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“The Shimmering Edge”: Surfing, Risk, and Climate Change in Tim Winton’s *Breath*

Breath, Tim Winton’s coming-of-age surfing novel, indirectly links the voluntary risk-taking of adolescent surfers with that of a society teetering on the edge of oceanic climate change. This paper draws on risk theory, the sociology of surfing, oceanic studies, and Winton’s related writings to provide an ecocritical reading of *Breath*.

We [Western Australians] are not sea people by way of being great mariners, but more a coastal people, content on the edge of things.

Tim Winton, *Land’s Edge* (41)

Surfing is a form of spectacular but deferred arrival. Wave-riders, often but not always young, white, and male, perform an approach to the liminal, transitional space of a coastline that they usually do not reach – and may need to avoid reaching – until they have finished surfing. *Breath* (2008), Tim Winton’s novel about an Australian boy’s coming of age in the 1970s through what he calls the “pointless and beautiful” activity of surfing (218), meditates on the addictive risk-taking and sensation-seeking that often accompany the adolescent male’s emergence. Winton’s characters pursue what theorists of voluntary risk- and excitement-seeking call “edgework” or “peak experience” activities (Lyng, “Edgework” 3; Ford 158): surfing for the three main male characters, aerial skiing and auto-asphyxiation for the main female character. Some eventually die from high-risk pursuits, or become physically or psychically damaged, and while they all survive adolescence, they never fully transcend it. The spatial liminality and deferred arrival of the surfer become analogous to the fluidity and temporal liminality of the adolescent, who is no longer a child under the control of others but not yet an autonomous adult who has taken control. Winton offers an ominous symbol of that suspended state in his description of a roadkill kangaroo, strung up by its tail, that “looked as though it was caught in a perpetual earthward dive. [...] The roo aimed and aimed and never arrived. Only its blood made the journey” (63).¹ The novel begins with a similarly gruesome image of an adolescent boy’s “[a]ccidental” hanging through erotic auto-asphyxiation (8); having taken a risk – taken control and then lost it – he too never arrives. In *Breath*, such images prove instructive as they reach beyond the individual pleasure-seeking contexts of surfing and sexuality to resonate globally and ecologically.

In an essay on voluntary risk-taking, sociologist Stephen Lyng writes of edgeworkers’ desire “to control the seemingly uncontrollable,” which he says is often a way of compensating for “the *lack* of control that people experience in their institutional lives” (“Sociology” 45). The challenges and thrills of extreme sports, for instance, come not just from defying gravity or distance or bodily limits or one’s own fear. For Lyng, “the exploration of limits or the ‘edges’ between sanity and insanity, consciousness and unconsciousness, or life and death provides a way to break free of the rigidified sub-

1. Bridget Rooney offers a compelling interpretation of this scene’s “meditation on mortality” (251): “In its urgent futility, the striving self is an automaton monotonously caught in its mortal body, repetitively aiming but never arriving. Likewise, surfing becomes a process of perpetually aiming but never arriving” (252).

jective categories created by disciplinary technologies that circumscribe almost every aspect of human experience" (43). Engaging in such activities is a way "to re-enchant a disenchanted world" (22). Surfing at a time before the rise of extreme sports, Winton's characters aspire to be and to do something "extraordinary" rather than "extreme" (Winton, *Breath* 102), but this motivation to compensate for constraints or disenchantments still applies to the adolescent protagonist, Bruce Pike, who is attracted to surfing – and to the small fraternity he surfs with – as an escape from his bleak mill-town environment and his passive, unadventurous parents. He seeks increased autonomy and individuality by doing something unconventional, counter-cultural, and thrilling, along with a wild friend of his age, named Loonie, and an older mentor, Sando, who teaches both boys the skills and initiates them into the culture of surfing.

