup> Bridget Orr calls this “the tradition of settler feminism, which saw new possibilities for [European] women in ‘new lands.’”<sup>30</sup>

I agree that there is a kind of settler feminism at work in this film, but *The Piano* imagines possibilities for settler women in *new waters*. The moment of Ada’s contact with Aotearoa begins not with a conventional view of the land from the ship’s deck but with a shot of the boat from below, a fish’s eye view in which a diffuse blue-green light infers tranquility in the depths—a foreshadowing, as these are depths to which Ada will return. The camera breaks the surface for a shaky sequence in which Māori figures (seemingly workers, perhaps friends, of Baines) carry Ada, Flora, and their luggage to shore through unrelenting gray surf that renders absurd the British fashions Ada has brought, particularly her piano, which has to be left on the sand, too heavy to be carried on the long wet hike to the house.

Ada is mute, due to unspecified trauma, and the film gives her more reasons to be, leading to the climax of her attempted suicide. When Ada and Baines and another group of Māori men are traveling by sea to the new settlement of Nelson—this is after Stewart discovers Ada’s infidelity and severs one of her pianist fingers with an axe—Ada has a sudden desire to jettison her piano. After some quibbling in which Flora advocates for her mother by translating their filial sign language into speech, as happens throughout the film, the men heave the piano overboard. As it falls, a spooled rope tied to it begins to uncoil inside the hull of the canoe. Ada places her booted foot in the center of this loop so that it suddenly tightens and whips her into the water and she plunges fast after her beloved instrument. Underwater her petticoats lift so that she looks more jellyfish than human. There are no signs of other life in this water: Ada’s own posthuman distortion supplants the teeming world desired by new materialist visions in which other-than-human organisms might have something to tell us about our entangled extinction. Then a moment of suspension occurs where her face appears in close-up and, improbably, she has stopped sinking. She blinks into the wet as if she can see, and, after a pause, kicks off the trapped boot to swim heavily up. As she breaks the surface, before Baines and three or four of the men haul her aboard—here Māori figures are a function of Ada’s baptism as a “New Zealander,” her newborn will-to-terrestriality, where her European luggage would have held her down—a bird’s-eye mid-shot shows the churning water momentarily split her white form into two or three or more figures.

This splitting is both an instance of wet disfiguration, where “seawater torques solar radiance into complex patterns,” here deforming the human, and a split in the psychoanalytic sense, where the mute subject emerges into the world of language, leaving a part of itself in the dark, speechless and churning.<sup>31</sup> Here I am drawing on Julia

29. Pihama, “Ebony and Ivory,” 125.

30. Orr, “Birth of a Nation?,” 156.

31. Hayward, “Sensational Jellyfish,” 163.

Kristeva's elaboration of the Freudian theory of oceanic feeling.<sup>32</sup> In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud describes oceanic feeling as "a sensation of eternity, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded . . . a feeling of indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole."<sup>33</sup> This has a pronounced resonance with the feminist new materialist claim that the oceanic sensorium could force a recognition of the nondiscreteness of all things. Freud goes on to characterize the oceanic as a retreat into a presubjective state of oneness with the maternal body, a theory that resonates with Gaston Bachelard's famous work in which water is the matter of an imaginary maternity.<sup>34</sup> "Water carries us. Water rocks us. Water puts us to sleep," Bachelard writes, and Kristeva explains that, as oceanic feeling sees the ego dissolve into its surroundings as it was once merged with the maternal, it "destroys the meaning of the symbolic and . . . leads the subject to commit suicide without anguish of disintegration, as a reuniting with archaic non-integration, as lethal as it is jubilatory, as 'oceanic.' . . . [The subject] reclaims the non-integrated self's lost paradise, one without others or limits, a fantasy of untouchable fullness."<sup>35</sup> This destruction of the meaning of the symbolic consists, for Kristeva, in the oceanic's "dislocation of form itself, when form is distorted, abstracted, disfigured, hollowed out,"<sup>36</sup> echoing Jue's idea of water "eroding the dream of a master language."<sup>37</sup> And, to corroborate the alignment I am drawing between these theories, Jackie Wang sees Kristevan oceanic feeling as a potentially communist affect quite similar to what new materialists see in the oceanic sensorium: "the illumination of an already-existing communalism and the direct experience of our embeddedness in the world."<sup>38</sup>

