

AT HOME IN OPEN WATER

THE LIGHT IN THE SKY FADED AND THE EVENING CAME. CLAWS OF DARKNESS CREEPT UP ON THE HORIZON AND STOLE AWAY THE LAST OF THE LIGHT.

REIMAGINING BELONGING IN

UNDER SOLOMON SKIES

This article examines the ways in which the protagonist's sense of belonging and identity in Berni Sorgia-Millwood's *Under Solomon Skies* is deeply and intimately tied with the nature and environment around him. Set in the Solomon Islands during a time of civil war and economic turmoil, it seems as if the rivers and forests of the islands are undergoing just as much change as the human relations that depend on it. While stranded at sea with his childhood friend Toni, Jack reminisced through his life and the events that led him to where he is now, and this remembrance acts as an exploration of the ever-shifting relations Jack has had with both the people and the environment around him – at times of amicable symbiosis, and at others, of brutal warfare and exploitation. The novel rarely takes an explicitly environmentalist stance, as shown clearly when Jack's hefty paycheck quickly assuaged his guilt and anger regarding the massive deforestation taking place at the hands of the logging company he worked for. Nevertheless, by foregrounding the relationship between man and nature and presenting it as it is with all its misgivings, the novel has an environmental consciousness that eschews any explicit moral judgement. This article will explore the dynamics of this relationship as it is portrayed in the novel.

Hatta Sasono

AT HOME IN OPEN WATER

REIMAGINING BELONGING IN *UNDER SOLOMON SKIES*

Hatta Sasono

T0121940@my.ntu.ac.uk

BA (Hons) English Student at Nottingham Trent University

This article examines the ways in which the protagonist's sense of belonging and identity in Berni Sorga-Millwood's *Under Solomon Skies* is deeply and intimately tied with the nature and environment around him. Set in the Solomon Islands during a time of civil war and economic turmoil, it seems as if the rivers and forests of the islands are undergoing just as much change as the human relations that depend on it. While stranded at sea with his childhood friend Toni, Jack reminisces through his life and the events that led him to where he is now, and this remembrance acts as an exploration of the ever-shifting relations Jack has had with both the people and the environment around him – at times of amicable symbiosis, and at others, of brutal warfare and exploitation. The novel rarely takes an explicitly environmentalist stance, as shown clearly when Jack's hefty paycheck quickly assuaged his guilt and anger regarding the massive deforestation taking place at the hands of the logging company he worked for. Nevertheless, by foregrounding the relationship between man and nature and presenting it as it is with all its misgivings, the novel has an environmental consciousness that eschews any

explicit moral judgement. This article will explore the dynamics of this relationship as it is portrayed in the novel.

The etymology of 'eco', as in ecology, is in the Greek word *oikos*, meaning 'home.'¹ Thus, when we speak of ecology, we inevitably speak of belonging and vice versa.

Our sense of belonging, and therefore identity, is deeply connected with the environment around us – and not just our social environment, such as one's friends, family, and community – but also our natural, material environment.

Developments in an increasingly modernized and globalized capitalist world, however, are quickly eroding our sense of place and locality, and thus, this has profound implications on our conception of belonging and identity. In Berni Sorga-Millwood's *Under Solomon Skies*, this close relationship between man and nature is made painfully clear in a world where humans are becoming increasingly disconnected from their surroundings.

While stranded at sea along with his childhood friend Toni, Jack, the protagonist of the novel, reminisces through his life in the Solomon Islands. Through this lens, we see a glimpse of a community and a culture that has strong ties of familiarity and intimacy with the natural world surrounding it. In a detailed account of the activities that precede the traditional wedding ceremony of Danni, one of Jack's close friends, Sorga-Millwood describes how 'women and young girls went up to their gardens to harvest yams, kumaras, slippery cabbage, pineapples, papayas and melons, while some men cut a sago palm tree,' and 'teenagers foraged around in the swamp at the back of the village, gathering

¹ Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (London: The Athlone Press, 2000), p. 4.

swamp taro, and young girls picked hibiscus and frangipani flowers to make into garlands to decorate the church and hall,² painting an image of a community very close to nature.

