FORMS OF RESISTANCE

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Abstract:

*Forms of Resistance* is an intervention in contemporary Australian poetics. Situated against the paradigm of lyric tradition, it argues that post-conceptual poetry must be social, and hence committed, in order to decalcify language games that perpetuate an unthinking suburbia as the banal expression of nationalist occupation. It targets poetries with a method of construction that perpetuate expressions of internal liberal selfhood and ‘writes’ poems through a set of uncreatively inflected reading exercises. The critique of the author as romantic individual in nature is made through a poetics of place that is ecological, critical, archipelagic and experimental.

Note:

During my candidature my work has been published in:


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Preface

What is Australia? What is poetry? What is contemporary Australian poetry? These are the basic questions that could be read as being submerged in this thesis. In thinking through them I have not only had to attend to Bourdieu’s ‘double historicisation’ as Philip Mead discusses in *Networked Language*, but I have also had to think through the contemporary context in such a way that I offer a worthwhile response to the prevalent modes of critiquing. In so doing I recognise that my poetics is a stylistic extension of my poetry by being dialectically oppositional along the lines of ‘ordinary language’ and ‘abstraction’.

Although the national moment has well and truly passed, depending on one’s predilection one is able to see in the poetics that happen in today’s Australia certain faultlines and tendencies of previous decades. In the public domain these include concern with metropolitan validation through prizes and positions. The Sydney and Melbourne dominated ‘literary bureaucratic establishment’ would have us believe Les Murray is eminently worthy of a Nobel Prize for Literature without due consideration of his aesthetic failings or the system of award.¹ And, in terms of global media reach, the elected Oxford Professor of Poetry, which has no peer in hegemonic official verse culture, could be problematised to consider Australians (or women or a whole host of non straight elites) as possible office bearers simply by virtue of their English languageness.

It is though partly a question of strategy, which cannot be divorced from aesthetics, about how ‘we’ are promoted and placed. Whether energy and capital are invested, for example, in local forms of advocacy and improvement, or whether Australians join existing structures - self-determination or assimilation in other words. It is not ‘either/or’ however, and these are concerns with the sociology of poetics. At the level of thinking though there are re-articulations of the repressed that bear thinking through.

Indeed, our collective failure to adequately historicise means there is a repetitious quality to much contemporary discourse. For example, Clement Semmler’s argument from 1967’s *Twentieth Century Australian Literary Criticism* still holds for the most part:

I mean by ‘Australian literary criticism’, criticism of Australian literature by Australian-born scholars and writers, or those writing in Australia.² And the comparative transnational framework Grahae Johnston highlighted in 1962’s *Australian Literary Criticism* resonates today:

We should have a body of work which is obviously different in certain of its preconceptions and tendencies from the best English work over a comparable period, and even from the best Canadian or South African or New Zealand work.³

Finally, Vincent Buckley in 1957’s *Essays in Poetry: Mainly Australian* offered something noteworthy when he wrote the following:

I believe in our poetry; but I also believe that its development is being thwarted by influences within our literary tradition as well as by influences outside it, in society as a whole.⁴

The crucial question might be: what is ‘ours’? And with that, who might thwart it? To return too to the idea of Australia – where are its bounds? What other nations might it be thought of with?

What I mean to map out with these quotes however is the sense that in claiming to ‘make it new’, I may fall into a paradoxical oldness. As Alain Badiou has written ‘philosophy is to some extent always the same things. Of course, all philosophers think that their work is absolutely new.’⁵ To that extent I agree more with Mead when he writes ‘the discourse on poetry in Australia has found it difficult to move beyond a formalist, basically New Critical, paradigm with its origins in the 1940s, a narrowly delimited object of study’

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rather than when he states ‘there is no longer any disciplinary predominant way.’

‘Australian poetry’ now though, and at least since Paul Kane’s *Australian poetry: romanticism and negativity*, is a mutually reinforcing double destabilization. In other words, the national project does not need nationalism to remain. Its repression and negation relies on it regardless. If the state, poetry and the state of poetry are not what they used to be, nor are they quite how we think they are. There is remarkable resilience in the nation, in discourses that define Australia as a place with definitive boundaries and terms of citizenship, which is seen most clearly in official debates around refugees. To unsettle Australia, as Michael Farrell has attempted to do, lacks a utopian impulse. To my mind, ‘country’ can do that work as a positive substitution. Secondly, the poetry that is analysed in the academy is still ‘page’ poetry presented in books and journals, and by Australian poetry many still mean poems by those whose identity is ‘Australian’ (as if that in itself was uncontested). There are, of course, exceptions in the culture at large and in our specific discourse – the Greens’ opposition to the Labor-Coalition idea of territorial ‘sovereign borders’; the Yidinji Government that claims legal ownership over territory in Queensland and has citizens who have rejected ‘Australia’ as a legal and financial entity; Stuart Cooke’s comparativist lens in *Speaking the Earth’s Languages*.

The doctoral thesis paradigm of European theory, North American field and Australian material, holds in this work to some extent. But I have attempted to proffer neo-logistical thinking – homonymity and suburbanism – and to read material that resists the national – Ngarluma source texts for example. It is also a theoretical intervention at the level of style. This has relied on freedom of interpretation and translation; translation being against the monolingual hegemony of much scholarship here. Indeed, when Australians think of the transnational they still *penser en Anglais*.

The dual quality of infinity on the inside, marginalism from the outside, is what gives poetry its power and potential. Poets can never compete with action

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* Mead, *Networked Language*, p. 8
films for the mass of people so the spectacle is not what is attractive.\textsuperscript{7} In any case that is not the audience for this thesis. One can easily be consumed by poetry’s diversity and density; its internecine conflicts and \textit{longue durée} wars.\textsuperscript{8} That is important for realising an informed originality and maintaining an enlightening self-awareness about reproducibility. Something similar applies to the nation. As R F Brissenden wrote in ‘The Poetry of Judith Wright’:

She [Wright] is neither ‘ashamed’ of being an Australian, nor irrationally proud of the fact: she merely accepts the Australian landscape and the Australian people as inevitable and natural features of the milieu in which she lives and writes.\textsuperscript{9}

Poetics in the institution has been the milieu for this work. We need though a revolution in both.

In reference to her own aesthetic practice, Bonny Cassidy has said ‘I only care about my own backyard’. I agree with her to some extent, but I recognise that my backyard has a veggie patch with \textit{mardirra}, curry leaves and spinach. There may or may not be roses at the edge, and bunyips too. Regardless of this, our backyards are part of eco-systems far larger than ourselves. This project for Australian poetry is to connect it to roots we did not know it had through digging in a very local loam. The soil may be shallow but the roots are as deep as they go.


\textsuperscript{8} See for example Sophie Heawood’s ‘Think of the world of poetry is a gentle one? Sharpen your quills’ in \textit{The Guardian}, 30/5/2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/series/sophie-heawoods-weekend-column>.

\textsuperscript{9} Brissenden, RF, ‘The poetry of Judith Wright’, \textit{Meanjin}, Spring, 1953, p. 90 – 91
Introduction

*Forms of Resistance* is concerned with the aesthetics and politics of poetry. It is an exercise in ‘ordinary language criticism’, which one may be tempted to see in Ludwig Wittgenstein from a philosophical tradition or in Carl Becker from a historical one. ¹⁰ Both disciplines inform my work in poetics and that Wittgenstein and Becker lived and wrote during a time of mass political ferment is important.¹¹ It would be incorrect though to suggest that without them one could not proceed in this fashion. Indeed, poetics happens in the demotic the world over, and the style, tone, premise of this thesis is to find an appropriate vernacular for a relevant wordlife in the here and now; a language of ‘heavy journalism’ that suits ‘us’.¹² That it takes place in an idiom that is versed in the Anglophonic transnational academy yet firmly located in the land mass (mis)labelled ‘Australia’ means recognising influences from theoretical text and everyday talk.¹³

The lived, material conditions of *homo academicus* - where one, for example, catches the bus from, how one speaks to the driver, the coin one pays with, the stop requested to arrive at university – matters for one’s scholarly language.¹⁴ In my case that is family gossip in suburban Perth; that is the talk at readings, conferences and book launches in Melbourne and Margaret River; that is the asides and allegiances on social media; that is the protean discourse of unmapped networks that influence modes of speech and patterns of utterance

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¹² For examples of a vernacular poetics see Twitter feeds including: Jaya Savige (@jayasavage); Rebecca Giggs (@rebeccagiggs); Michael Farrell (@readingrevival). There are also countless poetics list-serves and discussion forums. See also the *New Literary History* volume ‘New Sociologies of Literature’ vol. 41, Spring, 2010.

¹³ The transnational Anglophone academy is of course implicated, entangled with languages other than English – consider only the Meridian series by Stanford.

on Ngarluma, Noongar and Kulin country. What matters too are the paradigms of thought that arrive via PDF from peer review journals, the chased down citations, the philosophical traditions from the metropole. They are relevant even if I am speaking from, for and to ‘the south’, even if I ‘intend to do unheard of things with the empire’s language.’

This thesis does not follow either the chronological determinism of literary history nor the diachronic isolationism of close reading, though both techniques enter into it. It is a constellation rather than a teleological narrative. Yet, it is an application of frame that is dialectical and expressed in language rituals that are generative for thinking through the positive and negative emotional entrainments for opposition status groups. It stakes its position then as being one of the experimental in conflict with the literary bureaucratic establishment, which expresses itself in the doctoral thesis paradigm of clear centres and perfectionist pastism. It has its own lens then and accumulates but is not acquisitive. Throughout I return to central questions of the ‘social relations’ of poetry in Australia through a set of links that are in some sense ‘rhizomic’. I am interested in juxtaposing with my creative work a criticism that informs, imbues, matters for an unrealised collective poetic project. It is about entering into and continuing a conversation that is a common sense para-praxis even while acknowledging that ‘there can be no resistance to theory.’

Chapter one – ‘Towards Homonymic Consciousness’ – discusses the false binarism of autonomy/heteronomy discourses. It proposes a ‘slant’ reading of Mikhail Bahktin’s ‘dialogic’ and Homi Bhabha’s ‘hybrid’ to advocate for the cultivation of embodied homonymic consciousness. This is not necessarily to

19 Dickinson, Emily. ‘Tell all the truth but tell it slant – (1263)’
advocate for the presence of homonyms in poems in any explicit manner, but
to argue against the Du Boisian model of ‘double consciousness’ as an
applicable lens for my subject position as both an empirical white man and
colonised person of colour who participates in Indigenous law/lore
ceremonies.\textsuperscript{20}

Chapter two, ‘loam-words’, is composed of centos from Paul Celan’s work as
translated by Pierre Joris. The reader will recognise the relationship to Kate
Fagan’s centos that were analysed in chapter one, albeit only in the form of the
poem.

I came to Paul Celan in three different but overlapping ways. The first was
through the John Felstiner translation, which I began reading when I was
studying German at the University of Pennsylvania in March 2008. The second
was through Jerome Rothenberg, whom I heard speak about meeting Celan at
the Kelly Writers House in April 2008. The third was through Christian Grote,
who had known Celan in post-war Europe and who gave me an idiosyncratic
education in high modernism in May 2008. Since that time I have combed
through Celan again and again. This has been as a set of possibilities, of writing
through him in our time.

Celan is commonly situated as an important figure in post-war European
poetry and poetics, and although I do not want to make a case for his
‘universalism’, he can be placed in conversation with contemporary
Australia. In that way, Celan’s suitability is apparent in so far as he connects
to a history and legacy of genocide. In other words, his position as a survivor
of the Holocaust resonates with the historical paradigm emerging from the
work of Henry Reynolds, Colin Tatz and Bain Attwood [see footnote with
references] that Indigenous Australians underwent a period of traumatic
rupture during the same era. Since the national public acceptance of the
\textit{Bringing Them Home} report and the Apology to the Stolen Generation in the
popular discourse it has been more widely suggested that Australia is

\texttt{<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/247292>}

occupied territory with its own history of genocide. What that means is attending to intersectional and cross-cultural voices of ‘survivors’ as survivors and individual subjects within the iron forces of history, which can allow us to critique our own past from new perspectives. It is for this reason of shared trauma and its continued legacy that Celan functions as an important voice in *Forms of Resistance*. He becomes representative for shared, albeit contingent and specific, historical circumstances giving voice to the barbarity of Auschwitz and the colonial frontier massacre.

Chapter three – ‘The Silence of Kenneth Goldsmith is Overrated’ – builds on the homonymic sociological conception of chapter one and asks: what can we do in Conceptualism’s wake with a different consciousness grounded in ‘our’ material? It argues for a ‘social poetry’ taking as its inspiration Joseph Beuys’ reading of Marcel Duchamp not Pierre Bourdieu’s definition. It politicises Goldsmith’s Conceptualism without recourse to a ‘mongrelian’ identity politik, but to a climate changed ecological Anthropocene. Drawing on Roland Barthes the issue is with texts here rather than authorial identity.

Chapter four, ‘hollow type’, is a series of poems written from texts about crayfish. In 2014, while writing this thesis, my father and I were given a crayfish thalu, which is an Indigenous increase site, by traditional owners from the Western Pilbara. This was to aid our fishing for crayfish. When rituals, including poem and dance, are performed at this site the number of crayfish is believed to rise.

This chapter is a series of whiting out, of writing out, of gleanings. I have selected a number of texts, which in a Modernist gesture, plays with high and low registers. They are:

- John Gerassi’s *Talking With Sartre*, included because of Jean Paul Sartre’s well known hallucinations involving crayfish, which he called crabs
- David Foster Wallace’s essay ‘Consider the Lobster’
- the West Australian Department of Fisheries guide to catching rock lobster
Like the angel of history though the crayfish moves backward. After Walter Benjamin we could say that:

Where we perceive a sea of creatures, the crayfish sees one single environment, which keeps being burdened by wreckage upon wreckage, pollutant upon pollutant in front of his claws. The crayfish would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a current is eddying from deep off the continental shelf; it has got caught in his carapace with such violence that the crayfish can no longer walk. This current irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call climate change.21

Swimming backwards the crayfish sees the detritus of our lives – plastics, chemicals, rope, pollutants of the ocean – and knows that humans are out of control, that the excess of a suburbanite life is causing havoc. In my lifetime that little stretch of reef where our thalu is has changed. The coral itself has been flattened; when you look back on the headland what was once part of national park is new, luxury housing. We might turn to poetry for an understanding of crayfish, of a new social contract that includes them as an indicator species for the health of the ecosystem.