*The Piano* depicts the literal and the psychoanalytic oceanic, as its South Pacific is a medium of both colonial passage-making and of Ada's drive to die. This psychic-literal doubleness is also marked in the opening of *Blue Crush*, where massive waves in the harsh colors of a sunny scene filmed in photo-negative turn out to be the surfer Anne-Marie's (Kate Bosworth) dream sequence, cut jumpily between shots of her sweaty face turning in bed, as in the conventional Hollywood depiction of post-traumatic stress disorder. Set in contemporary Hawai'i, this 2002 melodrama tells the story of the ice-blond Anne-Marie's conflicted ambitions to compete in a surf contest on what the film repeatedly calls the "most deadly waves in the world." Her motivation is not literally represented as a suicide attempt but as a suicide mission for the once badly hurt athlete, in keeping with the death drive as it plays out in extreme sports. This difference in intent between Ada and Anne-Marie is betrayed when Anne-Marie meets a climax strikingly

32. Kristeva, *Black Sun*.

33. Freud, *Standard Edition*, 21:64–65.

34. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*.

35. Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 19–20.

36. Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 27.

37. Jue, *Wild Blue Media*, 10.

38. Wang, "Oceanic Feeling and Communist Affect."

similar to Ada's. In the big competition, Anne-Marie is swallowed by a wave that then severs her surfboard from the cord tied to her right ankle and loops it around a jagged reef. The rock holds her under the surf just as Ada's piano sunk her, also by a tether she attached to her own right ankle. The surf batters Anne-Marie so that the viewer loses sight of her body, only seeing the odd hand or foot, split from the rest by the rushing dull white of the water. Eventually she manages to loose the ankle from its velcro noose and, like Ada, rise.

Anne-Marie rides to shore and is celebrated by a watching crowd, a new boyfriend, and a representative of the surf-fashion brand Billabong, who offers her sponsorship. This is a big (feminist) break—she is her younger sister's sole carer but has just lost her job as a cleaner in one of the big hotels. The film ends with her set to leave her oceanic feeling behind and enter the industrial complex of international surfing, a complex that “has established Hawaiian identity and place as something static, to be conquered, controlled, and exploited.”<sup>39</sup> Just as Anne-Marie's not-drowning sequence does not present itself as a suicide, *Blue Crush* does not depict a first-contact moment of colonization. Instead it recalls Patrick Wolfe's classic statement that colonial “invasion is a structure not an event,”<sup>40</sup> a thesis that explains the unlikely likeness between these films. In one scene, Anne-Marie edges into a spa pool toward her blond beau after a brawl with Indigenous Hawaiians over access to a beach known to be “for locals,” and she says: “That's not real Hawai'i, they're just crazy, they're so protective of their land. Their waves, especially.” *Their waves, especially*—here the water appears as a kind of ultimate frontier, especially if we notice the way it echoes in tone and content when, in *The Piano*, Stewart complains of Māori who refuse to sell him their land: “What do they want it for? They don't cultivate it, burn it back, anything. How do they even know it's theirs?”

In *The Piano*, it is Stewart and not Ada who says this, because the film is self-conscious about colonization, and as such it requires a purportedly innocent woman to stage the genesis of the New Zealander. Several analyses locate *The Piano* in a 1990s crisis of Aotearoa/New Zealand identity that saw many whites attach to “pākehā”<sup>41</sup> as a label felt to distance them from the violent international mimesis of whiteness. It was in this context that director Jane Campion wanted to “touch and explore [her] heritage.”<sup>42</sup> (Note that she says “touch” before the masculine-colonial “explore,” a nod to Sobchack's cinesthetic film reading.) Reflexive in a way that *Blue Crush* is not, *The Piano* wants Ada to emerge from the water with a “a newly indigenized pākehā identity”—this is quite properly a baptism of the citizen, its holy water the South Pacific Ocean.

39. Ingersoll, *Waves of Knowing*, 24.

40. Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” 388.

41. A Māori word used widely to name white settlers. It has a contested translation, sometimes taken to mean “stranger” or “alien” or “foreigner.”