The limited control that Pike (a.k.a. Pikelet) actually achieves over his adolescent and later life is consistent with the peculiar qualities of surfing. At once sport, art form, lifestyle, and subculture (Ford 59), surfing is both active and submissive: the wave-rider skillfully engages powerful natural forces without any prospect of determining or altering them. Aiming to control what his body does on the wave, but not the wave itself, the surfer knows that unpredictable nature determines the limits of what he can do. His skill involves reading the sea and anticipating its effects – the swells and waves it generates – in order to manoeuvre on it gracefully and safely, but he does not physically affect that oceanic environment. Winton addresses this ecological dimension in an essay that describes surfing as "walking on water, tapping the sea's energy without extracting anything from it. [...] Few other water pursuits," he writes, "have this non-exploitative element" ("Surfing" 12). Indeed, as Nick Ford and David Brown note in *Surfing and Social Theory*, because the surfers' play space is active and dynamic, not static, they must be "reflexive performers" (18). The rider is "completely at the mercy of the wave," as a celebrity surfer puts it in Susan Casey's *The Wave*, an account of big-wave riders (93); Casey notes that surfers' "respect" for the sea helps them survive, "and they under[stand] the hubris of humans trying to impose their will on the ocean" (99, 100). As the global oceanic environment becomes both more dangerous and more endangered than ever, and as humanity teeters precariously and spectacularly on the edge of climate calamity while deferring transformative change to its exploitation of nature, Winton's novel invites readers to link the risky pleasure-seeking of adolescent surfers to that of a society that has long imposed its will on the ocean and the larger global ecosystem, and that risks surrendering whatever control it may once have had over its environmental future.

Given its characters' obsessions, *Breath* is clearly interpretable through the lens of risk. As Colleen McGloin notes in her reading of its construction of gender, early reviews and scholarship focused on the novel's "central theme of risk-taking as this relates to the male characters, and specifically, to Australian surfing masculinities" (109). Nicholas Birns's essay on *Breath* examines its characters' risk-taking and risk-avoiding acts in relation to neoliberalism's imposition and imbalanced distribution of risks. The novel has also been read through the lens of ecology: Salhia Ben-Messahel proposes that *Breath* "suggests that the individual is a component of place; it encapsulates an ecological vision [...] whereby the ecological spectrum participates in the search for an Australian identity and thus provides the means to explore deep psychological aspects of belonging and not belonging" (14). William Lombardi, beginning with the figure of the breaking wave as a "material emblem of the give-and-take between global influence

and local places” (41), makes the novel a case study for theorizing a “*postlocal ecocriticism*” that accommodates both a local, rooted place-sense and a globally aware identity so often seen as its opposite (41). In the titular image of breath and breathing as an internalization of one’s environment, Lombardi finds a positive image of “the land inscrib[ing] the human instead of the human inscribing the land in a rarefied form of environmental determinism” (48). What previous critics have not undertaken, and which this essay attempts, is an ecocritical reading of *Breath* that deploys insights from risk theory, the sociology of surfing, and oceanic studies to ask what its engagement with the ethics and aesthetics of surfing, and with adolescence, implies about the environmental risks of catastrophic climate change.

The ocean’s vast scale, relative inaccessibility, resistance to human inscription, and uninhabitability make it the world’s least understood and mapped space. In 2010, *PMLA* published an editor’s column and a large section devoted to oceanic studies, a then-developing “blue turn” to literary and cultural studies that complements ecocriticism’s “green turn” in order to combat what Margaret Cohen calls “hydrophasia”: “a pervasive twentieth-century attitude that [...] Allan Sekula has called ‘forgetting the sea’” (658). Scholars of postcolonial and Commonwealth literatures, like literary critics in general, have typically been guilty of this: we most often approach our subject terrestrially, even when we are critiquing territoriality, contesting boundaries and national categories, and theorizing such sea-spanning phenomena as transnational migration and diaspora. However, by 2010 some literary scholars had begun, as Cohen writes, “pioneering new paradigms and concepts of critical and cultural analysis scaled to what the early modern period called the *terraqueous* globe” (658). In postcolonial studies, scholars such as Paul Gilroy and Ian Baucom have been among the pioneers, focusing on the Atlantic Ocean in particular as the central space of European imperialism and the middle passage of slavery and trade – of the circulation of peoples, commodities, and ideas.² Edouard Glissant has written movingly of the overdetermined, multiple meanings of the Caribbean Sea in that region’s literature and culture.³ In framing his fascinating book on Shakespeare’s ocean, Steve Mentz writes, “When we stand at its edge, the sea appears at once too vast and too obvious for inquiry. In the modern West, the ocean is everywhere and nowhere, at once the most meaningful and most overlooked feature of our cultural imagination” (2). As the one truly shared space on our ever more integrated planet, and given its historical centrality to empire and role in both dividing and connecting far-flung peoples – dividing them geographically, connecting them through maritime technologies – the sea is a space to which we should pay more attention.