Chapter five – ‘On Suburbanism’s Open Matrix’ – considers how social poetry can ‘labour to negate’ the real material conditions of ‘Australia’ where the suburbanite life decimates the totemic crayfish.22 It focuses then on the suburbs and responds to an absence of critical poetics scholarship that has failed to adequately respond to what Max Weber termed a ‘style of life’.23 What might a Suburbanism that self-consciously opposes the suburbanite as an aesthetics and politics look like? This question is answered through a

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discussion of birds in the suburbs in the work of Jean Kent, Dorothy Porter and Geoff Page.

The sixth chapter, ‘concerning a farm’, is comprised of poems constructed from other poets’ poems of place. In that sense they are a negation of a rooted suburbanite existence and a freeing up of the cento form. They map though, like a diary, the routes taken in writing this thesis. They are impressionistic, in both the painterly sense and in the sense of impressed upon me. This is, of course, not to set up an opposition to realism, or even lyricism, for they express reality in a particular idiom. We could say of realism, what Wittgenstein said of language:

Language is a labyrinth of paths. You approach one side and know your way about: you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about.24

Through places such as Bunyah, Cherbourg, Mt. Tambourine we can refer to the archive of Australian poetry. We can read it again and again to find a new interpretation of history as an unfolding place to stand in.

Chapter seven – ‘Country & Western’ – adapts Frederic Jameson’s maxim ‘always historicise’ to be ‘always contextualise’.25 I discuss Western Pilbara tabi (personally authored songpoems) as a way to unsettle both the nation and transnational anti-capitalist activist discourse through an understanding of ‘country’.26 I place my critical work in a ‘field’, understood here as a historical antecedent, a contemporary opposition and a situational practice.27 The Western Pilbara, or Ngarluma country specifically, offers us a way to critique ‘Australia’ then, and not simply as a new commodity that can be assimilated, reified and fetishized by an unresponsive and unchanged structure. It is not about raw material being value added by critical scholarship but about undoing the academy from a located perspective that is not not nomadic.

24 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, s. 203
In Australia transnationalism has often ended up meaning America and the UK, or perhaps other settler societies like New Zealand and South Africa. Readers are very rarely assumed to engage in a sustained manner with those at the periphery of our polity let alone in our region or the Caribbean or even Russia for that matter. Reviewers do not suggest that John Kinsella’s latest work recalls Caesar Vallejo for example, let alone more contemporary poets in India or Madagascar. Bonny Cassidy argues that:

if criticism ignores the relationship between poetry written in Australia and correlative literary traditions in the modern English-speaking world, it has little hope of properly considering how contemporary local poetry comprises its own multifaceted tradition, ancient and modern, streaming in through various linguistic, political and cultural forces.  

As true as Cassidy’s statement is, we need to think of traditions in translation as well. What of all the languages other than English such as Ngarluma that matter for poetry written in Australia? This Anglophonic hegemony is not aided by the structural barriers to ‘world’ poetry here – educational regimens that teach Shakespeare and the Romantics in high school, and LANGUAGE in university; a lack of bilingualism; insecure funding for Asian and Indigenous languages in particular; and a self-perpetuating myth of isolation from our roots in Europe that lingers in the dustier corners.

This thesis extends and builds on the work of Stuart Cooke and Michael Farrell, who are the most recent authors of scholarly monographs on Australian poetics. Although their focuses are respectively historical, they offer an approach to ‘nation’ that is complex in so far as it brings into the conversation alterior and marginal texts (Farrell on Jon Ah Sing for example) as well as a comparative analysis of the canonical (Cooke on Pablo Neruda and Judith Wright). In synthesising these approaches, *Forms of Resistance* draws on Latin American material, which is reminiscent of Cooke’s analysis of Chilean poetics, yet it subverts, compromises,


problematizes them using methods borrowed from Farrell in his capacity as a critic and poet (see Ode, Ode and Break Me Ouch). Not only does this build on an existing field of transnational poetics, but it also contributes to a field of experimental poetry, which, when taken together, suggests that social poetry in our time functions as a critique to the canonical imperatives of a nationalising field. This is supported by the simpler demographic similarities between Australia and South American settler societies (Chile, Argentina, Venezuela), which has been suggested by JM Coetzee’s previous work, and there are political imperatives that link the translated Latino poets with influential mid-century Australians who also had to respond to Communism as an ideological and aesthetic force.

Chapter eight, ‘coal creek river’, continues this LOTE dialogue by translating Latin American poetry. The source texts though should be thought of as inspirations and starting points rather than true originals that Anglophones need be enlightened by. These are intentional ‘mistranslations’ and are guided by a subjective spirit of being ‘lost in translation’.

Indeed, Rudolf Pannwitz stated in Die Krisis der europaischen Kultur ‘our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works.’ This chapter builds on this sentiment to excavate and translate the spirit of the time as it manifests in the language of the work. In that sense it relies on archival research – biographical, historical, associative – about the poet that supplements and highlights the practice of translation. There is no attempt to translate it in terms of fidelity but rather to highlight the poetic practices of translation itself. As techniques I have used variations on and combinations of: substitution (seven up/down); homolinguistic; homophonic; lexical; Babelfish; Tzara’s hat; opposition. For the most part these techniques are used together in one single poem.

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31 For more techniques see Charles Bernstein’s experiments online: <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/experiments.html>
One of the central conceits of *Forms of Resistance* is in the importance of the serious play of language. This is to synthesise the difficulty of the politics of Language poetry with the mocking qualities of Conceptualism as it emerges from Kenneth Goldsmith. In that way, this is not only an attempt to articulate an antipodean Anglophonic avant garde from this North American axis, but the hope for a utopian suggestiveness that undoes the assumption that there are fixed boundaries in language itself. It is not that we can only build pragmatic foundations on firm ground or that shifting sands undermine the Dickinsonian ‘house of poetry’. It is that the future of radical poetics needs to include the structure of other systems of meaning that are not only linguistic or alphabetic.

In other words, ‘pain’ meaning both ‘to hurt’ (English) and ‘bread’ (French) is deployed as an anti-Babelian imperative, opening up a space that is at once dreamy (because it allows for (mis)understanding that speaks through congealed semiotic systems) and material (because it references a real that is also symbolic). The concern with translingualism becomes a concern with the tracks that run parallel to nationalism, and if there are linkages at the level of content across geographies (Australia, Ngarluma country, Latin America) then there are also bridges being built through the confusion and shared sounds of language itself. In that way, it is a hope that there is a universal language that if we cannot see prophetically at least allows us the opportunity to speak into the void of not knowing what our authentic voices are.

The methodological approach of my poetry is ‘non-traditional’ and it plays with different registers in a type of committed abstraction. In its method of construction these poems support Wallace Stevens when he writes that ‘all poetry is experimental poetry.’ They are writings of writings, being drawn from other poetries and words. Thus, my creative work is a negation of Robert Adamson’s statement that ‘I can’t delight as much now in virtuoso skydiving

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antics, or just mimicry and lyrebirding. There is mimicry and lyrebirding aplenty here. I will not make an assumption about the skydiving of these poems for that depends on one’s sky. They may well be simply small jumps or re-entering the orbit, both less and more than skydiving. In light of Goldsmith’s claims of the benefits of plagiarism, sampling and copying, and thinking through the traditions of modernism from Pound onwards, we must make a virtue of ‘just mimicry and lyrebirding’ and their being reclaimed as a post-conceptual decolonising technique. To be certain, sampling is as old as the Greek classics, and there is evidence to suggest a creative borrowing practice in older cultural traditions as well. Many song poets in the Western Pilbara make a virtue of how they reference their forebears. For example, mid-century lawman Donald Norman’s songs are carried, updated, remixed by their custodians today. Forms of Resistance does not think through the voice, originality and authenticity then but through the ear, homage and artifice.

Easy language is not necessarily a pre-requisite for audience engagement and the anxiety of influence is just the anxiety to influence. The attractive difficulty of poets that negate ‘realism’ suggests not only that we historicise and contextualise what constitutes ‘realism’ and ‘the difficult’, but that the demands and possibilities of such work depends on the material circumstances of its reception as much as the work itself, if we could momentarily, artificially, still make that distinction. This is precisely to suggest that my work is as accessible as other artists from Rover Thomas to Reko Rennie.

Poetry’s importance is essentially as metaphor and we must think not only in terms of ‘likes’ but at the level of structure and thought. Jose Saramago is correct to assert that ‘metaphors have always been the best way of explaining things’. We need to explain the world in order to change it. Given the squalid material conditions many live in, art offers us a way to think through the

33 Duwell, A Possible Contemporary, p. 141
36 Saramago, Jose. All the Names, London: Harcourt, 2001, p. 228.
possibilities that can enable change. Art after all is an ethics and a life work, and in this particular thesis, those twins aspire to be good.  

*Forms of Resistance* is the crystallisation, concentration, expression of thinking about aesthetics and politics in poetry as they are relevant for my own creative projects. I am sympathetic to Dorothea Lasky when she writes that ‘poetry is not a project’. However, my poetry is also not not a project. It projects without being ‘projective verse’. For some, poetry is the extension of the project’s activism by other means. For others poetry is a retirement project after a life lobbying and legislating. But these examples are simply where the connection between aesthetics and politics seems most dense. They are more often two sides of the same coin waiting to be pulled from behind the ear called text by the magician known as a literary theorist. That is the task before us, without losing sight of the fact that poetics is poetry by another name and that the coin may no longer be the best medium of exchange.

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39 Olson, Charles. ‘Projective Verse’
<http://writing.upenn.edu/~taransky/Projective_Verse.pdf>
Towards Homonymic Consciousness

An Aborigine is ‘by day a replica of a white Australian, slightly, sometimes heavily sun-tanned, who is taught to respect and accept the same Anglo-Saxon heroes as his or her peers; at night, a ‘real’ person with their own cultural identity. I have named this *double existence* ‘the super hero syndrome’.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal

The above passage is striking not only for the embodied, epidermal associations of Indigeneity (‘sun-tanned’), but also for the concordance of Noonuccal’s ‘double existence’ with transnational discourses of Blackness that come before and after her. One reads in this passage a similarity to both W. E. B. Du Bois’ ‘double consciousness’ and a popular contemporary iteration expressed in the phrase ‘walking in two worlds’.

There is, of course, a chronology in Noonuccal’s passage (‘day’ followed by ‘night’), which resonates with dialectics – thesis followed by antithesis. What though is the ‘synthesis’? This might be to ask what happens with the rise of each day or night? What happens in twilight? The synthesis might be some sort of ‘hybrid’, a dawn or dusk that sees the person halfway between performing their identity and being authentically human, being ‘real’.

The awareness of this ‘double existence’ returns us to Du Bois who stated:

One ever feels his twoness - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife - this longing to attain self–conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he

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44 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 2; See Adam Goodes in television documentary ‘So Who Do You Think You Are?’ SBS, 2014
knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.\textsuperscript{46}

The man with double consciousness is already a ‘Negro’ and an American, and will always be a ‘Negro’ and an American. But to be a ‘Negro’ is in some sense bound up with America and to be American is bound up with the ‘Negro’. In Du Bois’ characterization, it is also not about creating a hybrid, but about retaining cultural traditions to the benefit of society. The more important point is about context – about how one is treated as these two selves given that one need be strong to withstand the world’s opposition. This resonates too with contemporary scholars of whiteness who highlight whiteness’ invisibility as a raced category, its unseen privilege.\textsuperscript{47} To demonstrate this one need only highlight the prevalence of the raced prefix (Asian-, Indian-, African-American). Quite simply though, and in concordance with Noonuccal, the Black subject sees differently and doubly.

Noonuccal’s passage could also be read as a comment on context. In the cold, white light of day, Anglo-Saxon heroes dominate the environment. This contrasts with the black night where Indigenous people can revel in their ‘own cultural identity’.\textsuperscript{48} From Noonuccal though, we might begin to map out a theoretical position that critiques the autonomy-heteronomy binary of political theory, which undergirds this, and realise that subjects are always in context and that context is always in subjectivity. This might be less about ‘hybridity’ then about an enabling ‘dialogism’ that re-cognises homonymity.\textsuperscript{49}

In linguistics, a homonym is one of a group of words that share the same spelling and the same pronunciation but have different meanings, usually \textit{as a result of the two words having different origins}. The state of being a homonym is

\textsuperscript{46} Du Bois, \textit{The Souls of Black Folk}, p. 2
\textsuperscript{48} John Howard ‘relaxed and comfortable’ on Four Corners, 19/2/1996; Barbeque area references the 1986 satirical film ‘BabaKiueria’.
called homonymy. The word ‘homonym’ comes from the conjunction of the Greek prefix homo- (ὁμό-), meaning ‘same’, and suffix -onymos (-όνυμος), meaning ‘name’. Thus, it refers to two or more distinct concepts sharing the ‘same name’ or signifier. A homonym is potentially ambiguous because there are a number of ways that two meanings can share the ‘same name’; thus it may be used in different ways by different speakers. In particular, some sources only require that homonyms share the same spelling or the same pronunciation (in addition to having different meanings), though these are the definitions that many give for homographs and homophones respectively. Examples of homonyms are ‘stalk’ (which as a noun can mean part of a plant, and, as a verb, to follow/harass a person), ‘bear’ (animal or to carry), ‘left’ (opposite of right and past tense of leave). Homonymy can lead to communicative conflicts and thus trigger lexical change.

Homonyms occur in poetry more frequently than they do in everyday speech. They are used to heighten ambiguity even as a more definitive meaning may be evident from a language game the word is deployed in. There is though a way to read or listen so that criticism may find a difference among different readers, hence a conflict between interpretations. The presence of homonyms though does not necessarily mean the poem is thinking homonymically. Indeed, the question is not so much what are homonyms, but what is it to think homonymically where there is a productive ambiguity that plays on the possibility of confusion. What, in other words, does homonymic consciousness look like?

