

Coming into Country: The Catalysing Process of Social Ecology

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This paper takes the form of a written conversation between the two principal designers of the second national colloquium on 'sense of place' held at Hamilton Downs near Alice Springs in September, 1997. The first colloquium, held in the Blue Mountains near Sydney the previous year, combined the elements of a small conference and a

retreat: preparation and dissemination of papers beforehand; experience of place in a retreat-like setting over four days; three dozen invited participants with the emphasis on dialogue rather than presentation. It was large enough to have a diversity of voices and interests, yet small enough that the mass of people did not obscure the presence of the land.

The conversation tells the story of how the 1997 colloquium came about, how it was set up, and what actually transpired. The story can also be considered a dialogue about the process of 'designing a social ecology', which is the original use of the phrase 'social ecology' in an Australian context³ (Emery and Trist, 1975). It can be taken to mean the design of the conditions for effective social and environmental interaction using ecological principles, a subject that is important to both authors because of our involvement in the social ecology postgraduate programs at the University of Western Sydney. As it transpires in the conversation, however, the word 'catalysing' is a better description of the process than 'designing'.

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³ F. Emery & E. Trist (1975), *Towards a Social Ecology*. Plenum Press, New York.

The place of the unconscious and consciousness of place

John Cameron: I'd say the idea really had its birth after you told the story during the first colloquium of your Central Australian intercultural and mythological work. The next day, some people reported dreams about Aboriginal people, or about going to the centre of themselves or Australia. It was quite natural that given the content of some of the dreams, and the urgency of the land rights issue at the time, the group would want to gather again in the Centre, with the theme of the interaction between Aboriginal and Western senses of place.

Craig San Roque: You know, when I was thinking about this theme I went back to a lecture by James Hillman to the London Jung Club on the location of the Unconscious. He made the point that 'place' itself could be a location for consciousness or unconsciousness.

JC: A residence for awareness beyond the purely human frame?

CSR: Right. In Australia, the country or at least the Aboriginal country, is a seething mass of consciousness. Rocks, trees, watercourses, hills, ranges, all are impregnated with consciously held meanings, events, stories; all woven in intricate patterns of relationship and embodied in designs, song phrases and dance steps. This is a geographical literature which can be read once one has been taught the language and the perspective. Most of us who now live in Australia, and to some extent are the inheritors of this library, know of the existence of this inland sea of 'song lines' but are nevertheless profoundly unconscious of the subtle intimacy of the Creation Beings' life and their role in keeping Aboriginal consciousness healthy and alert.

JC: So, the interaction between Aboriginal and Western senses of place must start from the recognition that Aboriginal people have a completely different conception of the relationship between consciousness and place than most Western people. Our first issue in designing the colloquium was how to bring out this difference, conceptually and experientially, with a varied group of visitors from academia.

CSR: Within Aboriginal custom, as far as I understand it, human beings are gradually inducted into awareness of the country as library. There are complex protocols about coming into country which are, at the same time, protocols for coming into consciousness. The place helps make the people's mind. So, when a group of mostly British descendants come into a Central Australia which is still actively inhabited by the Tjukurrpa (Dreaming), the local host group are faced with a diplomatic problem. If the visitors have a declared desire for an induction into a country which is alive with Aboriginal consciousness, how is this desire to be satisfactorily and authentically met?

JC: There was a related set of problems to do with the expectations of the visitors - that the second colloquium would have the same contained intimate quality of the first, and that there would be deep communication with the local Aboriginal people.

CSR: As I said to you on several occasions: "I can't just deliver a mob of blackfellers

on demand, you know. It doesn't work like that out here". From a Central Australian perspective, Aboriginal people have their own business, their own priorities, their own timing. It is inappropriate to expect people to turn up on demand. In any case we had the subtle instructive presence of a local traditional custodian, Mr Bobby Stewart.

JC: In designing it together, I was very conscious of the difference between the two of us in location and experience. You had been resident in Alice Springs for a decade and were deeply immersed in the daily working-out of Black and White responses to each other and the country at the sort of levels you have just described. I had been resident in the greater Sydney area for the previous decade, and had been very involved with taking groups of White students into the local bushlands for a gentler introduction to sense of place. I was aware that unlike the first colloquium, this event would be held away from my home territory and therefore my role was to provide continuity and to facilitate the process of you and the local mob hosting us in your home territory.

CSR: I think 'diplomacy' is a better term than 'hosting'. Despite the illusion that is propagated politically that Australia is 'one nation', the reality is that almost half the landmass of Terra Australis is under Aboriginal occupation and Law.