42. Campion, quoted in Neill, “Land Without a Past,” 141.



When Ada enters her picket-fenced slice of Nelson, she begins to speak: emerging “into the world of language [i.e., out of oceanic feeling], she becomes, as it were, post-colonial,” ready for the domestic work of constructing “New Zealand.”<sup>43</sup> Bridget Orr argues that this ending “write[s] her out of history and into romance,” the amnesiac romance of settler futurity.<sup>44</sup> *The Piano*’s ending “relegates colonial and patriarchal violence to a kind of dreamtime. . . . [The] time of invasion and violation is the time before national language.”<sup>45</sup> Relegating invasion to the nonhistory of the time before language facilitates the forming of a pākehāness “not troubled by Māori claims for sovereignty.”<sup>46</sup>

Kānaka Maoli sovereignty claims trouble *Blue Crush* to the extent that the whites leave the locals’ beach after their fight, but, in the Jacuzzi, this is transformed into a pre-coital joke. And as Anne-Marie goes to work at the end of the film, she invests her personal project of future-building in a company named for a white Australian bastardization of the Wiradjuri word *bilabang*, meaning “lake,” where *bila* means “river” and *bang* means “continuing in time or space”—that is, a stilled river.<sup>47</sup> A *bilabang* is a sacred source of water, but *Billabong*™ is a brand of “bikini”—a swimsuit named for the Marshallese word for beach by an American fashion designer at the same historical moment that Euro-American nuclear testing at the Marshall Islands began in earnest to irradiate the Black Pacific. For Teresia Teaiwa, the bikini swimsuit thus marks a “supreme ambivalence in Western thought,” a simultaneous “celebration and a forgetting of nuclear power that strategically and materially . . . erases the living history of Pacific Islanders,” and one that allows white women to get full-body tans and thereby be “marked as exotic” and (surf-) brandable.<sup>48</sup> Anne-Marie’s romance with ambivalent bikini commerce befits this teen melodrama, whose production was brokered by April Masini, also behind *Baywatch: Hawaii* and bringing the Miss Universe pageants to Hawai‘i in 1998—Masini made *Blue Crush* the first film to exploit then-new special tax breaks designed to draw “high tech” industry Hawai‘i.<sup>49</sup> By participating in a broader intensification of the islands’ surf-tourist-industrial exploitation, *Blue Crush* relegates colonial and patriarchal violence out of history, only less to a prenatal dreamtime than to the flattened now of extractive capitalism.

### The Blue of Distance

As the women return to colonial work at the ends of their stories, they resurrect the gap between subject and object that facilitates imperial ways of seeing water. Read alongside

43. Neill, “Land without a Past,” 140.

44. Orr, “Birth of a Nation?,” 149.

45. Neill, “Land without a Past,” 137.

46. Neill, “Land without a Past,” 145.

47. “Billabong,” Burrara Gathering, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130510032448/http://burarra.questacon.edu.au/pages/bilabong.html> (last modified June 21, 2006).

48. Teaiwa, “bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans,” 101, 87, 93.

49. Stuart, “Surf’s Up.”

Rebecca Solnit's work on what she calls "the blue of distance"—the blue of a faraway horizon—as "the color of an emotion, the color of solitude and desire, . . . *the color of where you can never go*,"<sup>50</sup> the films' renewal of the gap safeguards the desire of the feminine settler, her desire for close distance from the blue world, a pulsing island of her want.

The world is blue at its edges and in its depths. This blue is the light that got lost. Light at the blue end of the spectrum does not travel the whole distance from the sun to us. It disperses among the molecules of the air, it scatters in water. Water is colorless . . . but deep water is full of this scattered light. . . . The blue at the horizon, the blue of land that seems to be dissolving into the sky, is a deeper, dreamier, melancholy blue, the blue at the farthest reaches of the places where you see for miles, *the blue of distance*.<sup>51</sup>

In these words, the Romantic European landscape beheld by a man proud of his dominion is laced with a knowing lament: not just that the desired thing is and was always out of reach, but that getting it destroys it. Desire is produced by lack, beauty by loss. Solnit takes this as a structure for even the most intimate relation, where the distance is not literal but psychic, as in a desire to get lost in the other but the other's beauty is a property of an enigmatic quality that you see in them but that is not really in them, let alone is it reachable, what Jacques Lacan calls the "in you more than you,"<sup>52</sup> and the closer you get to them the closer you are to losing it. The "blue" of blue crush cinema figures the loss that sustains wanting, its "crush" a desire that, like a schoolgirl's pining, is much more satisfying than its object could ever be. The settler woman wants not dominion over the oceanic but, impossibly, to get lost in the blue light, to keep wanting to be scattered along with the light that got lost.