In Roman Jakobson’s schema homonyms are part of the poetic function of language, even as they may be conative (hi/high). As we can speak of comic consciousness, we can also speak of homonymic consciousness as if it were a suburb of poetic consciousness. We might begin to think through certain techniques of linguistics and poetics rather than simply of their presence in the poem. Homonymic consciousness is a necessary starting point for thinking through and against binarism. In the most immediate sense it breaks down

autonomy and heteronomy; but homonymity could destabilise sound from meaning as well. It is the ability to think itself as without a synthesis that precludes the past.

At the structural level of a poem, homonyms resonate with centos. Although there are examples from Homer and Virgil, centos have a consistent recent thread insofar as they sample and remix like Pound, post-modernism (Olson) and conceptualism (Place). The resonance though between homonym and centos is with line rather than word unit. On centos we might say of the line:
- they share the same spelling or the same pronunciation;
- they have different meanings, usually as a result of the two lines having different origins;
- thus it may be used in different ways by different speakers.

A cento appears then to be a structural application of a homonym. The line is the same but it has different meaning because of the context, which is due in part to how it is situated by a different author (the ‘origin’). Thus, different poets use the line in different ways. The line is the same as the other line, but the sense is different precisely because of the context. This is akin to saying the word is the same but the game determines its meaning while also allowing for ambiguity. That it resembles another poem as if in a family is another way to frame poetry as a species, which is to say that through method of construction and poetic function we might categorise anew.  

There are distinctions to be made between centos though. There are those that reference the world, meaning here the not-poetry archive and ‘reality’, (Diane Arterian’s Death Centos which is composed of people’s last words) and there are those that reference poetry (Kate Fagan’s First Light, John Ashbery’s ‘The Dong with the Luminous Nose’ and Peter Gizzi’s ‘Ode: Salute to the New York School’). Fagan’s works are not centos in a strict sense of the form – they do not take lines wholesale, but also adapt and change the line breaks and

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They are however examples of homonymy at the structural level of the poem.

To take Fagan’s ‘Cinematico’ as an example. Dedicated to Astrid Lorange it is composed of lines from Gertrude Stein and UNKLE, and reads:

Cinematico

_Cento for Astrid Lorange_

This makes no difference.
A sentence
the sentence
makes no difference between.
Array her in cloth of gold,
She does not remember any orange.
No difference between
I’m over
I’m over
I’m over
I’m broken
Assemble moss rocks
china lilies plants articles
and and and and moving
completely in every direction.
Dancing. Numb hands
climb into a coat,
figure wanders on alone.
The scene opens with a storm,
rain but no hail. There is history
moonlight in the valley
sideways to love.

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52 See for example ‘Chrome Arrow’. The first two lines read: ‘If I could take a flight from zero/to infinity, get lost nearby/’. This is made up of line seven of Pam Brown’s ‘Laminex Radio’ (‘If I could take’) and line one of stanza two of Brown’s ‘Darkenings’, which reads (‘a flight from zero to infinity’). This seems consistent with other poems presented as ‘centos’, even as this is not strictly a correct formation.
‘Cinematico’ then is about interpretation as homage and dedication. It says as much about Fagan as it does about Stein and Lorange who has written an academic account of Stein titled *How Reading is Written*. The source for each line of Fagan’s poem is traceable, and has a different ‘origin’, thought of here as the social relations that cohere in the figure of the attributed ‘poet’ who, in the case of Stein and Fagan, may share gender but come from different generations and have different nationalities and biographical histories. The meaning too of each line cannot be read in isolation from the rest of the poem. For example, the opening line - ‘This makes no difference’ - comes from Stein’s poem ‘Patriarchal Poetry’ collected in *How to Write*. In the source text this phrase is a piece of meta-commentary. There is an ironic sense of whether ‘this’, meaning poetry, meaning abstraction, makes a difference against a misogynistic aesthetic. It is a landscape in which a feminist poetics must respond not only with ideological intervention but also with a change in the level of form and style – a Steinian intervention could not be otherwise. This landscape, being Modernism in the 1930s, comes after the women’s suffrage movement and well before second wave feminism. This differs markedly from Fagan’s mid 2000s Australia, where postmodernism and eco-poetics matter as much as the splintering of the feminist movements in the West in a post-identity moment. For Fagan, coming after Derrida’s ‘differance’ and Stein’s well-known life in Paris, we could ask whether this poem makes a ‘difference’ in the French sense of meaning ‘to differ’ as well as ‘to defer’.

We are paying deference to Stein with this poem even as Fagan differs from her in origin and project. Whereas Stein makes a virtue of repetition in her career, most famously with the oft quoted ‘a rose is a rose is a rose’, in Fagan’s cento, repetition is countered both by distinct objects (in the first instance ‘cloth of gold’ and in the second ‘moss, roses/china lilies plants articles’) and by a comment upon them. The three lines ‘I’m over’ ends up in ‘I’m broken’ - a broken record, a broken language connoting Stein’s breaking of realism (‘Picasso-esque’ or even ‘Bride Stripped Bare-ean’) as much as the breaking of


Stein herself by the generation of poets who come after (Fagan and Lorange among them). The Steinian style of the middle section of the poem gives way to a more typically Fagan rendering then even as we know it is still a Stein poem, albeit re-mixed. Stein here is not being repeated, but inflected, ‘sideways’, ‘sampled as compost’ for a new project that is attuned to the material world (the body and weather particularly (‘numb hands’, ‘storm/rain but no hail’)) and to emotion (‘love’) as it refers ‘beyond language’.35

In the second-last sentence of the poem, we read ‘The scene opens with a storm’. This is as much a comment on weather outside as it is about the play that is a poem before us. The next line – ‘rain but no hail. There is history’ – is vital. There is the presence of a homonym here. Hail means:

1. barrage, volley, burst
2. sleet, frozen rain, hailstones
3. greet, welcome, address
4. acclaim, acknowledge, salute
5. summon, call, wave

To not hail, could mean any number of these things. In the storm, which reminds one of Benjamin’s ‘angel of history’ as it goes through a ‘storm called progress’, we might refuse to fire, we might have no sleet, we might refuse to say welcome, we might not acknowledge, we might not wave. In these iterations, the poet might be saying no to Stein, might be suggesting that there is a post-Steinian language; that history is indeed separate and together, paradoxically rendered Other and Self by this very act of writing a cento. The words have been reclaimed from Stein as much as presented as a shrine. It is homonymic at the structural level.

After all, with nature – ‘moonlight in the valley’ - we move ‘sideways to love’. A straight historical account cannot be a homage, cannot be love; what looms then is poetry, in its metaphoric consideration, its very own language game, is the way in which we show respect and the contents of our heart. Through a

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35 Fagan, K. (2009), "'Originals of Revisable Originals’: Sampling and Composting in the Poetry of Peter Minter, Paul Hardacre and Kate Lilley', *Angelaki*, 9
homonymic consideration of language and the material of poetic history we
move towards an idea of how to be in the world.

Homonyms such as this enter into the political philosophic discourse of
autonomy and heteronomy too. To highlight a concrete example, how might
we consider the Northern Territory Intervention and the National Apology to
the Stolen Generations without recourse to isolating them or viewing them as
party political? Indeed, one need only highlight Labour Prime Minister Kevin
Rudd’s continued support of Operation Outreach, the intervention’s main
logistical operation conducted by an occupying force of 600 soldiers, for a full
seven months after he said sorry in parliament. As the meme circulating on
social media suggested ‘saying sorry means you don’t do it again’. Similarly,
many Liberal Members of Parliament during and after John Howard’s steadfast
refusal to engage with Indigenous people on their terms, supported
apologising. These are not simply partisan positions. One could argue that
there have long been competing impulses in non-Indigenous and Indigenous
relations in Australia – assimilation/self-determination being simply one – or
in theoretical poetic frames – Apollonian/Dionysian, Athenian/Boethian,
Kinsella’s experimental/mainstream.

These binaries are heuristic categories, ‘ideal types’ in Max Weber’s phrase.56
They rely on straw men held together by elaborate citation rituals to exist, the
maintenance or destruction of which depends on one’s aesthetic and political
project. Homonymy acknowledges this – for it is an immanent form of self-
critique. For every binarism, for every negation, established consciously and
unconsciously, homonymy as a reading practice, as a consciousness situates
the Other as a part of the Self as it may be framed discursively. As Peter Uwe
Hohendahl writes, in reference to Adorno, ‘the negation remains linked to and
engaged with what it negates’.57

56 Shils, Edward A. and Finch, Henry A. (trans. and ed.), The methodology of the social sciences
57 Hohendahl, Peter Uwe ‘Theory of the Novel and Concept of the Novel in Adorno and
Lukacs’ in Georg Lukács Reconsidered : Critical Essays in Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics ed.:
Thompson, Michael, p. 76. See also Orwell: ‘by fighting against the bourgeoisie he becomes a
bourgeois’ at http://www.drb.ie/essays/the-romantic-englishman#sthash.gbetVBCF.dpuf;
John Tranter suggests as much when he writes of Les Murray, he is ‘as obscure as Rimbaud, as much of his poetry is, though many would call him a plain speaker.’ It is not about artificially separating Rimbaud from plainness, or about two autonomous subjects realising their consciousness through a relationship, but the acknowledgement that these two subjects are always already connected through a vulgar materialist context and cannot be separated afterwards even if we do so genealogically and analytically. Origins, and originals, have origins still. We use the word ‘pain’, we breathe the same air, we eat the same bread.

Dialectics assumes a processional quality. There is a chronology, if not a telos, from thesis to antithesis to synthesis. But we could contribute a critique of cultural and philosophic understanding of autonomy to buttress post-colonialism more generally. This might be able through the apprehension of a single moment that sees paradox as central, and in that paradox recognises ambiguity and exchange, recognises the homonymic potential of political action. In its baser, more political moments, freedom seems to be about asserting one’s autonomy. It is not that we can only be free when you are in prison, or that to recognise my freedom you must be in prison; it is that part of me is imprisoned when you are in prison, part of me is free when you are free. That is homonymity. The subaltern is always already speaking, albeit not in its own tongue, albeit not in my own ear. It is already speaking if we know how to listen to it. Our doubleness then need not simply be integrated but used as a ‘reverse squeeze’ by which we can lead people to acknowledge that every 24 hours is a form of twilight.

See also TS Eliot when he wrote in a letter: ‘the people in Cambridge whom one fights against and who absorb one all the same’ <http://harvardmagazine.com/2015/07/the-young-t-s-eliot>


loam-words

centos from celan
no book opens itself,

with the tongue —

poems -, 

pressed into muteness:

in the speechshadow

vowel, effective

an ear, severed, listens

a clear word,

around us two

the cables are already laid

attack lines,

a wordbraid, red –
it talks itself dark, southward), a throwstone-game

to you and to me

you need

you read

wrote

you turn gamy

you press the word

your arrowscript whirrs

your outlawed word

poem, the noem

the letters are breaking formations

stammered true

beyond the cleftwords, through

thoughtbeetle

found tongue and tooth
thought –

the line, the line

the hard-won umlaut in the unword:

a word without meaning

the oaths

the flowersome message

the sign, dreamstrong, ablaze

the trace and the trace

in this book

lines

page

the rhymy beautiful

poem

of a world

*

32
when whiteness assailed us, at night

from fists, white

whitewhitegray of

off-world-white the

white, white, white

whitesounds, bundled,

the white

flightclear

the whitest root

hewn, white one

of the whitest

know: the invisible,

the white cypress

the glacier milk cart

concealing itself

honeycomb ice
drifting along white
apart, at the snowplace
white comet
sworn in on white, from them
the invisible
edged denialwhite
your whiteness
out toward the
sleepcorn
silver hoofs hammer
the whitehorsemanes.

*
melting ice –

thunderstorm

then water came;

through the flood

into the fish –

dreamproof skiffs

scale and fist

water came, water

the dolphins dart

but sea still is, fire red,

sea.)

in the skiff

flood does not believe us

the towropes vulturegrip

fish

to a sea, drinks it

the salt of a co-
in the wrinkled flood

the ropes, salt-water-clammy

greybacked, seaworthy

minnows

three standing whales

the sacrificecall, the saltflood

salthorizons

musselheap: with

pearls

storm riddled

raincord breaking

to the harbour

the swimming mourning-domain

through which we swam, two dreams now tolling

we swam, naked, swam

*

36
we already lay

you wake, who is beside you

hairpincurve glances are climbing up

hands at the three way

we grew intergrafted, there was

hands

pores

in dayskin, in nightskin

illuminated, the seeds

crocus, from the hospitable

wood between us

hungercandle in mouth

jams red –

redder than red,

the touch me not, helmeted

kinghard, nighthard

rocket-kissed:
your tongue is smutty

and the almond-testicle

the round, small, the firm

the strokes so tightly

head

sprawl and slobber

come, together let’s roll the doorstone

come with me to breath

come, swallow it down too

swallow it

magnetic blue in mouth

mothersmells in the throat

and spits

your funk wafts over

in the bed of missing bunting

lie next to each other

*
coastlike,

fjords

gullchicks, silvery,

across the sleeptrail

stimuli quanta, otterlike,

the fogs are burning

heavensbeetles

grey parrots

hatchetswarms

and animal-swarms empty, exactly as

blossom

on the rained over spoor

no halfwood anymore, here

winged soaring blackbird

the orange pepperwort

the not-to-be-mentioned prefrost,

there should still be glowworms
mineral resources, homey

gold

terrestrial, terrestrial

occupieable.

landinward, hither

twelve mountains, twelve foreheads

on ochre and red –

ever-light, loam yellow

undarkened, terrestrial

deslagged, deslagged

and wildnesses parietal

the inanimate, the homeland

laid fallow: the hidden

brooding rockart.