JC: To go with the passing on of local knowledge, we wanted the visitors to be in a listening and receptive frame of mind. We told participants well ahead of time that for the first couple of days they would be guests coming into country in the appropriate manner. This required letting go of preconceptions and expectations, listening to the diplomatic party which may or may not include Aboriginal people (we would do our best), and learning to listen to the land. After that they could talk, discuss their papers, discuss the concepts, but hopefully in a different way.

CSR: There was some method to our madness, and the madness and the method relied a great deal upon the ability of the country itself to derange and rearrange the sensibilities of the human being.

JC: What actually happened in those opening days certainly affected the sensibilities of the group, if not rearranged them. It illustrates the complexity of designing such an event. There we were, thirty university professors, lecturers and research students from universities around Australia landing in Alice Springs and driven 70 kilometres north-west to Hamilton Downs, a youth camp on a cattle station on the northern fringes of the Macdonnell Ranges. We were treated to a day and a half of explanation of the depth of layering of Aboriginal stories of place, and why it isn't culturally appropriate or realistic to tell more than the outer layer to visiting white folk at the outset. As well as the contribution by Bobby Stewart, we had stories of accumulated local knowledge by people who had worked with Aboriginal people as Landcare workers, teachers, artists, gatherers of indigenous knowledge, and guides for tourist groups.

CSR: For example there was Peter Latz's⁴ ethnobotanical excursion.

JC: I'll never forget being out in the dry sand at the edge of the river bed and having Peter point out some scattered nondescript pieces of green weed and tell us that we were walking on top of a forest. I didn't get it at first until he elaborated the picture of trees with only their topmost branches showing above the surface, that all the scattered 'weed' was connected up to the same tree under the ground. I had a sudden sense of vertigo, standing on top of a drowned forest, drowned in sand.

CSR: Some of the group were powerfully moved by the end of Sunday, and understood that they were in a different country in which different forces were at work on them.

JC: Others, though, were quite discomfited at not having some human needs and expectations met. Several people made complaints to me that they missed the intimacy of the first colloquium in which the whole group rapidly got to know one another. Some people were uncomfortable with the inequality of their being only in a listening mode, with the implicit assumption that they didn't have anything worthwhile to contribute. We attempted to accommodate these concerns by having a large circle introduction, but I was still conscious of the great disparity between those who were responding and those who weren't.

CSR: My comment would be that there are techniques and protocols for becoming accustomed to Aboriginal Country and there are techniques (emerging) for recognising and decoding the communications from country. Some folk allow these techniques to sit lightly upon them and elegantly conform to the customs, and there are others who prefer to wrestle with their own demons.

JC: Is it as simple as that? One of the participants commented to me afterwards that when they were out in this country, fully engaged, their attention was also drawn to their own woundings. They felt that their personal healing was what enabled them to enter more deeply into country. In this case isn't the 'demon-wrestling' part of the process?

CSR: I agree that there is no disjunction between attuning to country and certain types of demon-wrestling. However, I have observed that there is a point at which personal preoccupations can be so dominant that they impede the process of coming into country.

JC: As we moved into the next phase of the colloquium, many of the locals left, having played their part in the proceedings. Though it was marvellous that Bobby Stewart, our principal Aboriginal 'host', was engaged enough with what was happening to stay for the whole time.

CSR: That was much longer than he'd originally intended.

⁴ Peter Latz is one of Australia's foremost ethnobotanists who grew up with aboriginal people on Hermannsburg Mission and wrote an ethnobotanical guide for central Australia *Bushfires and Bush Tucker* (1995), IAD Press, Alice Springs.

The morning dream circle

JC: Each of the subsequent mornings, we had a voluntary morning dream circle.

CSR: To appreciate the value of an early morning dream collection group, let me pose a preliminary question: If the country does communicate with human beings then how might that occur? Human beings are part of a continuum of being including flora and fauna which have unique ways of communicating within the conventions of their own ecosystems. Aboriginal people have set up a closely observed association with fauna and flora and read the behaviours of birds and animals in a syntonic manner, as though they were part of the same 'mob'. A kind of associative symbiotic reciprocity is set up, which is portrayed quite clearly and delicately in ceremony, body painting and depictions of the dreaming pathways.

My guess is that when human and country set up an associative, syntonic communication, the midbrain and the so-called lizard brain are mostly in action. The way to establish communication with this level of perception may not be by conscious deliberate thinking, but by following the example of Aboriginal people who have been doing it for thousands of years.

