

'Poetry needs real outcomes'

John Kinsella responds to Tom Bristow's questions on place

Tom Bristow, John Kinsella

Let us conceive of the grassroots community becoming the intermediate micro-social space between the private and the public, macro-social spaces. What are the barriers to constructing sustainable communities, in your experience, and how does your place-based poetry address or represent the private-public dynamic? What happens when we take these questions to the more-than-human world?

I believe in real outcomes. Poetry needs real outcomes. Activist poetry certainly needs real outcomes. Place is layered with real outcomes. Sustainable communities are those that are self-aware on the level of the individual and in terms of consensus. Awareness comes about through access to knowledge and data, but also through listening to the 'environment' itself. Data only tell us what is already evident. Communities with a 'spiritual' sensitivity to the place they occupy are inevitably aware of its needs, vulnerabilities, and characteristics of 'intactness'. A dialogue of respect allows for longevity.

The overdetermination of 'technological' communities has led to the accumulation of data with an avoidance of listening/seeing what the land is overtly telling it/us. Data are easy to manipulate. Data can readily become the tool of both capitalist and state oppression. Death is the denominator that serves as interface between data and the ecological. Death announces finiteness in a very direct way. If trees, animals, even soil biology and geology die enough, outside their biological temporality, then place is unlayered and the people who interact (close or at a distance) unlayer as well.

'Hands off' what is not needed to live is a fairly stabilising attitude, in the same way that if you remove the vegetation from sand dunes they will drift, swallow your communities built at their base. (Mind you, in Geraldton, they removed an entire massive dune ecosystem and poured most of it into the sea for building works!) Grassroots communities might well demonstrate to a broader public that what is 'needed' for a happy, fulfilled and purposeful life is less in material content, less in its impact on ecologies, and 'smaller' than they think. The notion of human fulfilment aligning with material gain is ludicrous to my mind, and gain is an expression of thanatos. It's the human desire to fill the grave with all it has accumulated in its conquest of people and the non-human that compels us towards an end. This does not have to be the case.

My next question relates to the materiality of being. Your synthesis of ecological thought, indigenous knowledge and anarchist politics looks towards a radical negotiation of the conditions of material production. How might our connections with and respect for places supplement an exposition and critique of the homogeneity of the economic, the deification of the market, while also disclosing multiple and shifting communities of need?

We only need produce what we need to continue life in a way that doesn't lessen the ability of others to lead their own lives in meaningful ways. I believe less is more, and that a radical redistribution of wealth isn't something that should be imposed by the state, but

rather that the question of what one needs in order to be fulfilled should be addressed. All people are entitled to a quality of life that allows health (physical and spiritual), and allows them the liberty of decision-making that doesn't harm others. I do not believe in monetary society, and I do not believe in material 'ownership' beyond what is needed to make our lives our own. The fetishistic accumulation of material wealth to over-comfort one, and ultimately to differentiate and empower the owner, is fundamental in the way so much damage has been and is being inflicted on the planet. One of the major problems is bringing an awareness of the value of knowledge gained outside technology. Knowledge is not a possession but an interactive space where the quality of existence can be improved. Different communities do have different needs, but awareness through non-invasive 'science' and 'arts' and 'linguistic' and 'social' and 'artisan' and 'agricultural' learning and application can create a Venn diagram of usefulness. It's about exchange of knowledge. About mutual aid.

Let's turn to place-making. Place, region and landscape are not simply spatial categories for organising objects and events in the world, but processes in the ongoing dynamic of humans and non-humans making the earth their home. How do you learn from the power of language to create and transform environments? How does our shared destiny to create worlds out of nature relate to the creative project Jam Tree Gully?

Language is interaction with place. It is the comparative tool *for* place and *of* place. Place speaks; we listen. We speak out of that listening. Even the inchoate, even the a priori, is place-imprinted. We exist in time and space, we exist in place. However, I challenge definitions of 'place' (see article in recent *Southerly*). Place is 'polysituatedness' — it overlays and threads through experience (physical, inherited, conjectured). Language is polysituated in its ever-changing patterns, markers, signs. A particular 'place' will inflect the single word, never mind a speech, or a silent thought. I am interested in the silent thinking languages of presence. How place articulates as we silently engage with it. How we transfer that knowledge and experience to others. Jam Tree Gully is the place I write. When I am writing somewhere else, it is always inflected through my understanding, my silent and spoken languages of engaging with that locale, that zone. It creates a comparative model of place, a point within the infinite points of polysituatedness, a point or set of points that brings clarity to belonging. In tree-planting and encouraging non-human life back to Jam Tree Gully, a place that was once part of a large pastoral lease, we are both restoring and transforming. What is lost is lost, but a restitution can take place in which new ecologies can form with respect and in consultation with even what is lost. That's because we access knowledge of the place as it once was and respect that. What is lost is lost materially, but there's still a 'psychic' imprint, and it's this psychogeographic residue I encounter in my poetics, and in my non-invasive (I hope) search for linguistic answers.

How important is pastoral to your poetics of place? Is it necessary to relate pastoral to geopolitics?