*
far across the borders

in the jelly eyed beyond

rebellious

seditious

grave

insurrectionary like

the pair of blackbirds hangs

slackmawed

commodity

it capital, the un-

the sleeplessly wandered through breadland

behind the punchclock delusionsolid time

the network of the dead

of-the-whisping- hammer

standing-for-no-one-and-nothing

the marrow of treason and putrefaction
and camps

rest in your wounds

stand

fiery, straight, free,

we are ready

testimony

free / peace

the antimagnets, the rulers,

the forbidden

pitchfork high

luster sickles

thousand wall

carried by knowing barbedwire-wings

standing firebrand

unrepentant insubordination

the autonomous candles stand
you lie in the great listening,

world. everything doubles

rose –

you crumble plumb into

a motherstump

on your lip: the figsplinter

search for me blindly

shot at with heartstones

hearheavy

heart-satellite drifts

heartwelter, in

into the aorta

love, straitjacket-pretty

dreamlevel

whisper letterwords to each other,
the feeling-walls deep in the you-ravine

bluelight now, bluetight

it is still us.
quits with death, quits with

glory behind

around the wound,

this side and that side of mourning,

happiness.

light was. salvation

by eternity jingles,

soul, youward creasebent,

levitating, at pass –

the starlings survey death,

we remain equal to ourselves,
The Silence of Kenneth Goldsmith is Overrated

I come from nowhere: the suburbs of Long Island, a waste land bereft of culture… I know nothing of politics. I’ve spent the past thirty years in the studio. What do I know of the world? I know the network, I know art, I know music, I know literature. To think that I know more than that is preposterous.

Kenneth Goldsmith

On March 13th 2015, Kenneth Goldsmith received a death threat on Twitter from Cassandra Gillig shortly after giving a reading. The reading took place at Brown University and was a remixed St. Louis county autopsy report of African American teenager Michael Brown, who was murdered by police and whose death sparked nationwide protests against police brutality including in Ferguson (Brown’s home town). Goldsmith’s performance was titled ‘The Body of Michael Brown’ and the resulting commentary was widespread.

Goldsmith stands as the most visible figure of conceptual poetry. He has been interviewed for Playboy, The Colbert Report and performed at the White House. His visibility only increased after the Brown controversy and The Huffington Post, The Guardian, and others ran stories. Overland, Hyperallergic and the Poetry Foundation ran extended opinion pieces too. More recently there was a piece

60 Interview with the author, February 2015.
in *The New Yorker*, which attracted insightful responses from Cathy Park Hong and Brian Kim Stefans. One aspect that has been absent in the Goldsmith-Brown debate is that ‘The Body of Michael Brown’ is an appropriation of a representation not an appropriation of a real body. Thus, the author of the autopsy, the original creator, may have a legitimate claim of outrage for being plagiarized but others may have misread the action of the artist. This is not to disagree with Marjorie Perloff that it was in bad taste or that there has been a ‘structural racism’ as demonstrated by Goldsmith’s defender Alec Wilkinson. However, by sampling the autopsy report Goldsmith also highlighted the state and focused our attention on what Louis Althusser called ‘the repressive state apparatus’ that created the conditions for Brown’s murder in the first place.

If Goldsmith had done a neo social-realist spoken word slam there may well have been applause, self-congratulatory compliment from left liberals intent on bringing Brown, Ferguson, #blacklivesmatter into the consciousness. But I would argue that this could be an aestheticisation of politics precisely because it lacks formal inventiveness. The object of criticism then is both those who murdered Brown and those who fail to see the radicalism of form in conceptual poetry itself. Within conceptual poetry though, as Hong points out, there is work being done that is social or committed. This was demonstrated by Divya Victor’s collated pieces for *Jacket2* - ‘Conceptual writing (plural and

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66 I disagree with Conrad then when he writes ‘In the case of “The Body of Michael Brown” he slashed and cut into county autopsy reports, essentially the language representing the bone and flesh of the slain young black man.’ This seems a willful and deliberate act of misreading about what a county autopsy report actually is.  
global) and other cultural productions’. This was especially the case in ‘An affective response’ by Aaron Apps.

However, the immediate online debate’s thorough lack of historicising (no mention of Pound or Reznikoff) both in relation to poetry and poetics seems to suggest it has mainly been an opportunity for the accumulation of cultural capital through personal identity politik. Nowhere has this been clearer than in the moralizing didacticism of the anonymous collective Mongrel Coalition. When the positionality of authors has been absent, people have been unable to sustain criticism within the frame of poetry, of taking Goldsmith’s piece as art for art’s sake or of recognizing conceptualism’s diversity and merit. Only CA Conrad’s ‘Kenneth Goldsmith Says He’s an Outlaw’ and Ken Chen’s piece ‘Authenticity Obsession or Conceptualism as Minstrel Show’, which both came later, challenged that.

So much of the initial criticism of Goldsmith’s Brown performance was about Goldsmith as a ‘white man’, so much so that it has tended to reify the liberal author function according to sets of criteria that do not adequately reflect lived and embodied experience let alone acknowledge his Jewishness or the ‘death of the author’. It also assumed there was race solidarity, that people cannot be homonymic or fellow travellers. So, what is the white man to do? What are ‘we’ to do after Barthes, notwithstanding the self-promotion that has enabled Goldsmith to be a celebrity ‘Court Poet’?

I speak as someone who considers himself white and not. I as an author am not dead, though I do not necessarily want to suggest biographical detailism stand in for abstract ‘status groups’.

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70 See: https://jacket2.org/article/affective-response

71 See: @AgainstGringpo


73 Barthes, Roland, ‘The Death of the Author’ in Aspen, 5-6, 1967.

74 See CA Conrad, ‘Kenneth Goldsmith says he is an Outlaw’

75 See my article ‘What is the Hybrid to do?’ in Masiara Literary Review, 4/10/2015
Goldsmith’s silence during and since the controversy has been conspicuous and his defenders have mainly come in private social media exchanges, especially Facebook, rather than through public channels. The reluctance to defend, exonerate, rescue Goldsmith is possibly due to the social reluctance to potentially position oneself as a racist as much as it is about the exhaustion of Conceptualism’s brand.

It is also important to note that what matters in America matters in the world such is the global reach of official avant garde culture. American hegemony is, of course, challenged internally. Indeed, conceptualism is a diverse and varied field with roots in previous avant gardes and other arts. Kenneth Goldsmith is not in the same place as Vanessa Place; nor Erin Morrill, Craig Santos Perez, Myung Mi Kim, Dawn Lundy Martin, Douglas Kearney, Jeremiah Rush Bowen or Joey Yearous-Algozin. Moreover, there is a difference between the everyday focused forms of Goldsmith’s earlier Day, Soliloquy, Fidget and New York Trilogy and the spectacular turn demonstrated by Seven Americans Deaths and ‘The Body’. What are ‘we’ to make of it too on the other side of the world?

In reference to the ’68 generation Martin Duwell wrote that:

a common charge was that the New Australian Poets had simply surrendered to a new (US) orthodoxy at just that moment in history when, in poets such as Dawe and Murray, Australia was finally achieving its own ‘voice’. Something similar may be suggested by Australian interpreters of post L=A=N=G=U=A=L=G=E poetry working today, especially given its institutional status. Conceptualism in Australia has not, it seems, arrived in a

thorough way. This does not of course prevent observation of, say, Astrid Lorange’s ‘Select Menu Items at Outback Steakhouse’.79

Voice and authenticity should not be established in opposition to ‘new’ poetic forms and methods lest an identity critique (in this case ‘national’) over-determine an aesthetic one or that we continue to binarise authenticity and artifice. We might though want to ask what comes next to conceptualism from within its own transatlantic traditions as read by Australians?

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_Bonito Oliva_: You have said that the silence of Marcel Duchamp is overrated.

_Joseph Beuys_: … I hold him in very high esteem, but I have to reject his silence. Duchamp was simply finished. He had run out of ideas; he was unable to come up with anything important… Duchamp… wanted to shock the bourgeoisie… He refused to participate. His ‘Pissoir’ was a genuine revelation, a work which at that time undoubtedly had a considerable importance.80

In adapting Beuys’ comments on Duchamp one could suggest that Goldsmith’s silence on Brown has generated more heat than light and that his spectacular work admits a lack of ideas even as _Day_ was a revelation. Goldsmith has on numerous occasions encouraged comparison between himself and Duchamp.81 He has stated privately that he wants to do for language what Duchamp did for sculpture and also invites an art for art’s sake appraisal, which denies the politics of his work as suggested by the epigraph of this chapter. As a rejoinder we could look to Joan Kirner, when she stated:

_Just by making a decision to stay out of politics, you are making the decision to allow others to shape politics and exert power over you. And if you are_

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alienated from the current political system, then just by staying out of it, if you do nothing to change it, you simply entrench it.\textsuperscript{82}

I do not want to suggest Goldsmith is alienated or not, but to argue that there can be a politicised response to Goldsmith outside, beside, without the ideological frame of identity politics.

I want to draw from Beuys post-conceptually and focus on ‘social poetry’.\textsuperscript{83} Post-conceptualism as a mode of thinkings, approaches and a lineage (of people taught by Goldsmith and other conceptualists) has been excavated and theorised by Felix Bernstein in ‘Notes on Post Conceptual Poetry’. This was initially published as part of a special edition of \textit{Evening Will Come}, which also featured writings by former students Sueyun Juliette Lee and Steve McLaughlin. Although there is discussion of aesthetics and politics in Bernstein’s work, particularly in relation to queer theory, there is little attention given to the frame outside liberalism or a critique through analogous structures. As yet, criticism of Goldsmith, and by extension Conceptualism, has not attended to criticisms of Duchamp.

Beuys’ critique of Duchamp, and hence my reading of Goldsmith, lies in Beuys’ utopianism, which sought not to \textit{epater le bourgeois}, but to transform every person into an artist, to find in the creative potential and daily labour of every individual a new social order. As Beuys writes: ‘Politics has to become art, and art has to become politics.’\textsuperscript{84} He goes further stating:

\begin{quotation}
I think art is the only political power, the only revolutionary power, the only evolutionary power, the only power to free humankind from all repression. I
\end{quotation}

\textsuperscript{82} \textit{The Age} Editorial, ‘Joan Kirner, a warrior for all women’ <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/the-age-editorial/joan-kirner-a-warrior-for-all-women-20150602-ghexhg.html>

\textsuperscript{83} Although I am aware of John Stubley’s work, which uses the phrase ‘social poetry’, it seems in my mind to be an undeveloped poetics without adequate consideration of both the social and poetry. It, moreover, is not concerned with conceptualism. See also ‘social art’ in Bourdieu’s formation and Jared Zimbler’s article on that: ‘For Neither Love nor Money: The Place of Political Art in Pierre Bourdieu’s Literary Field’. \textit{Textual Practice}, 23.4 (2009), p. 599-620

\textsuperscript{84} Kuoni, Carin. \textit{Energy Plan for the Western Man}, p. 37
say not that art has already realised this, on the contrary, and because it has not, it has to be developed as a weapon.85

I want to give art the effectivity of the whole creativity. Then I can give it more power and force, I can catch all the participants who are already researching, widen the direction for all people – I mean the majority in an equal way.86

Even the act of peeling a potato can be a work of art if it is a conscious act.87

This idea of art encouraging freedom does not, of course, originate with Beuys, but it meant the expansion of his own practice. His early actions and his term ‘social sculpture’ were malleable and wide-ranging, free-ranging ideas. There was the shift from gallery actions to mass plantings of trees, from teaching a limited number of students to public outreach and the founding of organisations, bodies, institutes. Notwithstanding the complications of utopianism (and even a certain mysticism that has been projected onto Beuys) there was a strategic and material engagement with the world outside art, with politics, that is absent in Duchamp and Goldsmith.88 Central to this was the Seven Thousand Oaks project and the Free International University.

Beuys’ social sculpture was ‘how we mold and shape the world in which we live.’89 It was radical and dialogic: ‘Communication occurs in reciprocity: it must never be a one-way flow from the teacher to the taught. The teacher takes equally from the taught.’90 As a corollary, ‘social poetry’ is the language of how we mold and shape the world in which we live. As a term, it does of course refer back to social poetry as it has been applied to those in the Spanish Civil War, Texan Chicanos and Auden as well as containing within it reference to society, sociology, social realism and socialism. But these are historical references that re-affirm a definition that social poetry is poetry as committed commentary.

85 Kuoni, Carin. *Energy Plan for the Western Man*, p. 34
86 Kuoni, Carin. *Energy Plan for the Western Man*, p. 33
87 Kuoni, Carin. *Energy Plan for the Western Man*, p. 87
89 Kuoni, Carin. *Energy Plan for the Western Man*, p. 19
90 Kuoni, Carin. *Energy Plan for the Western Man*, p. 22
In referring to social sculpture we might want to think how ‘everyone is a poet’, how every language activity can be framed to be poetic, which surely comes as a sibling of Goldsmith’s early conceptualism, as it brought everyday language, the mundane metonymic detritus of conversation and the newspaper to the fore. It is the re-discovery of the utopianism inherent in this framing that enables one to practice an ‘opening’ ‘to come’, which has political resonance; we might yet find touchstones that have material implications in the spirit of early conceptualism. A social poet could indeed plant seven thousand eucalypts. A social poet could indeed recycle newspapers. A social poet may not need ‘felt’ or ‘fat’ or ‘hares’ to keep him company in the language games that take politics as their cue.

That might mean we adopt the processes of ‘unoriginal genius’ even as we must make it respond to social imperatives more explicitly – that is, we inflect conceptualism with a politics and not simply on a liberal axis. To be certain, one could find a type of feminism in Place alongside her ‘racism’, and this is to say nothing of M. NorbeSe Philip, Dionne Brand, Fred Moten or Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey’s anthologies (What I Say and Every Goodbye Ain’t Gone). All these poets represent the diversity within Conceptualism. In Victor’s edited pieces for Jacket2, there was also a particularly resonant concern with ecology in light of the climate changed present that Beuys foreshadowed. This included a discussion by Elizabeth-Jane Burnett on her swimming poetry project in the United Kingdom and Michael Nardone’s ‘On settler conceptualism’. As Nardone writes ‘I want a literature that engages the language that forms power relations — modes of supremacy and domination — in the world.’ For him, this involves gleaning, cutting up, assembling language from various sources connected to the Mackenzie Gas Project in Canada. These were ‘transcripts of testimonies, broadcasts, manuals, newspapers, legal texts’ that were then ‘rewritten, reframed, or reformatted within a poetic text’. Speaking of the broader terrain of Conceptual poetry Nardone writes:

91 This not only has resonance with Beuys’ claim that ‘everyone is an artist’ but with Tristan Tzara’s ‘poetry is for everyone’.