However, the relationship between nature and this community is not always one of mutual symbiosis, and one chapter in particular describing a dolphin hunt, shows the violence that is perhaps, at times, an inherent and necessary part of human culture. Jack recounts how ‘heads were carefully removed and placed in large, metal pots and baskets and bodies carved up and handed out to the eager crowd’³ in a scene of horrific and traumatic violence that is nevertheless an important part of the local culture. Sorga-Millwood later reveal that the Malaitan tribe that Jack and his family are part of used dolphin teeth as ‘bride price’⁴ in marriages, a practice akin to a wedding dowry in Western marriages.

That said, no sooner are we introduced to a sense of community and belonging that necessitates an intimate knowledge of nature, than we encounter forces beyond the local that transforms the ecology of the islands into something unrecognizable, even to those who have lived there all their lives, and here is where Sorga-Millwood shows precisely how unfamiliar home can be. Remembering his fractured relationship with his brother Manu, Jack recollected an episode of childhood hubris, wherein on the way to school after a torrential deluge that lasted the whole night, he misjudged the depth of the flooded river that they cross

every day; a mistake that nearly cost him Manu’s life as well as their sister’s, Annie.⁵

‘Deterritorialization’ is a term that describes how ‘experiences of place change under the influences of modernization and globalization processes.’⁶ The Solomon Islands, remote and untouched as it seemed at first, does not elude these effects. Shortly after he finishes school, Jack found employment in two separate logging companies. His experiences in the second company in particular forced him to face the gruesome reality of deforestation, and the impact it has on both the natural and social environment of the Solomon Islands.⁷ It is no coincidence perhaps, that Sorga-Millwood juxtaposed the episodes of the flood and the deforestation so close together, for although the wider ecological context is lost on Jack, readers who are privy to the mechanisms of climate change would understand that the two are far from disconnected.

Heine had also noted that deterritorialization is most commonly associated with two French post-structuralist thinkers in particular; Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in their ‘attempt philosophically to reconceptualize social, spatial and bodily structures outside the classifications, categorizations, and boundaries usually imposed on them.’⁸ Indeed, the manner in which Deleuze and Guattari utilize this term throughout their oeuvre is far more complex and wide-ranging, including diverse contexts, from art and literature to biology and geology. Guattari himself no sooner distinguished between three ecologies – social, mental and environmental –

² Berni Sorga-Millwood, *Under Solomon Skies* (London: Jacaranda Books Art Music Ltd, 2020), p. 211-212.

³ Sorga-Millwood, *Under Solomon Skies*, p. 59.

⁴ Sorga-Millwood, *Under Solomon Skies*, p. 60.

⁵ Sorga-Millwood, *Under Solomon Skies*, p. 121-131.

⁶ Ursula K. Heine, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 51.

⁷ Sorga-Millwood, *Under Solomon Skies*, p. 132-142.

⁸ Heine, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, p. 51.

as he emphasized that they cannot be thought of as distinct and discreet domains.⁹ It is thus that we may understand the flooded river that almost engulfed Jack's siblings as a movement of deterritorialization; a material and environmental – and one may even say global and economic – movement that threatens to dissolve the boundaries of his socio-psychological sense of belonging and locality.

This is part of the ecological conflict that has persisted not only throughout the subjective history of Jack's coming of age, but also the ecological history of the Solomon Islands. Deleuze stated that islands are borne out of a conflict between ocean and land; and indeed, they are the results of volcanic eruptions spewing material from under the sea, of water claiming entire regions of earth and separating fractures of it from the mainland, and other such geological movements. More profoundly however, humans are only able to live on islands in ignorance of this conflict, and the stability necessary in order for humans to form a livelihood on an island only presents itself under the assumption that the struggle between ocean and land is over.¹⁰ This struggle however, makes itself apparent even after humans have settled, as we see when Jack and Toni encountered a whole island submerged under the sea, not unlike the latter's home island of Walende.¹¹

How then, does Jack and Toni's being stranded at sea relate to the movements of ecological deterritorialization that occurs throughout the novel? Is it not simply the result of a chance happening, a miscalculation? Yet, the journey that they went through was a profound one, one

that forced them so far out of their ecological habitat (social, mental and environmental) that they had to reinvent themselves, time and again; a most extreme deterritorialization. Deleuze and Guattari spoke of smooth space – of which the uncharted, open water is par excellence – wherein 'points are subordinated to trajectory... the dwelling is subordinated to the journey, inside space conforms to outside space.'¹² It is a nomadic space of travels without destinations, where the interiority of mental and psychological processes are externalized, materially and environmentally; and it is precisely the kind of space that Jack and Toni voyage through.