In her *PMLA* editor’s column, Patricia Yaeger links the sea to what Garrett Hardin has called the “tragedy of the commons” – the tendency for publically owned, shared space to degrade and atrophy through the neglect, abuse, overuse, and simple taking-for-granted of its multiple owners, who, because there are so many of them, do not see themselves as owners and therefore take little responsibility (Yaeger 525; Hardin 264). As Yaeger laments our ever bigger and more damaging “plastic footprint” in the sea (528), she advocates an “oceanic ecopoetics” that would “start with a recognition that our relation to the sea is always already technological” and that “late-capitalist seas are becoming more techno than ocean” (526-7). As waste stuff spills into the sea from

2. See Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (1993), and Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic* (2005).

3. See Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* (1989).

ships, oilrigs, upriver technologies, and irresponsible dumping – and with plastic waste of particular concern⁴ – human culture affects and begins to crowd out nature. A surfboard, however, is a unique form of maritime technology. No doubt more than a few of these objects, lost through wipeouts, contribute to our plastic footprint, but otherwise surfboards, and the surfing that takes place on them, are ecologically benign. John Fiske in *Reading the Popular* writes that “[t]he skill and art of the surfer resemble more the way a dolphin interacts with the sea or a bird with the air than man’s more normal technological imposition of his will and needs upon nature, typified by the modern giant ships” (60). Relatedly, Fiske describes the surfboard as “the perfect example of a category anomalous between nature and culture,” in that it enables its users to “violate the boundary between man and fish” (60, 49). While the word “violate” may imply an unwelcome transgression, for Fiske, as for Winton, boundary crossing is enabling and rich with transformative possibility.

The beach or coastline where surfing takes place – that transitional zone between land and sea – is also an anomalous category in Fiske’s terms, and Winton talks about it as such in *Land’s Edge: A Coastal Memoir*: “Nowhere else on the continent is the sense of being trapped between sea and desert so strong as in Western Australia. In many places along this vast and lonely coastline the beach is the only margin between them” (42). As liminal spaces, he analogizes beaches with verandas on houses, quoting Philip Drew’s compelling observation that “The veranda is an interval, a space, where life is improvised. The beach, in Australia, is the landscape equivalent of the veranda, a veranda at the edge of the continent” (41). That spatial liminality also makes the beach suitable for transitional or liminal temporal processes and states, and indeed Winton agrees with Robert Drewe’s view “that almost every Australian rite of passage occurs on or near the beach” (Winton, *Land’s* 40). Childhood has historically been seen as a long transition: from the primal, natural, instinctive animal wildness of the infant to the acculturated, domesticated, conditioned rationality of the adult. Adolescent youths are located in a liminal zone on that temporal continuum from nature to culture, and if they surf they can be located in a liminal zone spatially, as noted above, and often, though in varied and unpredictable ways, behaviourally as well.