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They are tactics that continue to be tested and transformed in recent works framed within the milieus of Conceptual writing: in Carlos Soto-Román’s *Chile Project: Re-Classified*, a work that documents an attempted blackout of neoliberal terror; in Rachel Zolf’s *Janey’s Arcadia*, which dredges up and disrupts narratives of colonizing what is presently known as the Canadian prairies; and in Jordan Abel’s *Un/Inhabited*, an attempt to dismantle the entire pulp-fiction genre of settler-colonial romance.92

In thinking through method, ecology, responsibility and settler relations, in thinking post-conceptually for ‘Australia’, I want to focus on Kate Middleton’s *No Land*, which constitutes what Daniel Falb calls a ‘terrapoetics’ in the Anthropocene.93

Middleton’s *No Land* may be called a ‘gleaned’ text. It is derived from *This Unknown Island* by S. P. B. Mais, which is an Englishman’s travel guide to England published in 1934. As Middleton writes:

> I took each chapter and, instead of crossing out - creating an erasure - drew boxes around the words of my new text. I wanted still to be able to read Mais’s original essays: they are charming; charmingly outdated. Within them I found strange texts, windswept, saintswept…. If, as Dickinson has it, “Art— is a house that tries to be haunted”, these texts are haunted by what I have left out.94

Mais’ text begins with a quote from Coleridge, firmly situating him in a Romantic and British tradition. His is a tour of the greats. By contrast Middleton refers to Emily Dickinson, placing her in a proto-modernist frame. Middleton’s is a tour of tours; it is meta. What then does it mean to haunt and be haunted by this text? It may mean to engage with the presence of forebears, particularly if one mainly works in a lyric tradition as Middleton does; it may

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92 See Michael Nardone ‘Settler Conceptualism’ http://jacket2.org/article/settler-conceptualism
93 See Daniel Falb ‘A Note on Terrapoetics’ https://jacket2.org/article/note-terrapoetics
94 Middleton, Kate, *No Land*, p. 22
mean to haunt them, to reclaim them in return. It might also mean to allude to the way Australia is haunted by spirits and yarlies and massacres in its very landedness.

Consider, for example, ‘II. On Bury Art’, which is Middleton’s gleaning of ‘II. Glastonbury: King Alfred and King Arthur’. Mais’ version begins with a discussion of where Camelot may be, which is to say it is contentious between Caerleon-on-Usk, Winchester, Tintagel, Damelioc, Killiwick, Camelford and Somerset. It is about ambiguity of place. But as the title conveys, it is to Glastonbury ‘we’ are being called to. As Mais writes: ‘there are many reasons why you and I should go… [for] here is the Holy Grail, here lies King Arthur.’ The journey to the site of that most fabled of British kings, of Christianity, is punctured by the everyday when a woman collapses in a waiting room – ‘a Hardy-esque story in Thomas Hardy’s own country.’ Yet soon we journey through the countryside (‘white-washed, yellow-washed, pink-washed cottages of thatch’) from field to farm. Mais concludes by saying:

It is good occasionally to unravel the tangled skein of our origins, to look back at intervals at the rock whence we are hewn. A visit to Glastonbury does this for us. It does more. It reminds us in youth we set out in quest of the Holy Grail. That is a reminder that I, for one, need.

The chapter is a reflection on walking, on myth, on religion and on aging. It assumes a type of nationalism and references Old England with a sentimental and positivist tone. Its politics are subterranean but we can assume that Mais is discomforted by the intrusion of the modern world – ‘a car-park… and a cinema betray a strange obliquity of vision.’ At the centre of it is a rational, contained, nostalgic ‘I’. There is, we can gather, a liberal, Romantic, conservative politics.

What follows is Middleton’s version:

You know Camelot

96 Mais, *This Unknown Island*, p. 15
97 Mais, *This Unknown Island*, p. 16-17
98 Mais, *This Unknown Island*, p. 21
99 Mais, *This Unknown Island*, p. 21
know that the only true Camelot is a green knoll of midsummer

But you needn’t thread every moment with a clock of Arimathea

with the sacred cup under the Tor buried between architecture and archaeology.

Be shepherded into fact and fancy. Harbour both—

• • •

In the Pilgrim’s Inn, a loft room is haunted by the panoply of green rapidity

a palimpsest set on a green hill

white-washed, white

-limed, white smocks and

smocks not so white.

Then another change:

the flat brown road, hedgeless at flood level.

Withies upright at the junction.

• • •

To reach the orchards: pull against the door-post of the Great Flood

the monument: flatten between the obelisk and the bridge over the Tone

the withy-bed: sell the unstable canoe, half-full of water.

After landing be content with the remnants of a blue silk flag.

(The monument is a severity of pardon and vigilance, a

black piled heap of black

shawls, blotted out by grey
rain, orientated by the Dog
Star. A cinema. A strange
obliquity of grandeur.)

And you unravel the tangled skein of rock. More. Of grail.

Camelot is now a material thing – ‘a green knoll of midsummer’ – even as it is also a historical idea. Speaking directly to us Middleton implores us to ‘be shepherded into fact and fancy./ Harbour both.’ Fact and fancy are established as opposites only for the reader to be welcomed, sent, coddled, cuddled, held by both as if there were a dialectical synthesis between poetry and history. ‘Shepherded’ with its connotations of the pastoral, with its field associations, and ‘harbour’ suggesting a respite from the sea, ocean, storm, indicate that we are in a safe, if not bucolic place. This continues in the next passage; however, we are ‘haunted’ at the inn – not all is serene and welcoming. It is a ‘palimpsest’ suggesting that there are layers here, of meaning, of memory; that it is followed by variations on ‘whiteness’ allows one to open up into the possibilities not only of the colour spectrum but the politics of settlement in an English-Australian context. Race becomes visible. The ‘flat brown road’ is Mackellarian and the junction we are at is uncertain. We have not quite reached where we are going with the poem – it is not a procession from lush, green kingdom to featureless brown frontier. There is a pre-emptive haunting here, as if all relations, all empires and kingdoms have ghosts, spectres, traumas.¹⁰⁰

In Middleton the periphery is tied to the metropole in a complex tangle of relations. If we want to get there we must follow what we are told in the next section: ‘to reach’ one must perform tasks, act in a certain way as if the poet can be a speaker from a place of experience. Once one arrives, once one lands, if ever one can, we are told how to feel – ‘be content with the remnants of a blue silk flag.’ Flag, that symbol of nation, is merely a ‘remnant’, not a proud, unfurling, striking semiotic claim to virgin, unsettled land. ‘Pardon and vigilance’ – opposites of the juridical system collide. With ‘black piled heap of black/shawls’ we are held in wait over a line break to see if it is black ‘bodies’

¹⁰⁰ See also: XII. Then Lie of No Land
not shawls. However, shawls too, in their feminist connotation, haunt us in the tragic figuration as a piled heap – one remembers memorials of the daily in this iteration.

The Dog Star, which the naked eye perceives as a single star but is actually a binary star system, references Hesiod’s poetic *Work and Days*. This interplay of a colonial reading background and a system of establishing binaries only to destabilise them suggests the open possibility, the indeterminate politics of Middleton’s work, and that is what gives it a generative power when read alongside other works of unoriginality. It may connect with Conceptualism at the level of method of construction, but in its ability to be read, in its ambivalent political caring for the land, *No Land* is decidedly post-Goldsmith by paradoxically being pre-Goldsmith and reminiscent of Charles Bernstein’s adaptation of Erving Goffman’s *Asylums*. As Peter Allen or Gertrude Stein might say ‘everything old is new again’.

Art does not have an autonomous status. If Goldsmith knew nothing of politics, he knows something of it after ‘The Body of Michael Brown’. Although Adorno asserts that a critical concept of the social is inherent to the artwork, he also holds that the production of art is always part of the larger process of social labour and hence division of labour. His idea of ‘entwinement’ positions, on the one hand, a possibility of art against the demand for a correct image of social reality (in his case against the demand for social realism, or, for example, against Conceptualism as the inheritor of the avant garde that relies on a metonymic repetition of the everyday) and, on another hand, the threat of complete commoditization, a threat that turns art over to the expectation of social entertainment (the slam as competitive spectacle). That may yet be the course social poetry charts, responsive as it may be to climate change, the ‘greatest political, moral and economic challenge of the 21st century’. For as Beuys writes:

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102 Hohendahl, ‘Theory of the Novel’, p. 97
103 Hohendahl, ‘Theory of the Novel’, p. 96
Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline: to dismantle in order to build a social organism as a work of art.\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{105} Kuoni, Carin. \textit{Energy Plan for the Western Man}, p. 11
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On Suburbanism’s Open Matrix

I think of myself as almost exactly half way between Les Murray and Peter Porter. Peter is an amazingly indoor poet, one who inhabits the world of poetry books and opera. I actually don’t like being indoors. I can’t stand being indoors for very long, and like Les, I know accurately things about kinds of trees, species of birds and natural phenomenon of that kind. On the other hand, like Peter and unlike Les, I have been brought up all my life in cities and suburbs, and so the matrix into which I fit is an open matrix.\textsuperscript{106}

Chris Wallace-Crabbe

For post-conceptual social poetry to avoid being part of what Martin Harrison called a ‘narrow kind of talk’, it must respond to the suburbs, which are the real lived material conditions of the majority of the Australian population.\textsuperscript{107} This is not to discount the fringe-dwellers or the city-country divide, but to suggest that there is a dearth of poetic scholarship on the suburbs.\textsuperscript{108} Indeed, the appreciable body of work on Romanticism-Modernism, pastoralism-the urban is not matched by thinking on Suburbanism.\textsuperscript{109}

Suburbanism is the determinate negation of the suburbanite. It is the retrofitting of settlement with the anti-capitalism that it has forgotten that it wished for. A suburbanist way would recapture the original geist of the suburbs, the ‘country living, city benefits’ mantra. This way we could oppose what Robin Boyd called the ‘featurism’ of suburbia.\textsuperscript{110}

In speaking of Australian architecture in the post-war period Boyd highlighted the pervading ‘ugliness’, owing in part to Featurism and a confusing

\textsuperscript{106} Grishin, Sasha, ‘Bruno Leti’s Collaboration with Chris Wallace-Crabbe’, \textit{Imprint}, Vol. 34, number 4, p. 18
assemblage of Anglophonic traditions (‘Austerican’ for example). Boyd, in echoing Karl Krauss when he said ‘the root lies on the surface’, stated that ‘the ugliness I mean is skin deep.’\footnote{Youker, Timothy. “The Destiny of Words’: documentary theatre, the avant garde and the politics of form’ Columbia University, PhD Thesis, 2012; Boyd, \textit{Australian Ugliness}, p. 3} Indeed, we only have skin to work with, only surface representation to think through be that the wallpaper of a house or the words on the page.

Featurism was:

… not simply a decorative technique; \textit{it starts in concepts} and extends upwards through the parts to the numerous trimmings. It may be defined as the subordination of the essential whole and the accentuation of selected separate features.\footnote{Boyd, \textit{Australian Ugliness}, p. 19}

In that way featurism can be part of aesthetics and politics outside of architecture. It suggests a lack of thinking structurally, of the whole poem as the case may be, let alone the entire body of work. For Boyd:

The symbol or the image, the miniature of the new aspiration, is applied to the old thing in the hope that it will tinge the whole old thing with new colour. And, to unalerted eyes, indeed a feature can succeed in suffusing the whole of the thing to which it adheres…. The weather-board shed takes on a new aura with a wooden cross attached to the point of the front gable.\footnote{Boyd, \textit{Australian Ugliness}, p. 66}

For Boyd, featurism was evident in built Australian life and he chronicles its presence in Melbourne’s urban setting (churches and public buildings particularly); Canberra’s planning; the work of pioneers and agoraphobes; as well as other social phenomena. However, he does highlight that:

the Sydneysider pictures his city from the Harbour or the Bridge, its new white offices piling up against the sky they are trying to scrape. He does not
see nor recognize the shabby acres of rust and dust and cracked plaster and lurid signs in the older inner suburbs. The Melburnian thinks of his city as Alexandra Avenue where it skirts the river and the shady top end of Collins Street, which are indeed two of the most civilized pieces of urbanity in the world. He dismisses as irrelevant to this vision the nervy miscellany of the main commercial artery, Swanston Street, not to mention the interminable depression of the flat, by-passed inner suburbs.114

Although this comment may have rung truer in Boyd’s era, suburban life today is disproportionately absent from critical and cultural debate, from national imagination, as a sort of present absence. Despite being the space where most live, the suburbs are not thought of or thought through by official verse culture.  

Connected to Boyd’s idea of featurism is sprawl. If the Australian home is made ugly because of its ornaments, we might also say the landscape is made ugly by the sprawl of the ornamented home.116 Boyd is at pains to suggest that Australia is best viewed from the air; from this perspective it has a pleasing uniformity, as land, as geography. The suburbanite’s creep into the natural surrounds is not a cause for celebration, not a sort of ‘at-easeness’ at odds with the tidiness valorized by schoolteachers and urban planners, but a cause for ecological and cultural concern.117 Against both of these we might propose both to retrofit and to contain, which might mean to re-master old buildings and words (like a cento) and to be spare, which if not quite minimalist then considers reigning in an unfettered, individualist maximalism (like a

114 Boyd, Australian Ugliness, p.11
115 Boyd, Australian Ugliness, p. 41
Sprawl is to Murray what loafing is to Whitman; an at-easeness in the world that upsets the tidy minds of schoolteachers and urban planners. “Reprimanded and dismissed/sprawl,” “listens with a grin and one boot up on the rail/of possibility.”
gleaning).118 This way we could re-imagine the suburbs as something other than ‘god forsaken’ and ‘ugly’ in the poetic imagination, hence we might not have to retreat into a nostalgic lyricism about ‘nature’ or import a discourse of urbanism that is unsuited to a place lacking density.119

Featurism in poetry specifically could refer to a type of internal defamiliarisation. Rather than the whole poem reacting against an assumed context of intelligibility, whereby the poet writes a complete poem (or linguistic artifact) against some sociologically unlocated and general habitualised language, we might begin to think about a post-structural sort of defamiliarisation.120 In this case, the feature of the poem is a moment of interruption, a new thing inside the whole. The context, or even voice, has been established and a specific word or phrase breaks the pattern. For example, if one has written: I went for a walk/believing myself to be alone/dithyrambic raiment/of days in sun. The turning point of the poem (dithyrambic raiment) is its feature in so far as it takes us out of the established habit of the poem, which is enabled by the plain direct speech of the first two lines and the final line. This is about form, style and content as well as context and is an application of featurism as a working concept to literary criticism.