Where feminist new materialism hopes that oceanic sensing will aid in a project to sustain multispecies survival by transforming the human subject into something better, psychoanalytic theory claims that oceanic feeling cannot run its course to any conclusion except the subject's suicide. She either recovers from the feeling or dies. One might contend that the psychoanalytic stress on the impossibility of such a transformation amounts to support for the subjective boundedness of the Western ideal, but psychoanalysis has long insisted that the subjects called human are not the discrete proprietary beings they imagine themselves to be—in Freud's words, the human ego is "not even master in its own house."<sup>53</sup> It is precisely this nonmastery that makes the subject what it is: because the body is so thoroughly permeated and so vulnerable to its permeability, the oppositions that subjectivity first conjures in infancy, "I/Other, Inside/Outside," are "vigorous but pervious, violent but uncertain."<sup>54</sup> Bodily permeability is the

50. Solnit, *Field Guide to Getting Lost*, 25.

51. Solnit, *Field Guide to Getting Lost*, 25.

52. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 268.

53. Freud, *Standard Edition*, 17:139, 143.

54. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 7.

premise that inspires the subject's violent will to mastery, as much as it also troubles that will. Lacan once explained this in terms of vision: light "may travel in a straight line, but it is refracted, diffused, it floods, it fills—the eye is a sort of bowl—it flows over, too, it necessitates a whole series of organs, mechanisms, defenses."<sup>55</sup> The sighted body experiences even dry light as an element that might overwhelm it; or, in other words, light as we meet it is always already wet, and so the oceanic sensorium would occasion only the refinding of this rather than a new encounter. The subject has already been flooded and conjured a whole series of defenses against its floodedness. This poses a crucial question about the new materialist investment in ontological slippage as a necessarily radical movement.

Anne-Marie's surfboard leash and Ada's piano are left waiting at the sea floor. Like the Billabong bikini, a trace of transpacific colonial violence hiding in plain sight, these remainders are abject, "imperial ghost[s]," "administered forgettings and guarded secrets [that] leave a kind of counter-evidence: material and spectral traces, shadowy after-effects, and temporal disturbances."<sup>56</sup> For Amy Kaplan and others, whatever cannot be assimilated into the colonial domestic space has a spectral relationship to the nation—it irritates, persistently, as haunting is by definition ceaseless, necessitating the domesticating labors that women are typically tasked with.<sup>57</sup> The colonial beach is an unstable site for this work. When Ada and Flora arrive on Aotearoa shores they sleep one night like children under a tent made of one of the scandalously disrobed Ada's petticoats, the tide lapping at the ankles of the piano nearby, a delicate parody of settlement. *Blue Crush* also has a comedic scene: in a fit of disgust at American tourists, Anne-Marie storms the beach carrying a trash can and a used condom. She finds the offending man and demonstrates wrapping it in a tissue and putting it away. For this impertinence she is fired. Thus Ada and Anne-Marie might strike one as unlikely candidates for the reification of colonial domesticity, but their little mutinies invite our sympathies so as to provide an all the more attractive site for the inscription of settler futurity. Crucially, we see the women grow up, their childish refusals ghosted along with their oceanic tethers to death.

The women's ankle cuffs are also simply trash, pollution in the Pacific. Drawing on Édouard Glissant's "balls and chain gone green," DeLoughrey's oceans are "heavy" with the waste of the modern project, from those balls and chain in the Atlantic to nuclear fallout in the South Pacific.<sup>58</sup> For DeLoughrey the ocean is not the limit point or the outside of modernity: "The sea does not [even] merely facilitate modernity"; rather, the sea "is constituted by it."<sup>59</sup> Drawing on Bachelard's note that water "remembers the

55. Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 94.

56. McClintock, "Imperial Ghosting and National Tragedy," 821.

57. Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity."