JC: Given it's not conscious thought, how have the Aboriginal people been doing it?

CSR: I think it might go like this: First, you observe the activities of animals, insects, reptiles, birds and plants very closely and name them. Then you imitate them by cultivating a kind of identification mimesis. Then you condense this observation and identification into ceremonial performance where the closely observed actions of the fauna or flora are poetically imprinted into the human nervous system. Intellectual activity begins which nevertheless uses the pulsating animation of the animal, reptile, insect, and bird world as the basis for the construction of thoughts and conscious mental activity. So, the human distinguishes itself from the animal but still retains the syntonic alliance with this part of the living evolutionary continuum.

Humans who forget to mime the fauna and flora and forget to keep track of the animal images flowing from lizard brain to midbrain to cortex begin to lose track of the continuum. The communication linkage between human and country passes into unconsciousness.

JC: Okay, so what does this have to do with dreams?

CSR: The early morning dream collection was proposed as a way to meet the problem of the communication linkage between humans and between the humans and the country in which we find ourselves (the reality of the animated country which has, perhaps, passed out of consciousness). A valuable degree of vulnerability is achieved if very early, soon after waking, before become fully human, a group of people meet, speak little, sit by a quiet smoky fire, preferably in a river bed or a secluded bush setting. At this time of the morning birds are active, insects crawl

about and many animals are quietly moving. The opportunity to observe and be responsive is enhanced.

JC: While we are in the in-between space, between dream and waking state, between half-dark and half-light.

CSR: Right. So, the purpose of the early morning dream collection was to enhance the participants' capacity to remain open and vulnerable to preconscious perceptions, to allow dream imagery to help in binding human consciousness to the place. To demonstrate that it might be possible to, as it were, take off one's humanised skin and walk around for a few delighting moments as ant, galah, crow or kangaroo. The dream imagery collection and the connections established within the dreaming mob can soften receptivity, soften the skin, and allow more to pass between people and between people and country.

JC: The ones I went to had a completely different quality from the rest of the day. Just the process of sleepily making my way to the river bed and immersing myself in the flow of images and the silences in between had a softening effect upon me. Of course, it did feed into the planning meeting when five of us got together after breakfast to discuss the prospects for the day.

CSR: It is a custom among some aboriginal groups to have what is often called in English 'the morning news', when soon after waking, people will chatter, mutter and pass on the news from the night, this includes the news from dreams. Actions begin, somehow directed by this early permeation of night news and morning response. In our case, once the dream imagery was collected and interpreted at the vulnerable moment of the early morning then the implications, if any, for the behaviours of the day were communicated back into the group through the filter of the planning meeting. A tension was established because only some of the planning group were part of the dreaming fire and had no experience of the tenderness of the morning smoke.

JC: Yes, that was a problem for us - there wasn't a shared understanding of the role and significance of the dream circle. The planning meeting was fortunate in that regard to have Peter Latz attend.

CSR: Latz's lifetime of immersion in Central Australian flora and fauna, coupled with acute observations of detail, means that he can matter-of-factly kick the organisers and those who are willing into closer contact with the behaviour of country.

Separating the Men and Women

JC: At the end of the weekend, you proposed that men and women should go about their business of coming into country separately on the following day. This provoked quite a reaction. Why did you do it?

CSR: It is a convention of Aboriginal country that great attention is paid to male

and female responsibilities for remembering, maintaining and carrying on country business. Aboriginal perception of country is deeply affected by the perspective of the gender of the perceiver. The play of eroticism is held quite lightly and humorously but the powerful business of men's and women's responsibility for stories and cultural maintenance is held very seriously.

It was not our purpose to imitate Aboriginal process sentimentally, but to allow feminine perception of country to proceed relatively protected from influence by male perception, and similarly to allow the male lizard brain to find what it might be like to achieve a masculine attunement with other men and with the play of local nature.

JC: The response was a mixture of concern in some quarters that we were separating before the whole group had a chance to form properly, suspicion in others about the real motive for such a division, and enthusiasm in others that we could be more uninhibited in same sex groups.

CSR: This attunement is actually quite hard to achieve. Much inhibition and resistance seems to be built into the disinhibitory process. And currently there seems to be a lot of preciousness about what Australian men and women are supposed to do together and apart. All I can say is that a different quality of consciousness (and sub consciousness) seems to click into place when women meet as a 'mob' in the country and when men form a 'mob', apart, and conduct themselves with sensitive openness to the movement of nature through a day or a night.