As Boyd writes, ‘every Australian is not, of course, a featurist.’121 We could identify featurists though in poetry and suburbanite and suburbanist works. What then of the role of birds in the poem whose contents are the suburbs? As

118 See: Steton Colony Commune in New Jersey - an intentional community developed by anarchists in the Modern School Movement in the U.S. in 1915. It is within commuting distance of NYC and many residents retained factory jobs in the city. See Transition Town movement, which was started in the UK, includes some retrofitting of the suburbs (one resource is a chapter in ‘Resilience, Transition, and Creative Adaptability’ in John Barry’s The Politics of Actually Existing Unsustainability, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; Conor Cash, ‘Decomposition and Suburban Space’ in Affinity, Vol. 4, no. 1, 2010, online; For Australia see: David Holmgren, Retrofitting the suburbs for the energy descent future, Simplicity Institute Report 12i, 2012.
119 See Australian Poetry Library, quotes come from Hope’s ‘A Northern Elegy’ and Jone’s ‘Leaving Again’.
120 See Victor Shklovsky ‘Art as Technique’ Accessed 20/12/2015 <https://paradise.caltech.edu/ist4/lectures/Viktor_Sklovski_Art_as_Technique.pdf>
121 Boyd, Australian Ugliness, p. 125
Kinsella wrote ‘a parrot isn’t simply a parrot’ so too a bird is not only a bird. They bring colour, life, meaning; they connect with nodes of association and reference other poems; they reflect experience; they are ecological as much as political, cultural and social symbols and things-in-themself.

In many poetic works, the pastoral impulse re-asserts itself in a suburban *tabula rasa* of ennui, boredom, soullessness, and ultimately death. Jean Kent’s ‘In the Hour of Silvered Mullet (Kilaben Bay, Lake Macquarie)’ - is a four part reflection on life in the suburbs; ‘the land of the bland, a stranger might sniff’ but in Kent’s hands a reflective reverie of nature, people, task, labour, holiday. To take only the first part, we read of the poet walking the quiet streets at sunset. She is drawn from her home by birds. In the first stanza Kent writes:

> It was the *tink* of king parrots in the native frangipani –
> then the white sail-rip past my windows of cockatoos –
> sounds of the day on its final tack
> which spinnakered me out into this twilight.

Birds here propel the ‘I’ out of the house and into the street for an evening constitutional. They are lively and alive – they ‘tink’ and ‘rip’ compounding each other through their shared vowel. This contrasts with the suburb, even as they are constitutive of it. The suburbs, which ‘accost’ her at the beginning of her walk are seen as ‘quarter acre *mausoleums,*/ bungalows mugged by the dinner hour.’ Save for a P-plated car that ‘erupts’ with ‘expletives’ that ‘fart then fade, strange as circus elephants’ trapped hoots’, the streets are quiet. People are inside eating while the poet walks ‘this twilight trail’.

There are specific images – ‘a Volvo, shiny as a buttered knife, rests beside/ its long loaf of house’; ‘fibro weekenders/ not dolled up (yet); new Taj Mahals, curtained with sheets’ – but these aid her memory of ‘inland towns of childhood’. The memory, the thought, is interrupted by currawongs’ crying ‘*Come home now! Come home now!*’. For Kent the currawongs voices are ‘like sunlight on pewter water/dazzling away an entire suburb’s saucepan lids –

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/just as the bitumen turns a corner and swoops me wrapped in everyone else’s
dinner, fragrant as bait,’. What then are we to make of the birds here? They
offer not only life in the face of the dead, built environment (the mausoleum,
the tomb of the Taj), or the inanimate buttered knife, but they also offer us a
way for the poet to be led.

If a sailing vocabulary (‘sail’, ‘tack’, ‘spinnakered’) connoting journey, travel,
movement draws her out of domesticity, an allusion to the kitchen (‘saucepan
lids’) draws her back into the home. Birds then have a position of knowing
when to come and when to go; nature knows in some sense. We could deduce
from this, especially when read alongside Kent’s other poems in this volume,
that there is a desire to regard animals as part of a ‘group spirit’, a sort of
redemptive and knowledgeable way in the world that informs the poet’s
memory and subject position. We are in the suburbs, but, dead as they are, we
might prefer to be in the national park, the field, the ocean.

In ‘In the Hour of Silvered Mullet’ birds are the Romantic, pastoral trope that
tells us there is life inside the catacomb that is suburbia. We see something
similar, namely that the suburb is dead and the bird is active, moving, alive, in
Jamie Grant’s ‘Yacht Harbour - Stillness’ (‘silence embalms/the suburbs’); SK
Kelen’s ‘Saturn’ (‘suburbs died of fright’); Robert Adamson’s ‘Drawn With
Light’ (‘suburbs of living dead’); Tim Thorne’s ‘Advice’ (‘waste’, ‘sick’,
‘cancer’); Henry Lawson’s ‘Interlude. Next Door’ (‘a suburb that hasn’t the
soul of a louse’); John Kinsella’s ‘Conspiracy’ (bird death), ‘Exotica at Lake
Joondalup’ (‘empty circulatory systems’) and ‘Letter to Anthony Lawrence’
(‘raven garrotes/the suburbs’); Dorothy Porter’s ‘Gossip’ (‘death/is a boring
smell/in a room/in a suburb’); Alan Gould’s ‘Kosciusko Essay’
(‘downward,/deathward’); David Rowbotham’s ‘The Birds of Berkeley’ (‘the
suburbs of stoned Stephens’); and Ouyang Yu’s ‘Sex Notice’ (‘your suburb is
too dead’). 123

123 See Australian Poetry Library online.
In contrast to this Romantic sensibility, a suburbanite rendering of birds is seen when they are presented as a form of ornamentation within the poem. They are there to add colour, to decorate without recourse to the fact that they are there to be life-giving amidst the deadness of the whole; that is to say they are ‘featurist’. This is clearly demonstrated in ‘O, Kingfisher’ by Dorothy Porter.

O, Kingfisher

I’ve heard
your singing.
Every morning
it’s the same
azure kingfisher;
exotic for my suburb
as if
the jungle had
snuck in.
It’s your singing;
stunned, quiet
fatigued
I’m resigned
to each wild,
rich guise.
Even
as the sky
turns belly-up
you sing.

Porter is aware that the bird is ‘exotic’, but the reader also apprehends the word ‘azure’, which in the plain speech of the rest of the poem seems exceptional if not defamiliarising. ‘Fatigued’ works with ‘resigned’ and ‘guise’ – they are words apart but together in their apartness. ‘Azure’ may correlate with ‘jungle’ because of the sound, but both only compound azure’s separateness. It is the striking, featurist word of the poem.
We also get a feauturist word amid plain speech to describe birds in Gig Ryan’s ‘Past’ (‘plangent’) and Thomas W. Shapcott ‘In the Town’ (‘melisma’). These are the words one may need a dictionary to explain. In Porter’s ‘Scenes from A Marriage I’ the suburb itself becomes ‘swish’, ‘dangerous’, ‘glamorous’, ‘gamey’, ‘golden’, ‘exhilarating’ because of a bird. She writes:

**Scenes from A Marriage I**

How fantastic are these  
  familiar suburbs  
  when the night parrot  
    is driving my car!

The ovals, the churches,  
  the school playgrounds  
  the hardware stores

all swish  
  like the high skirts  
    of a Kirchner prostitute;  
the seedy glamour  
  of memory  
    at its most piercing  
where dangerous old perfume  
  from an old lover’s skin  
hangs about  
  the streets  
like a saucy hoodlum  
  snapping his fingers  
smoking an unforgettable cigarette  
turning this milk Bar  
  this boring suburb  
    into El Dorado  
where the streets are gold  
  at its most gamey  
    like gory Celtic jewelry –
when the night parrot
is at the wheel
the Top 40
becomes hot ice,
and I throw these burning songs
from hand to hand
with my pulse
ticking like a gaudy grenade;
it’s the jumping blood’s answer
to happiness
the night parrot
drives slowly
to counterpoint
my exhilarated heart’s speed.

Paradoxically, the night parrot, a symbol of nature, mystery, perhaps extinct, brings the suburb into a sort of modernist, urban, dangerous realm. As Kinsella writes:

the parrot becomes an alter ego, a conscience, counter-point, antagonist, most-often indifferent companion, of address. In Porter’s work this is more literal – the bird is a ‘character’ in the internalised dialogue with a shifting persona[….. ] Characteristic of Porter’s poetry in general is the play between the casual, familiar language and a razor-edged intensity. Her night parrot is no mere empty signifier.124

When the night parrot is considered as a counterpoint to Kirchner – a German expressionist painter whose work was considered degenerate under the Nazis and who committed suicide in 1938 – and El Dorado – a mythic American city of gold – we have a complex interaction between country and city, nature and human. The suburb though is a flashy thing because of the parrot. If the parrot was not driving the car – symbol of the post-war suburban – one may assume we would not think either of Kirchner or El Dorado. This is a question of the suburb as a consuming, sprawling entity that builds on the featurism that Porter presents elsewhere.

124 Kinsella, Disclosed Poetics, p. 19
A suburbanist rendering of birds is demonstrated when there is a pleasingly homonymic ambiguity to the interpretation, which is to say that the suburb is not dead and that the bird is not there as an antithesis rendered as life. In other words, birds are part of the suburbs. As Boyd writes, ‘forms and spaces can be a delight in themselves without an observer feeling any needs for features.’ Nowhere is this clearer than Geoff Page’s ‘The Birds’:

The Birds

The birds today
have shifted in on him,
an aviary
about the house.
Cockatoos
ride windy branches;
currawongs
foregather loudly
in the pine trees;
grey sparrows
leap like mice
among the shrubs.
All conspire
against his silence.
The air is birdsong.
He watches them
too much, the way
they prop so fast
above a branch
and drop their claws,
the magpies
strafing the house.

A short campaign.

125 This is not to say that the night parrot is not part of Hewett’s suburb, but that the focus is on the daily rather than the mythical, the material rather than the conscious, the mundane. I would, of course, acknowledge that these categories bleed into each other, that they have crossover and overlap.

126 Boyd, Australian Ugliness, p. 263
At night he flaps up to join them, takes the new perspective from a moon-grey gum, and, feeling the buoyancy of air beneath his feathers, glides off over the suburbs.

Although he may ‘flap up to join them’, it is a suburb that is run by birds (‘an aviary about the house’). He does ‘glide off over the suburbs’, but we can reflect on whether he will return with these birds. We are unsure whether the person wants to identify with the birds as an escape from the suburbs or whether he simply wants to engage with being about the house. In either case it collapses his human animality into the Othered position – he becomes them, able to escape. It is not so much about remaining a suburbanite then, but escaping from it in such a way that he allows himself to get deeper into the structure; it is after all ‘their’ home.

This suburbanist ambiguity of separation from and connection to is also evident in Adamson’s ‘Drum of fire’ (‘In the park/I flew with rainbow lorikeets/ and hung upside down in the branches of flowering coral trees’) and Julian Croft’s ‘Suburbs’ (‘the boyfriend hurtles past bird-bodied’). There is also a sense in the following poems that the birds are an integral part of a suburb that is living: Philip Salom’s ‘Planes’ (stanza one); SK Kelen’s ‘Creatures’; Rowbotham’s ‘Coorparoo’ (‘the cottages are cotes’); Jill Jones ‘April’s Rescue’ (‘the second nesting since we’ve lived here’: ‘we adopt their nurturing’); Adam Aitken’s ‘The Reply’ (‘like the silence between trees/ filling slowly with the songs of birds/ you could transcribe as the happiness/of the woman my speech could never keep’); Kinsella’s ‘Ornithology’ (‘this refuge in the suburbs’); Douglas Stewart’s ‘The Dreaming World’ (stanza two); Pam Brown’s ‘Seven Days’ (‘Home’ to ‘installed for them’); Vivian Smith’s ‘Early Arrival: Sydney’ (stanza one); Katherine Gallagher’s ‘Entente’ (stanza one); Murray’s ‘Equanimit’ (‘More natural to look at the birds about the street, their
life/that is greedy, pinched, courageous and prudential/as any of these bricked
tree mingled miles of settlement'; ‘bird minds and ours are so pointedly
visual’).\(^{127}\)

We could encourage a Suburbanist, as opposed to suburbanite, aesthetic with
regard to birds. If the Romantic and Modernist and the dialectic framed as city-
country are all but exhausted, the suburbs have really yet to begin. They have,
it seems, being a hybrid form that finds no negation and hence cannot be
represented in criticism. Indeed, as much space as the rural takes up in the
poetic imaginary (the Murrays) and as challengingy urbane as the inheritors of
modernism are (the Tranters), Australia is a suburban nation. If parrots enter
into the work of many poets as ‘Nature’, which if not uncomplicatedly
Romantic at least refers to the real, what are we to expect when the frame is
not Bunyah or ‘the city’ but the Western periphery of Sydney?

Suburbanites are anti-Suburbanist, even as they live as neighbours in the
suburbs, in each other’s homes, in the same body at extremis. The suburbanite
is the false interlocutor of the suburbs, who exploits the material base without
the idealized potential. With their unimaginative presence they can grind down
the Suburbanist as a real candidate for real change. Suburbanism is not the
ironic, parodic, satiric re-interpretation of suburban life, not Barry Humphries,
_kath & kim_, _The Castle_ with their featurism but an infrastructural realignment
of suburbia to become collective, and decentralised. It is the poets task to
represent that in words.