Risk-taking, as Lyng notes, is “a form of boundary negotiation – the exploration of ‘edges,’ as it were” (“Edgework” 4). In *Breath*, Pike’s aquatic risk-taking begins at age 11 when he and Loonie explore aerobic boundaries, competing to see who can hold his breath longest at the bottom of a river in order to induce panic among bystanders; the panic is followed by anger when the unwitting spectators realize they have been duped, no longer good citizens responding to an apparent drowning but the audience for a prankster’s performance. “We scared people,” Pike writes, “pushing each other harder and further until often as not we scared ourselves” (16). In this pre-surfing embrace of a liminal state between boy and fish, the friends maintain a high degree of control and are at low actual risk: they choose how long to stay underwater and resurface into their air-breathing human identities at will. But others perceive them to be at high risk, dangerously displaced into inhospitable nature. The “solitary and feral” young Loonie’s “wildness” involves taking similar controlled risks in the realm of culture when he rou-

4. The non-profit organization Plastic Oceans Foundation estimates that humans now produce nearly 300 million tons of plastic a year, and that over eight million tons are dumped into the oceans (Plastic). In June 2018, French swimmer Ben Lecomte began a swim across the Pacific Ocean to raise awareness of plastic pollution.

tinely “played chicken with log trucks” (17-8). As he and Pike begin surfing under Sando’s tutelage, they take increasingly greater risks in a less easily controlled environment; a big wave is more unpredictable than still water or even a lumbering truck, and the wave takes much more skill to challenge safely.

“[G]reedy about risk” and indifferent to authority (33), Loonie inspires Pike to take greater risks; in an era of more laissez-faire parenting, Pike’s parents are either ignorant or in denial of the extent to which he puts himself in harm’s way. The boys do it, as most surfers do, for the in-the-moment thrills of confronting a challenge and feeling at one with a force of nature. Pike writes,

There was never any doubt about the primary thrill of surfing, the huge body-rush we got flying down the line with the wind in our ears. We didn’t know what endorphins were but we quickly understood how narcotic the feeling was, and how addictive it became. [...] We talked about skill and courage and luck – we shared all that, and in time we surfed to fool with death – but for me there was still the outlaw feeling of doing something graceful, as if dancing on water was the best and bravest thing a man could do. (26)⁵

This ultimately “pointless” pursuit challenges not only the powerful waves but the mill-town’s prevailing models of masculinity and productive labour; in Sawyer, Pike says, “men did solid, practical things, mostly with their hands” (25).⁶ Valorizing the extraordinary, transcendent possibilities of the sea over the daily ordinariness of life on the land, Pike not only embraces surfing values but echoes an older tradition dating from the eighteenth-century discovery of the sea and the shoreline as spaces of pleasure and self-knowledge. As Alain Corbin notes in his masterful history *The Lure of the Sea*, “For the Romantic hero, real life is the sea, an intact place of freedom that insulates him from the triviality of the earthly sojourn” (170). W.H. Auden writes similarly of the Romantics’ view of the sea as “where the decisive events, the moments of eternal choice, of temptation, fall, and redemption occur. The shore life is always trivial” (13).

In *Breath*, the unbounded, uncontrollable sea is the primary space for self-discovery and growth through taking on the challenges and risks of wave riding. The exhilaration surfing provides as Loonie and Pike take on bigger and more dangerous waves, particularly a notoriously shark-filled spot named Barney’s, makes them feel stronger and older; as Pike says, “the exhilaration of the rides themselves inoculated us both against the worst of our fear” (75). However, insofar as this personal development represents a form of progress, it is articulated in the novel – and in Winton’s short essay “Surfing” – as an ecologically neutral, pure, and private kind of development. Indeed, when Loonie’s success at Barney’s has him wishing his best rides had been photographed, Sando is dismissive, saying there is no need to prove it, to have his ride witnessed by

5. Comparable descriptions of the enchantment of waves and surfing can be found in many non-fiction accounts of their affect. William Finnegan’s Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir *Barbarian Days: A Surfing Life* (2015) provides many vivid examples, beginning with this passage conveying his youthful discovery of the sea’s pleasures and alluring dangers: “I waded into the waves [...], diving under pummeling lines of foam, thrashing toward the main sandbar, where the brown walls of the big waves stood and broke. I couldn’t get enough of their rhythmic violence. They pulled you toward them like hungry giants. They drained the water off the bar as they drew to their full, awful height, then pitched forward and exploded. From underwater, the concussion was deeply satisfying. Waves were better than anything in books, better than movies, better even than a ride at Disneyland, because with them the charge of danger was uncontrived. It was real. And you could learn how to maneuver around it.” (71).