58. DeLoughrey, "Heavy Waters," 703, citing Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*.

59. DeLoughrey, "Heavy Waters," 705.

dead,” DeLoughrey argues that the ocean preserves history in the form of the nuclear-petrocultural waste that travels the food chain and comes to literally constitute us. The ghosts of the modern project consist of real matter, so that the subject, by virtue of its wet relationality, incorporates sedimentary toxic waste produced by and for nuclear modernity. Here again the wet membranes of the human body are precisely what constitutes it as the subject of history that it is, contra feminist new materialist claims that membranousness is the way to that subject’s dissolution. It seems to me noteworthy that DeLoughrey’s work has focused more on the Atlantic, the crucible of modern industry, the stage of the Middle Passage, with its ship’s hold what Saidiya Hartman calls the womb of the world, whereas the other authors I cite in relation to feminist new materialism seem all to write with reference to (or from institutions located near) the Pacific, where, as Anisha Sankar writes, “narratives of exceptionalism . . . distance the history of colonisation in Oceania from the history of the transatlantic slave trade, as if they were separate and unrelated structures of racial violence.”<sup>60</sup> The Pacific is imagined in dominant cultural memory as if it is less written through by capital, a Western fantasy that at least some of its farthest West’s wet immensity still escapes humanity so that humans can still escape to it or through it; it is clean, big, and rough, a kind of last true wild. The ontological slippage desired by new materialism is the very ground out of which a settler subject emerges, and when this desire concerns the Pacific, the anti-Black nuclear history of the bikini is no incidental point. As Quito Swan writes in *Pasifika Black*, the imperial history of the Pacific is one of Europe’s distinguishing what it called “Melanesia” (etymologically “islands of Black people”) from “Polynesia” and “Micronesia,” the latter’s people being lighter-skinned and straighter-haired than the former’s.<sup>61</sup> This was to structure the practice of “blackbirding,” a form of racial slavery that began largely after transatlantic slavery’s prohibition, in which Melanesians were kidnapped, transported (usually by sea), and forced to work on lands from which their European captors had displaced other Oceanic peoples, mirroring the economic function of racial taxonomies in the Americas and elsewhere. This history is typically forgotten in dominant accounts that locate slavery in the Atlantic only—and, by extension, Blackness as of African origin only—a forgetting that recalls Teaiwa’s description of the absent-present history of the bikini as marking a “supreme ambivalence in Western thought,” as if that thought remembers the Atlantic’s culpability in racial slavery only on the condition that it can have one ocean, the biggest, fantasmatically free of slavery’s stain.<sup>62</sup>

Blue crush cinema is set in the Pacific, not the Atlantic, in order to host a settler oceanic feeling, so that its ocean can appear to the Western eye as its “non-integrated

60. Sankar, “Intimacies,” 62; Hartman, “Belly of the World.”

61. Swan, *Pasifika Black*, 2.

62. Teaiwa, “bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans,” 101.

self's lost paradise, one without others or limits, a fantasy of untouchable fullness."<sup>63</sup> In blue crush cinema, oceanic feeling functions as a frontier, in that it is the site of an imperial construction ("woman"), but it is not the typical kind of frontier whose chief threat is whatever menace is imagined to be on the other side, spatially removed from the interior. The Pacific is not the constitutive outside of this subject. Instead, the Pacific figures the settler's constitutive drive toward her own nonbeing and functions to repeatedly rinse her of the weight of her history, as in a christening, a second birth. The imagined threat is that, by her own volition, the settler woman might never return from the water. The trash-ghosts of her drive at once represent that drive's collateral and its persistence. Because the ocean is a danger to her only insofar as she is a danger to herself, hers is a vital form of privilege and one that is increasingly paramount: shelter from the weather. Ada and Anne-Marie live *in the wake*<sup>64</sup> of nothing so much as their own structural and psychic ambivalence.

In sum, *blue crush cinema* has the following elements and functions: (1) It tells the story of a white woman with a strong draw toward the water, for which the word *crush* has triple valence, referring to her longing to enter the blue, the potential violence of oceanic pressure, and, the way a schoolgirl crush is infinitely more pleasurable than contact with its object, the fact that desire wants mostly to beget itself; (2) the ocean is at once literal and psychic; (3) the film camera allows the pulling, crushing, diffractive animacy of water to depict the "dislocation of form" that Kristeva associates with oceanic feeling, and that feminist new materialists associate with the oceanic sensorium's efficacy at destabilizing Western subjectivity, and that Sobchack associates with cines-thesia; but (4), in the final instance, blue crush cinema's embrace of wetness is a function of a therapeutic process that uses contact with the oceanic to momentarily satiate its subject's drive and thus enable her to return to colonial work.