\(^{127}\) See Australian Poetry Library online.
concerning a farm

poems of place
duck-ladder / rabbit-bone: a suite of taringa poems

i.
suspicious mirrors, of candour
riches scratches twists
breath-grief death-with
no muscle at all

ii.
dream-dream themes
obedient harmonies, see
salty fruit changes
sing rapture-gift

iii.
scan chance
all, and all
norm scarps form
glow, and all

iv.
rock music
acquires surprises
ought few to which
hoard love, music

v.
corner eye-magic
pink or dark
rim-hope jerks
head seamless universe
i.

ash loam and foot flesh
farm-bones and skin maps
pink, grey, graveyard,
form-grasses and wavetails
wellbaked and seed black

ii.

starlows the cropframe
saltcanvas of generation, plateau
waist the size of place

iii.

tigerhand by jokebite, and
fivethink of bootstub
hand-me-down, snow hot
tamarisk, sack-a-flour,
jackgun trapchasm foreign sun
our unsetlement
green upland detail: a suite of hawkesbury poems

i.
riverfowl of redgin
racebet death by prawn eat
bloodcold sandfly
a mullet married

ii.
dampchuckle threadlife
mudflats meridian
translucent morning of howling life

iii.
airfield squarehead
livebait lyrebed
tidecoming echo of
whistling mellow
i.
home twilight, gleam fruit sky,
twig, granite, hobnailed, fifty six,
wind skillion milkseamed thump,
chide never, rabbit verandah
shining at the yearn-creek

ii.
prime half-moon
corn-ground now coin-sized
shining land with bare pole barn

iii.
house-hood-hamlet-project
dozent year of painted illumination
miniature oil-lamps
nine dresses, maroon tips
spiral of a year foretold
long ago tarrying in cheap-wine-light
day earth watching quill: a suite of colombo poems

i.
fell press, wormy surplus
vibrato tight, tongue learnt

ii.
weft blown bones
crevasses edges, span-dark
sand tincan, skin-temple
burr ash and raw

iii.
bent red, scream dark-rumours of other
ginger thick and ticking
fortress broken north hard

iv.
ribbon sea, fray teeth
headed carve, a tin boat, concrete homes
reedy catch, scaly gemstones

v.
riper broad, loaded with round
sliced thick, bind ate
flesh snow lecherous
no-use gaze

vi.
razor shape wall torn, in the empty imprint
shard cord, maw face
down
eclipse years: a suite of perth poems

i.
swan banks, them swans
then through, with here, of not,
in stones warned shop, where plain
abstract, ready four, cloud
followed, would come.

ii.
hand glass, vein freeze
eyes read silence
mine open, my mouth
float throat, of hot-tip

iii.
polaroid energetic
satisfaction plastic
generous interest for
booted clad, of job-good

iv.
mucky duck desk doze
bitter come, twice fax
a scheming, spite rank have this
moon-potato-handshake
whisker tight, volt grey
soft blowfly like snood hence
or-it-right: a mt. tambourine poem

idea shade below inch-burn
century leech, ankle knack
wonder term high air trunk thin

shadow and cool, claw water
dog tick, flicking off leaf mould
hidden still waiting
returning

site down, each ritual
pebbles, discovery lodged more gaunt, more whitened, other
too
if not possessed
stranger uncle: a suite of cherbourg poems

i. big water
   big eels
   later: sun clean just, catch get
to up not, not about or
who, was big rock, our bird
stone first, home reservoir

ii. sang take, porky high
    porky ablaze
    race hide, live sea sparkly moan
    pride glow, lagooned

    brumby rolling flaming misery
    working truth, fast future, form pole
    took emptiness for now

iii. maddened hopping,
    misery punishing,
    weary wisps
    pushed white, death exposure
    end yes
snake rock of innocents: a suite of uluru poems

i.
back rock pastel
lime climb frond,
you’ll never own
nestled vapour, trail

ii.
new split-level
gentle as brail
imagination transplant
semi-articulated, faint and peering

iii.
watching company, tough stone
fought crevice and shadow-dim
illumination of skink

iv.
chipboard grain, was shining light
rampant jacaranda, cat grape and honey-skin
decay, relate, orbit of wrecking mate
the madness of no parting: a suite of gold coast poems

i.

geodesic rain
run money, love baby
the clarity we want
lick relax, misery glint

ii.

pick taro, pick flames
terrain and party,
redeemed backing

iii.

casual fidget and world-leisure
picnic snapshot,
and gravel smile
well kept impediments
hobart/december: a tasmania poem

limps leg love
look long loving
listen loutish lobotomised
lapping living laps
lunch laughs long live
learn language
lucky lucky lord
like life livers lash leg-irons
crack hollow hand
over moon: a melbourne poem

loss of ago now
moon knows of old, not only cold
mooch mood how look so bloody so
frosty cock down frost of
moon bloody moon
no for body to
who knows not so among rocks
for soon to ago
for moon don’t not
long moon stop on moon for lost to
for who
for so
for dogs, so
for, for who, to go, of so bloody
to bloody
song photograph to node: an india poem

mentioning reminding surrounding
surfacing breathing waking
forgetting
arriving dreaming becoming
following turning
stifling fading
looking looking grinning slipping
fading
lave flume over jade straw plain, flared
concerning a farm: a new york poem

crime death pity spread
minnow sun button spring
make me whole

luck disease simple leaf
trap steel ankle,
cheeseramas and vodka rhinestones
blue insulation of silo

as tokens of gratitude
overbright gong of sticklike tree
indiscriminately crawl, bonelike
clear jeans from hotel levy: a london poem

crisp peck like hash

garlic divine fag lash

yearn to be still,
inheritance on my tongue
snippets sweet fleshpots

bombing run make-up
scouting wind wake-up
authorities after talks
wistful desk of bourbon glow
haunt and affect
traffic staring rigorous
continuously left it
darting winking atom thrust
core star nucleus
sparkled glittered
mudfrost quad-toy
in his mind’s eye, a corruption prize
Country & Western

The aim of the writer should be as a social interpreter, his realism the realism of the people working, fighting, living and struggling. For a long period, the progressive Australian writer found very little outlet for his work. Literary Australian journals were too busy arguing over the pros and cons of art for arts sake, that outworn hobby horse, to realise that world events were booting in their ivory castles.

Dorothy Hewett 128

That poetry is implicated with politics is incontrovertible. 129 As Theodor Adorno writes ‘art exists in the real world and has a function in it, and the two are connected by a large number of mediating links.’ 130 Those mediating links however, the things that connect each to the other, are harder to grapple with. What does the daily life of a protest poet look like compared to a conservative one when both work in a modern university? What poetry does the politician read? 131

The heuristic separation of aesthetics and politics is historically seen in the debates around Communism and realism whereby one can have a ‘radical’ politics and a ‘conservative’ aesthetics or a ‘radical’ politics and a ‘radical’ aesthetics (Lukacs and Prichard being iterations of the former; Adorno and Hewett of the latter). 132 It is far rarer to have a ‘conservative’ politics and a ‘radical’ aesthetics, which is partly why the 2015 debates about Goldsmith and Place were noticeable. What this suggests though is that one’s aesthetic

129 See Maurice Bowra, Poetry and Politics; Hugh Ford A Poets War; Bernstein, Poetry and Public Policy; Ernst Fischer The Necessity of Art: A Marxist Approach; John Harrison, The Reactionaries: a study of the anti-democratic intelligentsia.
132 There is though less work performed on radical aesthetics and conservative politics.
persuasions are no guarantee of one’s politics, that the mediating links go in many directions.

Consider then Robin Blaser’s six propositions in regard to what is political poetry. In his essay ‘Particles’ he writes:

1. ‘The public realm is necessarily political’
2. Despite the appearance of settlement in our body politic ‘our political thought is dominated by modern revolutions’ from America to China
3. ‘Our thoughtful concern about revolutionary purposes always revolves around the problem of authority’
4. ‘The purpose of a revolution is to destroy a rotting body politic in order to replace it with another in which the foundations are laid for freedom’
5. ‘Freedom is an activity involving deeds and words in a shared public realm’
6. ‘Life as the highest good is not understood for the enclosure it is, but when it becomes, as ideas do, active in the world.’

Two conclusions we could reach from Blaser are that all poetry has a politics and that revolutions matter. We could also ask:

1. Who is the public? Is that the voting citizenry of a polis? Is it something else?
2. How might we think of revolutions after the ‘end of history’? How might we consider what is happening in Beijing where there is a different marriage between Communism and capitalism than one that may exist in Berkeley?
3. What of Foucault’s ‘discipline’ versus his ‘technes of the self’?
4. How might freedom be possible today?
5. What deeds might poets undertake? What words might activists and politicians heed?
6. What strategies are necessary for making poetry matter in the world?

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134 See the differences between Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* Volume One and Volume Two.
I do not want to attempt to answer each of these questions, but to orient myself around them. As a starting point, and after Frederic Jameson’s maxim to ‘always historicise’ we might turn to Claude Levi-Strauss when he suggests that ‘history is a fine vocation as long as you give it up.’ Indeed, it is necessary to always contextualise, particularly when thinking through politics. In that way, we need consider poetry that often escapes criticism.

In thinking through the activities of poets who consider themselves political, and in responding to an oversight of the literary academic record, we might want to consider poetry that is outside the official record. To that end, we need to consider the *volk*, to think through bush ballads, spoken word, performance poetry as political verse cultures with their own logic and economy. Indeed, for all the debates within the academy there is a tacit conflict with those outside it through the absence of criticism. Tranter and Murray, Kinsella and Adamson, Hose and Page all seem to exist in a pre-determined context without considering a mass of poetic activity that occurs in Australia. This includes Indigenous traditions. These may be dismissed as an object of study because they are ‘difficult’, but we could simply update debates concerning the avant garde to justify their inclusion in the university sector.

In the Australian context I believe that means bringing poetry that escapes scrutiny into the critical realm as much as it means changing the poetics discourse around accepted texts. As AD Hope wrote in ‘The Activists’ in 1965:

> In a sense all great literature makes itself known as such by the overwhelming conviction of truth that it produces: either that enlargement of experience which astonishes us with a quite new vision, or that refashioning of experience which Shelley calls the power to strip ‘the veil of familiarity from the world and lay bare the naked and sleeping beauty’.

Enlargement and refashioning need happen in our criticism too.

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137 Hope, *Cave and Spring*, p. 33
To that end I want to discuss a type of Indigenous song poetry called tabi. Tabi are personally authored, public song poems of the Western Pilbara. They are similar to other forms in other regions including junba in the Kimberley, but they are decidedly their own object domain. These are not songlines and as such there is a very different type of ownership and relationship to sacredness than commonly assumed. They are essentially common knowledge rather than religious understandings and there are relatively few cultural proscriptions in place that prohibit their circulation. This is in contrast to the songs Ted Strehlow discusses in *Songs of Central Australia*, or even Bruce Chatwin’s *The Songlines*. As the former writes in his introduction, ‘a song is a complete set of verses associated with any ceremonial site and pertaining to the doings of any single mythical being or group of local totemic ancestors’. In contrast tabi are often reflections on daily life. Donald Norman, for example, has tabi on wristwatches, aeroplanes and station work.

In the published record of poetics, tabi are most well known through Carl von Brandenstein and A P Thomas’ 1974 book *Taruru*. Tabi from that volume have been collected in the *Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry*, quoted in *Final Theory* by Bonny Cassidy and taught in university courses. They are, moreover, part of a well-developed anthropological tradition of song poetry that has been recorded by ethnomusicologists such as Bob Dixon, Ronald and Catherine Berndt, John Bradley, Alan Marret, Linda Barwick and Sally Treloyn.

I came to tabi through my brother-in-law, who is a Ngarluma man from Roebourne in the Western Pilbara. The first time I went there was in 2003 and since that time I have conducted research and cultural heritage work in the region with Indigenous owned and run organisations. One of the projects I worked on was a collaboration with Perth’s FORM Gallery in 2013. Titled *Ngarluma Ngurra* it was a multimedia exhibition that featured paintings, digital

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138 Strehlow, TGH *Songs of Central Australia*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1972, p. xiii
140 I have worked on the FORM gallery shows *Ngarluma Ngurra* and *Once Upon a Time in the West*. After the birth of my nephew I was commissioned to write a vocabulary builder and a short story for children (both in Ngarluma).
mapping, and recorded poems and oral history from Ngarluma country. Part of the project involved the return of materials collected during the production of von Brandenstein and Thomas’ *Taruru*. The repatriation of archival material for *Ngarluma Ngurra* was to the community, including elderly traditional owners. It included recordings of interviews, extra poems that did not make the book’s final cut, material artefacts such as visual art and cultural objects, all to family members of the informant poets. This took place on country and was subsequently re-interpreted as paintings by Jill Churnside to be paired with oral histories by a number of people. This type of song poetry repatriation differs from skull and bone repatriation because of the reproducibility of most of the materials. It is similar though in that communities feel a positive emotional energy from rituals associated with return.\(^{141}\) They feel, and I quote Reg Samson here, as though ‘we are getting our culture back’. Central to this was updating translations of tabi for an academic audience. Consider the following two poems:

**Racecourse Wharlu**

Tabi by Old Tumbler

maya kalinda ngunu warnda yundu mara-la-ngu
(pungu-na) yarra wa ni ula pirrirrda manguna
maya kalinda ngunu
Guran-Guran du pirrirrda manguna
Ieramugadu-la ngarri ma na
bawa-na wa…. Yarra li na

The storm turns back towards the houses
Tearing the trees to pieces, torn
Throwing trees up in the air, thrown
Smashing the houses, smash, pow

It’s coming towards us
The Guran-Guran bird leads the salt-water snake towards us
The rain thunders down through the night
At daybreak Ieramugadu is under the flood.

**Tabi Two**

Mount Satirist Station

by Robert Churnside

Kangala karnamarna warrimarila,
jumndiri julajula
Narnukardi
marnda wangugurrula
ilinkarrima
puliri karba

From high up I viewed the bare ground
The crevices, recession in diffusion
Towards Narnuna
The mountain in the corner of my view
Seems to have torn to shreds
The rounded contours of its peak.\textsuperscript{142}

If, as Les Murray has written, ‘settled country is the land of the dead’, this work is unsettled and alive albeit rooted and located.\textsuperscript{143} Note the words shredded, torn, tearing, throwing, smashing. Note too the place names Narnuna and leramugadu. There is also a different I here, which connects us to the complications of lyric, liberal speaking subjects. Stylistically however, the poems have a sort of plain speaking materialism – weather is central and expressing that in a common sense way is what matters.

This tabi, and a poetics associated with it, enables the transformation of the objective social world because it transforms our mode of literary representation, which rest on expanding then re-interpreting the archive. This does so through the recontextualisation and defamiliarisation it brings by virtue of being. This is because of the historical failure to consider Indigenous poetry within a literary aesthetic paradigm, which is still the case notwithstanding

\textsuperscript{142} Reikjaveich, Frank, Know the Song, Know the Country, Port Headland: Wangka Maya, 1995, p. 10
Michael Farrell’s discussion of Ngarla songs in *Writing Australian Unsettlement*.144 In that sense it speaks back to questions of style here, style being never more than an extension of context.