Pastoral has never been fully understood, to my mind. Critics and practitioners too often see conventions preceding the breaking of conventions without considering the earliest breaking of conventions that led to pastoral motifs. The pastoral as repository or template for a dialogue between people's agricultural needs and the 'natural world' offset by an awareness of ritual and spiritual affirmation again offset by a social ordering is a digression of the state-business literary machine as far as I am concerned. I think 'pastoral' is far more usefully thought of in terms of a spatiality, a zone of tension between order and disruption, between the made and the unmade. In writing an 'anti' or 'counter' pastoral I have tried to show the ironies of good order—the poisons and fertilisers that allow increased food production 'cost us' in ways denied or unseen. It might be endocrine disruption, or organ damage, or breakdown of DNA, but at some level or other, the technology of pastoral brings damage. People might contest and say the goatherder brings no damage. Well, look at the husbandry of goats in the 'modern' world and you'll overtly see otherwise, but even considering those of Theocritus... it's always cost the goats. Bodies don't take well to being milked and milked beyond their birth-feeding cycle. A goat loses liberty in being kept as such. In being slaughtered and so on.

Obviously, vegan ethics are pivotal to my argument, and people will contest this as well. But from the point of view of understanding my challenge to the 'pastoral', it is relevant for me to point this out. So, I argue for a reconsideration of the pastoral as a non-intrusive (it already is in itself) tool of dialogue. A way of stating 'arguments' of interface between 'nature' and the nature humans wish to use to live (and too often exploit). This makes it an active zone of contesting the colonial, for example, then merely being an outcome of colonial intrusion. If its invasiveness is acknowledged, then we can use it in a 'homeopathic' way, maybe, and as an extension of international regionalism.

Your writing, the act of writing, is under constant scrutiny in your poems. You have deleted the object in nature as a mirror for humans. You have practised 'palimpsesting' the landscape to respect traces of history and to detail multiple practices of settlement. Do these hallmarks arise out of a position of exile, or do they relate to your sense of belonging?

Ha! I have to laugh while agreeing with this question. I once got accused of having 'hallmarks' (all negative) and someone once said I had got 'palimpsesting' from them despite my writing about it a decade before they began (as, indeed, had many others prior to that, in other contexts)—but they can say what they want; there is no ownership of ideas. What's funny is that I see no way around these issues of writing and being overwritten. I never overwrite to delete, but to respect. I am even hesitant about my 'right' to dialogue with such traces. But I do, and do so by trying to allow those traces their own speaking space within my 'voice'. I see writing and certainly my presence in 'wheatbelt Western Australia' as deeply problematical. Stolen land. Fact. I don't believe in land ownership per se, and I don't believe in 'title', but I do believe in custodianship, and I do believe in knowledge of place/s (a 'deeper' focus of one's polysituatedness within a particular zone), and through this I acknowledge the Ballardong, Whadjuk, Yamaji, and other peoples of the land I write. My knowledge in terms of that 'place' (large or small) is less than minimal, and my poems can but enter into a conversation with a little of this knowledge. However, I do know what life is, and I do know ecologies through my own interaction with them, and I do always respect the non-human and human alike. This gives me some access, to my mind, to write this/that place. But I have to scrutinise myself—not only because of inevitable complacency, but because I am who I am. I cannot undo the colonial past of family, I cannot undo my presence in the place, but I can challenge its constituent parts.

I was recently challenged for calling myself an exile. True, I am not forbidden entry or presence in Australia in a government sense, but I have been shot at, had death threats, and my (pacifist) views are constantly challenged by the overt right yet also the subtle right of (post)colonial land owners/ownership. I am entirely pro-migration, pro-refugee, pro-plurality, pro- (nongovernment) multiculturalism. I believe in diversity. I also believe that all presence should be discussed and 'negotiated' with traditional owners, and that presence and respect are entwined together. I also believe that even the most 'separate' issue, that of the preservation of the biosphere, has to be enacted with knowledge of indigeneity and also trans-presence cultures, communities and individuals. I also believe, not in contradiction, that non-human ecologies (those that can function outside the human) deserve equal respect and privileging. Poetry for me is a nexus, a way of organically processing these apparent contradictions and offering 'answers' or proffering approaches to the epistemological problems of presence. *Jam Tree Gully* and now *Firebreaks* are attempting to work as conduits, as nexus points for discussion. They are textual but also sound/sight/place interfaces.

Your poems are often compellingly concrete places of thought, rather than abstract places for thought. In 'Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography' you write: 'Who describes where we are without thinking / of when we'll leave it?' how is your sense of space and place affected by your sense of time?

Even spirituality is concrete to me, which is not to be confused with (only the) material. Consequences. Cause and effect. We inflict damage and more damage will result. Mortality is the excuse we use to inflict damage when it really should be the quality that allows

us most to respect the biosphere and that lives and exists within it. To get at an 'obscure' knowledge, I feel the best route is through the observed—I take that data and emplace it, give it a conceptual context in which it might grow outside its constraints of application and utility (unless it's a utility of conservation, an announcement of its own consequences of being). I think of time as multidirectional—this is a political as much as a conceptual belief. If we don't believe an act in time has consequences in all 'directions', we abrogate responsibility in at least some points of possibility.

I have always felt 'history' often serves as an avoidance rather than qualification of the implications of time. We might 'learn' from history and say, let's not repeat that error (though we do), but lost in that process is the sense of history being eternally present. What I am talking about here is responsibility—taking responsibility as a human for the damage humans have (always) inflicted on each other and other life. This is an active presence (of the temporal) in my poems—sometimes they shift tense, then often make the past eternally present and rather than warn of a (damaged) future they account for that in the here and now and say we are in that moment, right now. This is why poetry of the curatorial space is only interesting to me if that curatorial space is in itself active and not just for entertainment and pleasure. That's what I call 'leisurism' and I reject it: it's a major source of the damage.