6. Lombardi reads this moment as presenting further contrasts in which “‘useless beauty’ is valued more than utility, and play replaces work as a cultural touchstone,” remarking that “the working men of Sawyer are defined by the extractive work of global capitalism, [...] while the emerging surf subculture refuses to participate” and thus “causes a rupture in the cultural identity of Sawyer” (46).

others: "Son, he said. Eventually there's just you and it. You're too busy stayin alive to give a damn about who's watchin" (77). Instead, Sando says, "It's about you. You and the sea, you and the planet," and he describes success at surfing, which for him means risking death with the most dangerous waves, as a brave transcendence of the realm of the "ordinary" that is its own kind of progress (77). "Every day," Sando counsels the boys, "people face down their own fears. They make calculations, bargains with God, strategic manoeuvres. That's how we first crossed oceans and learnt to fly and split the atom, how we found the nerve to give up on all the old superstitions" (116). Taking risks, Sando suggests, is essential not only to one's own development but to society's.

Of course, the analogies Sando makes here are to technological developments, two of which, ocean-crossing and flying, are broadly (if not unequivocally) seen to have benefited humanity, whereas the third, splitting the atom, has been more clearly damaging. But whereas surfing is "pointless" and ecologically benign (218), these developments are purposive and intrusive. Whatever nerve it took, whatever fears and risks were faced to develop such technologies in the first place, their presence in the world has generated further risks and fears, including those tied to their environmental, social, and economic impacts. As Deborah Lupton explains in her book on risk theory, the concept of risk as understood today, and indeed the word *risk* itself, has its origins in "early maritime ventures in the pre-modern period" in Europe (5); the concept of insurance begins around the same time, introduced to deal with the uncertainties of ocean voyages in particular and only later being applied to other perils. In earlier times – e.g., the Middle Ages – fears and insecurities and associated "superstitions" of the sort that Sando alludes to existed, involving plagues, diseases, demons, witches, monsters, natural disasters, hostile others, and acts of God. In the face of such beliefs, magic, rituals, and religion were ways to try and attain some degree of control (see Lupton 1-3). As human technologies developed alongside increased knowledge and control over the physical world, however, the modern concept of risks caused not by supernatural agents but by human actions, institutions, and technologies emerged. New indeterminacies, new risks, new anxieties replaced older ones, including environmental risks and anxieties that result from humankind's accelerating ability and willingness to impact upon the natural world. Hence the idea of what Ulrich Beck calls a "risk society" (19) and Anthony Giddens calls a "risk culture" (3): an era, beginning in the late twentieth century, when an increasing capacity for technological control has produced whole new types of uncertainty and worry at global and local levels – risks humans have brought on themselves.

In an article on surfing and risk, Mark Stranger calls surfing a "risk-taking leisure activity" (267) and as such motivated partly by what he sees (following Giddens and Lyng) as "the cathartic properties of risk-taking in the context of the uncertainty inherent in the current rapid rate of social change" (265). In other words, to offset the lack of control one may feel in the face of societal risks and uncertainties, one takes on voluntary risks that one's courage and skills can enable one to overcome. The embodied experience of surfing – the ecstatic feeling of harmonious oneness with the wave that permeates the sport's folklore⁷ – can enable the realities of reading the wave and controlling the body to extend to an illusion that one is controlling the wave itself, even as one recognizes, rationally, that this is impossible. When Winton's Sando speaks of

7. "Surfers ride *with* waves, not simply on them. They are part of our bodies and our bodies are part of them. It can reach the point where I do not know where I begin and the wave ends" (Evers 898).

that oneness, he inspires Pike and Loonie to seek the extraordinariness that will result from pushing the limits of their fear and skill on “the shimmering edge” of the biggest, most dangerous waves available to them (43-4). At such moments Pike feels “immortal” (98) and experiences the “intoxicating power” of being “an outrider, a trailblazer [...] doing things that no one else dared try” (117).