The other point about this is that this country is vast, perhaps overwhelming, and full of intricate detail. You don't take it in at one perceptual sweep, with one click of the camera or one reading of an Aboriginal Dreamtime story. The process of attuning perception, of becoming attentive and attaining some knowingness about the place is accumulated. One way to accumulate impressions in a manageable way is to break down the process into stages. Separating into male and female and then coming back together is a helpful divisioning.

JC: Well, true to stereotype, the women stayed close to the camp area in a circle while the men trekked off up the sandy riverbed. The men divided again and spent the day in an occasionally rough and disputatious, occasionally silent, fashion accustoming themselves to the place and to each other. In the afternoon we prepared our reporting back to the whole group in the form of two 'acts'; one was based on the interaction between various animals imagined to have gathered around the waterhole, the other on the observations of a hawk in the tree above us, sighting and diving on its prey. After dinner, around a wild campfire blown nearly horizontal by the wind, the men acted out their small plays, replete with croaking frogs and circling hawks.

CSR: I see the men's evening campfire story enactments based upon the behaviours of possum, frog, hawk, and company as being engaged with the same project of allowing the participants to find some way of sliding consciousness down the neural pathways to the early or so called primitive brain which we share with lizard and

his relatives. Some may call such activities 'animistic mysticism'. This may in fact be an accurate descriptive term. I do not in the least consider it to be a pejorative term.

JC: As a participant in the hawk dance, I was aware of so many things happening at the same time - striving to find a place of 'hawk-ness' within myself, keeping a choreographic sense of how the performance was working together, enjoying playing and swooping with my fellow hawks, and keeping at bay my feelings of foolishness and awkwardness. For me at least, a lot more than my primitive brain was engaged.

CSR: Still, in terms of the purpose of allowing the male 'lizard brain' to attune with other males and with the play of nature, some progress was made during just one day and night.

JC: The contrast with the women's 'give-back' to the group was striking. They had us sit silently around the fire, then led us to sit without talking around a tree in the riverbed and back to the fire. The absence of human voice and activity, coming after the men's vigorous plays took us out into a quiet and expansive place. How does this resonate with your previous experience and views of the different qualities of men and women's response to place?

CSR: Perhaps it enables a distance to occur between the gender groups which facilitates a more dynamic communication link later. The resistance to division creates a tension, the distance creates a tension of 'not knowing' and the reconnection produces a new linkage, maybe even a communication, which the men and women together in the same place could not have dreamed up.

JC: So, the gender divisioning worked despite the resistance, or perhaps because of it.

An Excursion

JC: Two needs presented themselves strongly the following morning. After the first colloquium, I was convinced of the value of the whole group taking a significant journey away from camp. In design terms, the social ecology being created has to have a dynamic flow between difference and commonality, between silence and discussion, between intellect and play, structure and spontaneity. By the fourth day, the group's need for a common experience was palpable. Fortunately, I was also able to accommodate the other strongly felt need, which was for more 'content', for more intellectual discussion of the theme of the colloquium.

CSR: I was content with what we achieved together. It would have been a rather fruitless use of our content if people had arrived with their papers intact and begun speeches based on what they had already thought before. The country wouldn't have had a look-in except as a pretty setting.

JC: On the day's excursion up the canyon to 'Fishhole', we had the equivalent of our two 'keynote addresses'. The places in which each of them was given stand out

in my memory. Veronica Brady stood on a rock platform above us on the steep canyon side and gave us the historical and literary perspective of two hundred years of immigrants suffering loss, hardship and deprivation as they struggled to come to terms with this country.

CSR: And David Tacey stood in the sand at the bottom of the canyon and used the image of the underground river that was in fact flowing beneath our feet to talk of the unseen currents of the psyche, the hidden and repressed parts of our culture that move below the surface.

JC: Both of them talking about what lay beyond the visible and immediate.

CSR: Yes. The discourse was linked to the actual presence of the metaphor, the river below the surface was there as a shared and perceptible reality. The river was not only a mental construct and image.

JC: Interestingly, that was about it for intellectual content. We had planned to break into small groups in order to discuss these talks and to revisit the pre-colloquium papers we had all prepared. However, when we arrived at Fishhole, the sight of swimmable water and masses of bare rock seemed to vanquish any further structured discussion, even hours later. Perhaps it substantiates your comments about the way place engages us at the lizard brain level, not via our rational communication faculties.