The absence of navigational instruments aboard their vessel meant that there was no possibility of gaining any form of objective and accurate measurement of their positionality, only approximate intuitions based on sensorial intensities – a kind of 'complex and empirical nomadic system of navigation based on the wind and noise, the colours and sounds of the sea.'¹³ When they first realized that they had drifted into open water, 'the intense, deep navy colour of the water confirmed what he said was true.'¹⁴ Smell and hunger guided them as food became scarce and survival an increasing concern. An entire nomadic culture, as unstable and temporary as it is coincidental, is coming into being, as the two formed a livelihood based on whatever the waves and the winds drifted nearby; leftover waste from an ocean liner, a sea bird, raw baby shark meat, etc.

Boundaries and demarcations began to dissolve as interiority is subordinated to exteriority.

⁹ Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, p. 41-42.

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, 'Desert Islands', in *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*, ed. by David Lapoujade (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), pp. 9-14 (p. 9).

¹¹ Sorga-Millwood, *Under Solomon Skies*, p. 272.

¹² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), p. 556.

¹³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 557.

¹⁴ Sorga-Millwood, *Under Solomon Skies*, p. 37.

Although Jack kept a track of how many days they had been stranded by scratching lines on the rim of the boat, it slowly became meaningless as ‘mornings blended into evenings and nights into days,’ and how ‘if it wasn’t for the soft, gentle lilac and blue sunrise, and the vivid tangerines and reds at sunset, I swear I wouldn’t know what part of the day it was.’¹⁵ Again, intensities such as colour was their sole navigational tool. Physiological boundaries too, were literally dissolving; ‘the skin on my arms and legs was dry and peeling, and fell off in flakes onto the floor when I rubbed them.’¹⁶

Mental and psychological boundaries are also breaking down, as shown when in an encounter with a blue whale breaching the surface, Jack described how ‘out at sea, after a while even the most spectacular events became commonplace to us... seeing it stirred little hope in me and barely any fascination.’¹⁷ This is perhaps an indication that they were lacking a certain separation from nature that views it as Other, and allows one a sense of fascination as if gazing upon a foreign, sublime object, that one may argue to be a quality of the modern capitalist subject that has been so far displaced from its environment.¹⁸ Instead, they view it as mundane, not in a way that integrates the Other into an interiority, but an exteriority that is rid of any otherness to begin with.

Thus, as previously emphasized, we can no longer consider the ecological domains that are present here as separate and discreet. In their stranding, Jack and Toni happen upon a nomadism that forces them to reinvent their conception of belonging in the sense that we have understood them in this article; as

including social, mental and environmental ecologies that involve diverse movements and processes in material, cultural, physiological, and psychological fields, among others. Perhaps we may no longer even understand it as belonging, but it nevertheless presents a radically alternative existential territory, as Guattari himself might put it,¹⁹ than that of the modern capitalist subject that has lost its sense of place; one based on nomadism and exteriority.

Bibliography

- Deleuze, Gilles, ‘Desert Islands’, in *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*, ed. by David Lapoujade (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), pp. 9-14
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987)
- Guattari, Felix, *The Three Ecologies* (London: The Athlone Press, 2000)
- Heine, Ursula K., *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)
- Sorga-Millwood, Berni, *Under Solomon Skies* (London: Jacaranda Books Art Music Ltd, 2020)

¹⁵ Sorga-Millwood, *Under Solomon Skies*, p. 267.

¹⁶ Sorga-Millwood, *Under Solomon Skies*, p. 254.

¹⁷ Sorga-Millwood, *Under Solomon Skies*, p. 323-324.

¹⁸ Heine, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, p. 50.

¹⁹ Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, p. 7.