### Conclusion: "A Hydrological Turn?"

"Why water?" Cecelia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis ask in their 2013 essay "Towards a Hydrological Turn?," in which they suggest that the humanities is and should be seeing such a turn.<sup>65</sup> The notion of a turn implies academe's prior negligence of a topic or theory, and, oftentimes, naming a turn has a performative function whereby previous work on said topic is either forgotten or classified as the new project's origin story.<sup>66</sup> "First, we love water," they answer themselves: "Water attracts us: rivers,

63. Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 20.

64. In *In The Wake*, Christina Sharpe theorizes anti-Blackness as a weather system. It controls the subject's ability to breathe and (non)protection from environmental toxins in the present wake of the Middle Passage, which, by denying air and space to those in the hold of the ship, set the course for Atlantic modernity as a world defined by an anti-Black organization of the weather.

65. Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis, *Thinking with Water*, 5.

66. See Ann Cvetkovich's analysis of the "affective turn" and its forgetting of 1980s and 1990s feminist, often Black feminist, work on the politics of emotion, in *Depression*.

ponds, rainstorms, coastlines—even puddles—have an undeniable sensual charisma.”<sup>67</sup> It is telling that love appears here. The knowledge or study of water as a boundless element is not new: Hau‘ofa published “Our Sea of Islands” in 1994, and he is drawing on Pacific knowledges both ancient and living. “Not everyone needs to renew a commitment to the vitality of so-called things,” Kim TallBear writes, in an engagement with new materialist work on animacy in the Americas that disregards Indigenous epistemologies.<sup>68</sup> TallBear goes on to argue that, in their efforts to make visible and thinkable the vitality of so-called things, “we [Indigenous thinkers] are the living that the new materialists, like so many Western thinkers before them and beside them, refuse to see.”<sup>69</sup> Blue crush cinema stages and then ghosts Ada and Anne-Marie’s suicides in order to recuperate them as subjects of settler futurity, and the feminist new materialist project to dissolve the human into water spectralizes the Indigenous Pacific thought that precedes and exceeds the terms of their turn toward the water. But TallBear and others have made this point already, and it is not my main aim.<sup>70</sup> Rather, I am asking: What if the desire of feminist new materialism is structurally analogous to that of Ada and Anne-Marie? Even if its hydrological turn did not ghost Indigenous thought, it would thus have the paradoxical potential to recuperate the desire of the settler subject by scattering the forms of that subject into the sea.

Ada does actually drown in an earlier draft of *The Piano*.<sup>71</sup> Her ultimate survival is what Jane Campion calls a “[have your cake and] ‘eat it too’ gesture”: she gets lost and then finds herself, feels the Pacific and recovers.<sup>72</sup> *The Piano* closes with Ada’s fantastic suicide, an underwater shot of her would-be corpse tied to the piano on the sea floor (fig. 1), which she narrates: “At night, I think of my piano in its ocean grave, and sometimes, myself, floating above it. Down there, everything is so still and silent that it lulls me to sleep. It is a weird lullaby. And so it is; it is mine . . . in the cold grave, under the deep, deep sea.” Is what’s hers the silence of her presymbolic state, her crushed piano, or the grave that is the deep sea? All of it, I think: here the oceanic as Campion’s cake is had and eaten. Ada recounts this over the film’s closing image, which tracks backward from her floating body so that both her form and the film’s first and only sight of fish get more and more blue until they disappear into the water. In the end this is a picture of entangled multispecies extinction: one that takes place in the register of fantasy, and in which fish say nothing at all.

67. Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis, *Thinking with Water*, 5.

68. TallBear, “Beyond the Life/Not-Life Binary,” 193, referring to Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter*.

69. TallBear, “Beyond the Life/Not-Life Binary,” 198.

70. Also in terms of anti-Blackness, such as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson’s warning that “we must think critically about the enthusiastic fetishization of ontological slippage in much recent posthumanist, ecocritical, and speculative-realist work, [because they] . . . require an exception, and black people have been [so] burdened” (*Becoming Human*, 225–26).

71. Campion, in Bilbrough, “*Piano*,” 113–23.

72. Campion, in Bilbrough, “*Piano*,” 117.



Figure 1. Ada's ghost  
(Campion, *The Piano*).

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