CSR: I remember the sight of various distinguished bare skinned doctors up to their waists in water, philosophising. It reminded me of the death of Socrates, himself up to the waist in hemlock, dissolving the anxiety and arrogance of his students by his example. 'Sink into non-knowing, my dears'. It is a very alchemical image.

JC: This was also borne out by an event three of us, all men, experienced in a small side canyon. We wandered off, experimenting in allowing ourselves to be drawn along rather than actively deciding where to go. We found ourselves in a small closed canyon with a natural rock amphitheatre at the end. One of us exclaimed that this was a perfect throne, and was just about to sit on it when an unearthly loud 'whoop, whoop, whop' sound emanated from the centre of the rock mass. The hair rose on the back of my neck as we stood in shock and stared uncomprehendingly at each other. Finally, it dawned on us (or we told ourselves) that the noise of a frog croaking deep in a crevice was being naturally amplified to a remarkable degree. We were reminded of the figure of Frog in one of the men's dances the night before, and made our way back to the camp hours later in an altered state. It reemphasises that this was not a place for intellectual discourse.

CSR: Or a place for intellectual hubris.

JC: Which left us to conclude a remarkable five days with a gathering in the woolshed at Hamilton Downs, and a stirring talk from Veronica Brady about the spirit of Waltzing Matilda. She spoke of the figure who dived into the water rather than submit to authority, who still speaks to us from the billabong if we have ears to

listen. We all sang the song as we never had before, aware that we had all been participants in something larger than ourselves, a social ecology you might say.

Catalysing a Social Ecology

JC: I'd like to frame our concluding discussion in terms of Emery and Trist's concept of designing a social ecology, to see if it is still the most meaningful way to use the term 'social ecology' for our purposes. We could start with their conclusion that the design of a social ecology capable of dealing with social and environmental complexity requires adaptive planning processes and open-system thinking by the participants. Now, I think we had to use a lot of adaptive planning.

CSR: Well, we designed it in, most notably in the linkage between the dream circle and the morning planning meeting. As participants adapted to the country more each day, the dream images grew richer and therefore there was more material from the other side of the brain to modify and adjust our plans for the day accordingly.

JC: Although this process was somewhat hindered by the way the planning group worked. I think that is one of the difficulties of adaptive planning - it places greater demands on the skills and fluidity of the planners, especially on a venture like ours.

CSR: No different really for anyone in government brave or foolish enough to attempt planning out in this country using only one side of the brain.

JC: Were we really designing, though? Design has the connotations of imposing our thought and will on raw reality, whereas what we did was set up certain structures and activities and then allowed a fairly spontaneous and unpredictable process to unfold. For one thing, you said you were relying on the ability of the country to derange and rearrange the sensibilities of the visitors. Implicitly you were also relying on our ability to contain and handle that process.

CSR: Fortunately, it wasn't left just to you and I. The country itself acts as both deranger and container.

JC: This gets to the heart of one of the things I wanted to talk about. To the rational conscious mind, the notion of the country acting directly on another, 'lower' level of consciousness is difficult to contend with, and makes the process quite problematic. On the one hand, there is the need to create a safe and conducive space physically and psychologically. On the other hand, it is as though we had an active non-human partner in proceedings, the place of Hamilton Downs itself. Maybe the interplay between the two is what generates the *temenos*, the sacred space. Neither solely human-created or solely place-created, but requiring both.

CSR: What I was concerned with was creating the conditions for allowing some communication between country and a group of human beings that were not accustomed or acculturated to that. I suppose it's not really design, is it?

JC: No, how about 'catalysis'? We provided certain elements as catalytic agents, and then forces beyond our conscious capacity came into play.

CSR: That is a better description. Attending to one Aboriginal dreaming story over and over again on site is one way to catalyse the process. Becoming attuned to the cadence of an aboriginal language or an aboriginal intonation and body language is another. Closely observing seeds, and bush fruits even though apparently unremarkable is another. Going for a slow or long walk is another. Being alert to the emergence of new imagery in dreams while sleeping in country is another. Most of these we at least introduced people to, although it was only an introduction.

JC: It strikes me that this requires open-system thinking of a high order. We are accustomed to seeing human beings and the landscapes they occupy as being mutually closed systems on all but the most simple physical level such as exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide with the plants. Certainly we see them as cognitively and psychologically closed.

CSR: Whereas what I'm talking about is becoming alert to the dynamics of one's cultural transference process. Cultural transference is a term adapted from psychotherapy and in this instance it means attending to the subtle movements in feeling, thought and bodily sensation that go on inside oneself, between oneself and others and between oneself and the country.