However, when Sando’s ambitions extend to an ugly, rocky wave called Nautilus that he describes as “[t]he next frontier” (115), Pike hesitates. Loonie goes headlong toward it and gains some stature as a result, but Pike’s more cautious approach to “the most dangerous wave [he’d] ever seen” separates him from Sando and Loonie (145). Refusing to surf it despite Sando’s taunts – “I thought I brought surfers with me. Men above the ordinary” (147) – he justifies his decision to himself on the basis that this deformed wave, “as ugly as a civic monument,” is unnatural – indeed, in that simile, associated with unlovely cultural space – and therefore unsuitable for surfing (148): “A small, cool part of me knew it was stupid to have been out there trying to surf a wave so unlikely, so dangerous, so perverse. [...] You could barely call such a mad scramble *surfing*” (148).

While Sando and Loonie survive their encounter with Nautilus, the trajectory of the novel establishes respect for environmental forces – and limits on one’s ability to survive challenging them – as prudent: Pike lives on to middle age, whereas Loonie, who continues his aggressively risky behaviour into adulthood, does not. Nor does Eva, Sando’s 25-year-old American girlfriend, through whom Pike recognizes both the tantalizing allure and the danger of risk in entirely different contexts than surfing – and in terrestrial rather than aquatic space. A high-flying aerial skier before she ruined her knee and found herself washed up and bitter on the snowless Australian coast, Eva is, to Pike, “a woman not in the least bit ordinary” (172); in what he learns of her fearless acrobatics and determination to pursue what rationally is an “impossible, pointless, stupid, wasteful” goal of gravity-defying extraordinariness (173), he recognizes “the singlemindedness it took to match risk with nerve come what may” (173). But while Pike in this passage identifies her directly with Sando and with himself, the character Eva most resembles, in her “idiot resolve” (173), “warrior spirit” (172), and “implacable need to win the day,” is Loonie (172). Moreover, it is Loonie, as Sando’s disciple, who shares with Eva what Pike calls “the contempt she felt for those who withdrew from the fray or settled for something modest or reasonable” (172). To replace the thrills skiing used to provide, Eva takes up auto-asphyxiation to achieve more intense sexual climaxes, and coerces 15-year-old Pike, after seducing him, to help her choke herself. The novel directly correlates auto-asphyxiation and surfing, given the precarious edge on which each act places those who undertake it: between a transcendent, fleeting high and a deadly, permanent low of drowning or suffocation.⁸ However, Eva’s high-risk leisure pursuit involves technologies – albeit simple ones: a rope and a plastic bag – and it is clearly an intervention in the natural process of sexual arousal and fulfillment. In attempting to challenge and improve on that natural process through risky, artificial means – as with her daring freestyling – Eva is more like the devil-may-care Loonie than she is like Pike. Indeed, she is close to the risk-takers of human history that Sando celebrates. This dif-

8. A big-wave surfer quoted in Casey’s *The Wave* is one of many to compare the feeling of surfing to sexual excitement: “When you blow down the side of a wave and the thing’s growling at you and snorting and all that power and fury and you don’t know whether you’re gonna be alive ten seconds from now or not, it’s as heavy an experience as sex! If you surf, you know” (176).

ference may attract Pike – “She was all about going hard or going home [...]. At fifteen you can buy such a philosophy” (173) – but he honours boundaries she disregards, disapproving of her unnatural sexual risk-taking and trying to get out of helping her with it just as he earlier pulled back from surfing the Nautilus in fearful respect for the wave’s power.⁹ Again, he survives; Eva, like Loonie, does not.¹⁰

