

Kith

Kate Bowles

Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [Kate Bowles's blog](https://edtechbooks.org/-fyw) [https://edtechbooks.org/-fyw] on June 10, 2017.

Kith originally meant native land or country, not just in the sense of one's place of birth or ancestry, but in the sense of a loving, intimate, friendly relationship with the landscape of home, the place you come from and the people and things that share it with you. Kith is not only the place you know and love, but the place that knows and loves you back.

Susan Beal, [A Place of Love](https://edtechbooks.org/-zEm) [https://edtechbooks.org/-zEm]

We're watching the UK election, and my daughter says: can you still vote there? It's been so long, I'm not sure. I don't think so.

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Home 2017, image by Kate Bowles

But I know that in the background of every news shot, I'm watching the summer light in the sky and thinking about long evenings, and chalk and flint farmland. This is the practical condition of homesickness: at the sound of a thrush or the thought of a real beer in a proper pub, it flares up like a headache.

In the small community where I live I can drive past three homes I've lived in as an adult, and the ghost of another. Above the surf club there used to be a rundown weatherboard beach house that has been replaced by a showy oceanfront mansion. It was the first house I stayed in when I came here to work. It was rambling and unrenovated, filled with someone else's Australian childhood furniture. I could walk out in the morning and drink a mug of coffee sitting on a low wall watching the sun come up over the ocean. I really loved it.

Since then we've moved around within a very small area, street hopping, trying to stay close to the ocean. Each of our three daughters was brought home from the local hospital to start life in a different house; finally when the older ones were very little, one and two, we stopped rolling and settled in the home where

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we now live. They all learned to ride scooters and bikes in this street, and then skateboards, and now two of them drive cars, more or less.



Our street, 2011, Kate Bowles

This morning I drove my daughter to her work, and then dropped off a friend of hers who had stayed overnight. We talked about how we each appreciate living in this place. She's 17, she's been away for six months and come back, and can't believe her luck at still living here. I drove and listened, and didn't say: I remember you when you were five years old. But what I was really thinking was that I didn't grow up here. This is not my home. And everyone who was a child here, learned these streets by walking with small feet, will have a different

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way of seeing the big sky and the escarpment and even the wide Pacific ocean, than I do, because I still see it with a shock of not belonging, every day.

I have no kith here, and I shouldn't. It's not my place. It's not my place to love, to ask it to love me back.

2

In March 1797 at Ninety Mile Beach in Victoria, five British and 12 Bengali seamen swam ashore after their longboat was ripped apart in a storm.

Sydney, a town of barely 1,500 people, was over 700 kilometres to the north. Meanwhile, their fellow-survivors from the wreck of the Sydney Cove were stranded further south, on a tiny island in the Bass Strait.

I listened to historian Mark McKenna tell [this story on the radio](https://edtechbooks.org/-yDb) [https://edtechbooks.org/-yDb] as I was driving through this country that I see as beautiful, and where I didn't grow up. The seventeen sailors washed up on a stretch of coastline still described today as "untamed", and set off to walk. They walked for two months, running out of food and leaving people behind. On May 15, three survivors were seen from a fishing boat, crawling along a beach just north of here. They had walked 800 km. One was from Scotland, and one was Bengali. The other, I don't know. They had foraged and swum and climbed and been poisoned by eating the wrong things, and interacted regularly with Aboriginal people without whose help and guidance and

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foodsharing they would not have survived.

What did they make of any of it? When they were rescued and made it to Sydney Cove, how did these three sailors feel about where they had arrived, where they had been? How did they come to terms with the fact of the people who had shared resources and knowledge with them, who had showed them where to go and what to eat and how to overcome their own fundamental unfitness to be in this country?

What did it mean to each of them, different as they were, to be so far away, to be so *kithless*?*

3

This week I'm part of a rolling conversation on digital citizenship as a metaphor for thinking about how we manage our aspirations, responsibilities and resources in creating an online environment that works. It's an annual conversation curated by people who think and care about citizenship, and this year it's run into trouble with the idea of citizenship as a metaphor for anything, in these times of walls and borders and sinking boats and offshore processing centres of astonishing cruelty and even, really this is a thing now, *calls for a return to internment*.

I'm one of those who feels that citizenship can't work as a benign metaphor now, and perhaps it never could. I hold two passports and I can only see citizenship as a bureaucratic exercise in which I don't know if I can vote in one place, but voting is compulsory in the other. I have bank accounts and pay tax in both; I have healthcare rights in both, just about. The

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apparatuses of both states treat me well, and recognise my children as connected to me. But none of this suggests to me that citizenship is anything other than the grounds of our refusal to care for others as we'd like to be cared for if misfortune tore us from our homes and threw us onto the mercies of others.

I've been helped in my thinking about belonging and statelessness by Amy Collier's recent post on the [hidden immigrant \[https://edtechbooks.org/-MRA\]](https://edtechbooks.org/-MRA), the immigrant who passes in two places but is at home in neither. Amy asks whether this idea of belonging and not belonging helps us get beyond the difficulty of applying citizenship as a metaphor for what we do online (especially as this is far more obviously regulated by capital than by any state). At the end of her post, Amy raises the question of digital kinship, a term I'm drawn to because of the way it sits with ideas about kindness. Kindness (kin-ness) has ancient origins that connect us both to nature and to relationships, and took me back to kith (as in "kith and kin"), and the importance of knowing the place where we are, the way that knowing place nourishes our capacity to belong.

Where can we experience anything like kith online? Are there places that we love online, environments where we feel at home, that seem to love us back? Is this about user experience, or ethos? Is it about the trust we're willing to place in design, in what data is kept and what is done with it? Can we feel at home under conditions of continual digital surveillance? Can we love a place that is manipulating us for business or political gain? Is it ever possible to experience kith when the whole thing is set up, controlled, regulated and organised in service of values we don't share?

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For the moment, it seems to me that these questions are worth asking, and move us beyond a narrow dispute about citizenship as a metaphor.

#digciz

Last week's #digciz conversations came to rest on the question of belonging, and next week with my colleague Maha Bali I'll be taking up the organisers' invitation to think about what comes next. There's a separate post coming about that. But in the meantime, we both hope you will join us next week on Twitter and other places where you feel at home online. You can read some of Maha's thoughts on citizenship [here](https://edtechbooks.org/-DQD) [<https://edtechbooks.org/-DQD>].

*(kithless: [not knowing anyone, having no acquaintances or family](https://edtechbooks.org/-yHQN) [<https://edtechbooks.org/-yHQN>].)

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