JC: Taken by analogy from the psychological transference and counter-transference patterns that run between a client and therapist?

CSR: Yes. I think these subtle internal movements of feeling, thought and sensation can be viewed as elements in a communication sequence that run along the evolutionary continuum from plant to insect, fish, reptile, bird, animal and complex animal. All of this sequence is held in the human nervous system and is located at specific sites along the spinal column, lizard (lower) brain, midbrain and higher cortex. There is an as yet undefined linking process between these sites in the nervous system and sites in the Australian country.

JC: You are taking us to new aspects of open-system thinking here. The human nervous system and the natural system we call 'country' are actually mapped on to each other in some way? Not just vaguely connected, but congruent?

CSR: I think this may be so. I don't know how literally to take it, but reading the cultural transference (maybe it should be called country transference) is as much a poetic undertaking as a closely sensate one, and it requires cultivation of a mythopoetic sensate state of mind. I mean by this the way in which our imagination engages with our sensing of natural processes. It involves the arts as deeply as it does the sciences.

JC: I suppose in a way we are fleshing out the starting idea from Hillman that you quoted - that consciousness can reside in place, not just in the human body.

CSR: This needs further exploration but the questions might begin like this:

1. What is the relationship between the evolution of forms and the evolution of consciousness?
2. How does the continuum of consciousness running through creation operate? Are there collective or linked streams of consciousness as well as individual ones, 'mob souls' as it were ?
3. If the human form contains in some sense the consciousness of all that precedes it, how does retroactive interspecies communication occur ?
4. What is the exact neurology of the different qualities of consciousness ?
5. Is the notion of the 'mob soul' or collective consciousness a matter of social ecology?

JC: Huge questions. One of the conclusions I come to is that we need to be more humble about what we can achieve by conscious rational effort, by the design of institutions and processes, and to recognise that at most we can act as catalysts. Reconnecting the associative communication with country isn't something we can plan for, adaptively or otherwise; at best we can create the conditions that are most conducive for people to re-engage the whole of their brains. There's something very appealing to me about encouraging people to enter 'lower' states of consciousness as well as so-called 'higher' states of consciousness.

CSR: There's that old gnostic saying that goes 'as above, so below'. Maybe we should start thinking horizontally and topographically as well as vertically here in Australia and take a lesson from the locals. Indigenous thinking works in relation to landbased songlines and human relationship obligation patterns. We need these in addition to developing our Christian Western skills of vertical thinking and abstraction.

JC: In terms of thinking about the broader ramifications of this discussion, I wonder about the likely response of land managers with their strategic plans, or hard-headed scientists who would surely regard consciousness in the land or mythopoetic states of mind as so much mumbo-jumbo.

CSR: Maybe they would, but many of the pastoralists are surprisingly responsive in person to the qualities of the country. As I said earlier, the land has power and affects all who spend any time out here in ways that many whitefellers feel but can barely articulate. Nor do they relate it to how they earn their living.

JC: So, it is not as if our European 'lizard brains' are completely inactive, they are just cordoned off from our normal waking consciousness and relegated to the unconscious. From that perspective, it is less a matter of introducing new material or new consciousness than it is of finding a skillful way to break down the barriers that have been erected within the consciousness of the average Western person.

CSR: From my point of view the colloquium in Central Australia was arranged so that we could begin to think about such things in a place that still has the power to influence human being and human thought.

JC: Are you implying that there are only certain places that still have that power?

CSR: It's a complex question. Do we find these places or do we make them? We know at least that there are some such places now, and it is important to maintain them through custodial attentiveness.

JC: And all country will respond to that care and attention, whether it demonstrably has the power you are talking about or not.

CSR: Indeed. Sustain these remote powerful places we know exist and.....

JC: It doesn't have to be a choice. Relating to any country, any wild or urban place, in this dialogical way begins the process of making or remaking it.

CSR: And it makes us more human.

JC: Right. Given the constraints of the colloquium we were operating within, we were able to let this particular place exercise its power and it was recognised by different people in different ways. When I look back on it now, the strongest sense I have is one of presence - the sheer being of the river red gum, the outline of the back of the Macdonnell Ranges, the voice of Frog from the 'throne' that we encountered. Equally, there was Bobby Stewart's quiet presence and Peter Latz's gaze. Alongside of that, the frictions between people tend to fade. I have a feeling that although our planning and catalysing helped, it was the quality of this presence that was most important and most enduring. Perhaps it is one of the hallmarks of a social ecology in the way we would like to use the word.