In one of his meditations on the past, Pike as middle-aged narrator sounds not unlike the risk and edgework theorists deployed in this essay as he diagnoses what drove his younger self and his friends in their risk-taking ways. He writes,

More than once since then I’ve wondered whether the life-threatening high jinks that Loonie and I and Sando and Eva got up to in the years of my adolescence were anything more than a rebellion against the monotony of drawing breath. It’s easy for an old man to look back and see the obvious, how wasted youth and health and safety are on the young who spurn such things, to be dismayed by the risks you took, but as a youth you do sense that life renders you powerless by dragging you back into it, breath upon breath upon breath in an endless capitulation to biological routine, and that the human will to control is as much about asserting power over your own body as exercising it on others. (43)

The human will to control, like the impulse to take risks, applies not only to bodies and other people, however; it applies also to the environment. Yet in humanity’s efforts to increase control over the physical world – for instance, with petroleum-powered technologies that conquer such environmental fundamentals as the distance between places – it has created new collective risks through human-induced global warming or climate change. The health of the oceans that cover 71 percent of the earth’s surface – whether in terms of warmer temperatures causing more frequent, intense, and unpredictable storms, or rising sea levels threatening coastal communities – is at the forefront of climate-change concerns. As Susan Casey writes in her study of freakishly giant waves and the surfers, scientists, and insurers trying to understand them, the “details about what a warmer planet will look like are still coming into focus, but there is one thing our environmental future will clearly hold: a lot of restless water” (17). The current century has borne witness to numerous natural catastrophes, with hurricanes and tsunamis devastating many regions, and the 2011 tsunami in East Japan precipitating disaster in the atom-splitting nuclear industry as well, with enormous human and ecological damage.¹¹ How, then, might we extend Winton’s vision of individual risk-taking offset by humility and respect before the ocean to understand its implications for humanity’s hubristic risk-taking with its collective environment?

Ursula Heise, in her important book *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, argues lucidly “that the study of risk perceptions and their sociocultural framing must form an integral part of an ecocritical understanding of culture” (13). Climate change, as a subject of scientific and policy debate, is always framed in terms of risk and danger, but one

9. Rooney, reading *Breath’s* engagement with discourses of the sublime and the uncanny, sees it pivoting between the two at the moment when Pike refuses the Nautilus, thus shifting the plot from surfing adventures to sexual ones. Both the Nautilus and Eva, she notes, are associated with “deformity,” with the ugliness of the rock and the ex-freestyler’s ruined knee identifying them with each other (254) – and, one might add, contrasting with the beauty Pike finds in the forms of surfing he admires.

10. Their deaths both occur years after the main events of the novel and are conveyed in the epilogue-like final chapter: Eva from “asphyxiation,” alone in an Oregon hotel room (208); Loonie from a gunshot wound in a Mexican bar after a “drug deal gone bad” (211).

11. See Helmreich for a fascinating analysis of how the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai’s 1829 woodblock print “Under the Wave at Kanagawa,” which Helmreich calls “the world’s most iconic portrait of ocean waves,” has been adapted and reimaged by later artists “to speak to contemporary human-generated global oceanic crisis” (203).

of the challenges of this particular global threat, as with oceanic space, is its vast, seemingly unfathomable temporal and spatial scale. Although its effects may be seen in sudden, short-term events, climate change occurs gradually and almost imperceptibly, with predicted effects until recently extending beyond normal lifetimes of individuals and certainly of governments. It therefore, as Timothy Clark notes, “eludes inherited ways of thinking” (11) and narrative representation, and is relatively absent from ecocriticism and ecologically themed literature. In fact, when climate change is present, it usually takes the form of “apocalyptic” and speculative narratives (Heise 2006) – in Amitav Ghosh’s words, “as though in the literary imagination climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel” (7).¹² Moreover, as risk theorist Glenn Croston argues, evolutionary biology has equipped humans poorly to respond to risks presented by “the glacial creep of slow-moving threats like climate change that don’t feel like an imminent peril” compared to an attack by a nearby predator (15), for instance. As the Norwegian environmental philosopher Arne Naess bluntly writes, in human awareness “the nearer has priority over the more remote – in space, time, culture, species” (qtd. in Heise 34). Climate-change risk thus registers relatively low on what risk theorists call the “*risk thermostat*”: the calculation of the degree of risk one is willing to accept to achieve whatever reward the activity in question will bring (Croston 135). Croston introduces this concept in relation to voluntary risk-taking by teenagers, noting how the risk thermostat is adjusted when teens’ feelings of invulnerability eventually pass “as we age and reality teaches us that we are all too vulnerable, leading us to throttle back on the risks we take” (134).

In this truism, and the rite of passage it describes from a dangerously high risk thermostat to a more moderate one, lies the foundation of a reading of *Breath* as a climate-change fiction – not an apocalyptic one but an indirect one premised on the imaginative extensions of allegory and synecdoche. As Pike balks at the crest of the Nautilus, trading short-term glory for longer-term safety, his risk thermostat prioritizes that which is temporally faraway, diffuse, and invisible – his future – over that which is close at hand – the present-tense challenge and opportunity. In this moment of maturation, his view implicitly extends spatially as well: beyond the local (the breaking wave) to embrace the global (the larger ocean whose endless flux and uncontrollable processes produce the wave). And this perspective on surfing and the self invites us to extend its implications further: from the vast, encompassing ocean to the larger climatic systems it synecdochically represents and directly influences. If, as Mentz writes, “The moment when bodies enter salt water represents the absolute loss of human control” (82), that water must be approached with humility and even a healthy dose of fear. In the figure of Bruce Pike – whose respect for the big wave’s autonomy and power trumps any idea he may have of conquering it; who glides and dances gracefully on the water without

12. In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh asks why “climate change casts a much smaller shadow within the landscape of literary fiction than it does even in the public arena” (7). His answer is a brief but compelling history of the literary novel, with its focus on everyday experiences, as eschewing the improbable, exceptional, and miraculous (which permeated older narrative forms such as epic and romance) in favour of the probable, ordinary, and realistic (16-9). Furthermore, he argues, the novel developed at a time of “relative climatic stability” in which “the complacency and confidence of the emergent bourgeois order” assumed (and wanted to assume) “that Nature was moderate and orderly” (21-2). As I note in the final paragraph of this essay, insofar as *Breath* is a climate-change novel, it is so in an indirect, allegorical way; it does not explicitly thematize climate change or include meteorological events suggestive of climate change. And while it does thematize the “extraordinary” in human action, it is of course written in a mode of realism fully committed to the probable.

altering it, putting anything into it, or extracting anything from it; and who survives to surf another day – Winton offers not just surfing but surfing *in a particular way* as an instructive, cautionary image.¹³ Like the undertow that pulls invisibly away from the shore as the spectacular waves crash onto it, this resonant figure moves quietly but powerfully beyond the Western Australian shoreline to speak to a global society that has not yet arrived at ecological maturity and that, by refusing to put the teenager's cavalier and hubristic risk-taking ways behind it, teeters on the edge of a calamitous loss of control over its environmental future.

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13. In a similar vein, Birns, arguing that *Breath* points away from forms of risk taking identified with neoliberalism, writes, "Pikeler's continued affirmation of a completely pointless and beautiful ideal signifies aesthetic, not cultural capital. The book holds out hope that art – and the 'art', not the competitive 'sport' of surfing – can be different, that it can take risks without hurting anybody, that with its unselfish pointlessness it can protect the integrity of the truly beautiful" (278). Extending that idea to the current reading, the "truly beautiful" would naturally include the environment in which that "art" takes place.

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