How though should we consider this material? If my conversations with people on country and Stuart Cooke’s *Bulu Line* are indicative, there is a wealth of ordinary language criticism in Indigenous Australian communities both today and historically, a kind of theory of texts performed in colloquial Aboriginal Englishes.145 This is to say nothing of the conversations that happen in Ngarluma, Yindjibarndi and Banjima, of the endogenous rituals that suggest a form of autonomy and resistance we must open ourselves out to. This is not to suggest that we mimic Aboriginal Englishes, lest we wear a rhetorical ‘blackface’, or that there are no Indigenous people versed in French theory. It is though about suggesting that our frames of reference, our reading tools, might not so easily serve the same purpose for which they were designed, which is to say we cannot mimic an empirical theory either. Our references and vernacular can’t all be Deleuze, Badiou, Lacan, unless we would all too easily separate our poetry from a suitable poetics. Every new poem deserves a new theory. As Stephen Collis writes:

> poetry’s politics is to be found in *where* we find poetry — in the communal spaces it becomes a part of, the struggles it has some currency in.146

We need poems then from country within the landmass Australia to speak back to the idea of the nation. In addition we need to begin reframing certain material as poetic and in so doing enrich what constitutes the political as it exists in Australia today. We might start by thinking of Western Pilbara tabi as part of the language games that form our ideologies and worldview. And from that we may grow more conscious.

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144 Farrell, Unsettling, p. xvi
145 Cooke, *Speaking the Earth’s Languages*, p. 32
In this regard John Kinsella’s ‘activist poetics’ provides an analogue of how we might think through the critical work required to engage with this material. People may speak of close reading, or even close listening, but in thinking through the lived conditions of occupation in settler societies such as Australia and America we might want to re-examine some of the revolutionary potential of activist listening, particularly in a transcultural context. I derived this term after repeated criticism from elders up north to just listen to the poems, to engage with the language. I would translate activist listening to be gurlga warrgamarnigu, or ‘ear work’ in Ngarluma. The hybridity of this term derives from Kinsella then as much as it does from Jill Churnside and others.

We need not only a critique of all the white supremacist and misogynist poetry, as the Mongrel Coalition, Claudia Rankine and others call for, but also a way of thinking through the ways and means for loggers to ‘become’ poet protestors. In that sense we could add to Tranter when he says, in a common refrain, that he had not developed his voice in his first book to claim we are yet to develop our ears. Developing our ears might mean listening homonymically to social poetry as it exists as part of Suburbanism in a transnational Left. Activist listeners are necessary then. They are fellow travellers to revolutionary poets, particularly when considered alongside passive tourists ogling the spectacular. They provide a mode of engagement, a positive emotional entrainment, a reason, for poetry to be. The central question becomes then how do ‘we’ participate in ‘their’ cause.

Reframing that for poetry we might ask: how do we read these poems on their terms? This is not to suggest one can be on the inside of an Other’s experience and perspective, but that through empathetic openness one engages actively with the text, which is ultimately an interpretive and political act that involves creating community. It might be one thing to decolonise solidarity then, but

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147 Duwell, A Possible Contemporary, p. 15
we also need to find solidarity in decolonization. This means there are allies to be found in ways that undo myths based on racialised thinking. In other words, what is to be gained by perpetuating basic identity categories such as Indigenous and white as assumed forms of authentic cultural capital rather than calling into question their very foundations and historical fraughtness?

Activist listening suggests this question if only because it is attentive, open and doubtful, and implies that we need think through lived power relations in a historically attentive manner if we are to generate useful understandings.

Poetry, as the research and development wing of language, is thinking at the edge. It can help us precisely because difficult problems, problems endemic to the frontier that is the Western Pilbara, require difficult language. A self-aware poetry, of a particular social kind, can give us a critique that moves us towards decolonisation in a digital age. Returning materials, allowing communities control over archives, learning languages in an appropriate way, listening to elders, spending time on country all matter for the society that is to come. To undertake this work is essentially utopian, for in shifting power from traditional anthropological and literary institutions we can find a collaborative project that responds to the ongoing re-presentation of self in everyday life occasioned by the digital industrial complex – this is the self as artificially constructed, as mediated, as disembodied to a degree where performance is inseparable from the real. In that way realising that the Western Pilbara is globally connected not only through iron ore pathways, but through the online access of cultural resources means we need think through the possibilities of activism now.

In the transnational anti-capitalist activist discourse there is the (common) idea that poetry can comfort us in the diminishing light of the contemporary world. And that may be the case. But specifically we must ask, after Byron Gysin, whether politics is fifty years behind poetry. In Arundhati Roy’s Capitalism: A

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151 Sanders, Jay. ‘Charles Bernstein’ http://bombmagazine.org/article/3454/charles-bernstein
152 See Andrew Dowding’s work on this in Jacket2 < http://jacket2.org/interviews/white-engine-against-black-magic >
153 See Fredric Jameson ‘On Utopia’ < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNVKoX40ZAo >
Ghost Story, which is symptomatic of broader conversations, there are two lengthy quotes from Pablo Neruda, including his poem 'Standard Oil'. Poetry though, even activist poetry, has moved on since Neruda. The Occupy movement, whom Roy addresses directly in her last chapter, has a freely available online poetry anthology, which, despite being overly moral, offers a newer engagement with the world and word.\(^{154}\) Given Roy’s own reticence to articulate what a unifying activist front might look like, we can assume with some certainty it is not the State as it once was for the Communist Party supporter Neruda.\(^{155}\) For Roy the State and India’s assorted Communists (Maoist, Marxist, Leninist) are portrayed in a particularly damning light in Capitalism and perhaps only corporations are met with more disdain. In that regard activism has not kept pace with politically progressive poetry.

The fact that very little money changes hands in the poetry industry, that it is a ‘gift economy’ allows it to be a far wilder place for experiment than many others.\(^{156}\) It does not have to be about beauty or emotion, and its relationship to capital allows it a greater degree of self-awareness or independence than many other forms. A self-aware poetry, of a particular social kind, as critique not therapy, can give us an idealism that has more chance of being outside the book royalties and literary festivals, the market logic, that so raise Roy’s ire.

The shape of anti-capitalist thought will be decided in part by people versed not only in the past history and present news of activist struggle, but by the utopian spirit of a materialist poetry, despite its scepticism of such a hegemonic, and eminently contestable, idea. Indeed, it is utopianism that seems to be sorely lacking in anti-capitalism at the moment, especially when we compare it to the heady teleological narrative of Capitalism, even more so since the approval of coal-mines, destruction of sacred sites and pervasive mentality about the possible. Onwards and ever upwards go corporations while activism, struggling against totalising narrative, clings to micro-resistances, jettisoning

revolution and reformism, abandoning Gramsci’s ‘war of position’ and ‘war of manoeuvre’, hoping against its own hope for a reason to activate. There is hope though if one considers the recent material success of Podemos, Syriza and a whole host of Latino movements as well as Frederic Jameson’s injunction of Lenin’s ‘dual power’. These may yet coalesce into structural changes that can enable the advancement of a more poetic life. As Benjamin Kunel suggests it is ‘utopia or bust’. The answer, after all, ‘is not in our machines but in our politics.’

157 See Frederic Jameson <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MNVKoX40ZAo> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qh79_zwNI_s>
coal creek river

1. the subject of mistranslation
2. the subject of collaboration
Nocturne of the Angels

See discord, what last calls flows sweetly in the night.
Last light is not life, queue reach, unveil her secret,
The secret queue of lost me. Queue. Then come and know
because all stand in secret
and nothing sees these canaries with split in milled piece.
See, in contrast; it is so sweet guard
and withinsplit only with the person selected.
Se diría que las calles fluyen dulcemente en la noche.
Las luces no son tan vivas que logren desvelar el secreto,
el secreto que los hombres que van y vienen conocen,
porque todo están en el secreto
y nada se ganaría con partirlo en mil pedazos
si, por el contrario, es tan dulce guardarlo
y compartirlo solo con la persona elegida.

Xavier Villaurrutia (Mexico)
Damn the High Sky

Damn the high sky
last stars with their reflection.
Damn the blue tile,
rock flint hailstone with your contortion.
Damn the way stones lie
queue for my ailment and lute.
Damn the estimation
of time with shame.

How much sir is my dollar?
From ‘Maldigo del alto cielo’

Maldigo del alto cielo
las estrella con su reflejo
maldigo los azulejos
destellos del arroyuelo
maldigo del bajo suelo
la piedra con su contorno
maldigo el fuego del horno
porque mi alma esta de luto
maldigo los estautos
del tiempo con sus bochornos
cuanto sera mi dolor.

Violeta Parra (Chile)
Mahler fate bed down lie with phoenix, and I bed
with one, in caddies, gorgeous
and no soup of my horoscope until
long after when the Mediterranean began to exit

Mass and mass ruf-wave-tide; rowing
ages ago legume house exhausted
the twelfth century: all is white, all is birds
the ocean, the sunrise cons the whites.
Mala suerte acostarse con fenicias, yo me acoste
con una en Cadiz bellisima
y no supe de mi horoscope hasta
mucho despues cuando el Mediterraneo me empezo a exigir
mas y mas oleaje; remand
hacia atras llegue casi exhaust a la
duodecima centuria: todo era blanco, la saves,
el oceano, el amanecer era blanco.

Gonzalo Rojas (Chile)
Bulletin: why elegy for the mighty?

Sin pay, sin corn, sin fleece.
Yes, sin hunger, from pure not coming;
only skull, only four week fasting
receivevment. My match is spilt in two.
Wife, his convivial elle. Two dead by the whip.
And I, by life, why sin, dead.
From ‘Bulletin y elegía de los mitas’

Sin paga, sin maiz, sin runa-mora,
Ya sin hambre, de puro no comer;
Solo calavera,
Llorando granizo Viejo por mejilas,
Llegue trayendo frutos de la yunga
A cuatro semanas de ayuno.

Cesar Davila Andrade (Ecuador)
Anniversary of United Vision

The floating: it is lost, why today LA, life remains in LA, light of the spring that has
brought your mirror
why while perishable in LA, eco contemplate, match with departure, with elle (human) and accomplishment horizon
why the ephemeral and the substance transparent discurrent, LA life the sweetness, the how much LA, the loveliness with sadness, your presence
why appear mediated?
From ‘Anniversaria de una vision’

Lo flotante se pierde, y toda la vida se queda en la luz de la primavera que ha traido tu mirar
-y mientras perduras en el eco yo contemplo tu partida con el humo en pos del horizonte,
y la esperanza y la substancia transparente discurren a lo lejos:
    vives la dulzura cuando piensa la hermosura con tristeza tu presencia,
y apareces de medio perfil
    al tanido de unos instrumentos nocturnos, azules y dorados, que relumbran,
que
    palpitan y que vuelan
en el hueco de mi corazon

Jaime Saenz (Bolivia)
Two Murals, User

Whether arched, loined assumes curve
of the convex descent-venture
talon legible, hanging
and weight, about the centre, of the
Sphere.

A prune-dense
distant and captive
incognito this wife
hangs. Area face exert effort fade away.
A prune dents
distant and captive
incognito spies, and
hang.
The mist
polished garden
ivory keys
strange fruit brainmasher.
What is supine?
Nor do those chunks of rock
linger idle.
Such cliffs.
From ‘Dos Murales: USA’

Si arquedo lomo assume curva
de la convexa desventura
talon legible pende
y pesa sobre el centro de la

Esfera.

A prudente
distancia tu cautivo incognito espio ese
talon. El mismo
callo pulido criso
elefantino
machacasesos
que ya supimos.

Tampoco me son extranos estos
penascos.
Tales acantilados.

Carlos Martinez Rivas (Nicaragua)
That queue - animals, bugs. Why do they exist?
Deer, wild pigs, the rest.
They are still there. We do not kill them.
Why do they exist. We do not kill them.
I do not find myself
here, nor you here.

Whether the government like
yes likes, governance
me, hades, jaguar and all will find you
bugs. This is a jungle, though seamed.
Queue, do not present your nothingness,
we do not need any more tools.
Eso que llamamos bicos, ya no existen mas: 
venados, cerdos monteses y todos los demas.
Y aunque existan, nosotros no los matamos.
Yo ya no me hallo mas,
Aquí yo ya no me hallo mas.
Si el gobierno puede,
si puede el gobernador,
me ha de dar un lugar en donde abunden los bichos.
Aunque no sean bosques, aunque no sea,
que no me presten mas nada:
yo ya no necesito mas herramientas.

_Antonia Martinez (Argentina)_
Prelude N: Boring Cure

Tune tune the dried step footprint, why taps
why other para-jerries, tune tune.
Of China and Nigeria
where their warm, be tunes
funded the with bravery.

With cancer and maracas
why low growl of gong
the curtain highlights the island
an aristocracy of macaques
and cornmeal and tripe.

All solemn papas of Haiti
option the rumba, hot
suspect men, and the sprained hips
of mulattas, saddled by wildness.
From ‘Preludio en Boricua’

Tuntun de pasa y grifería
y otros parejeros tuntunes.
bochinche de nanigeuría
donde sus calidos betunes
fundé la congada bravia.

Con cacareo de maraca
y sordo grunido de gongo,
el telon isleno destaca
una aristocracia macaca
a base de funche y mondongo.

Al solemne papalua haitiano
opone la rumba habanera
sus esguinces de hombre y cadera,
mientras el negrito cubano
doma la mulata cerrera.

Luis Pales Matos (Puerto Rico)
Is so is that

Oh facile oh fossil
oh missile oh fissile
oh arts o heart attacks
oh ochre oh sepulcher
oh vessel oh recess
oh sickle of fascicle
oh lex oh judex
oh beach fad oh grandad
oh dove oh calf knuckle
oh lone oh coquina
From ‘Isso e aquilo’

O facil oh fossil
oh missil oh fissil
oh arte o inarte
oh ocre oh canopo
a urna o farniente
a foice o fasciculo
a lex o judex
o maio o avo
a ave o mocoto
o so o sambaqui

Carlos Drummond Andrade (Brazil)
Stone of Sun

a sauce of cristal, one chop of water
one alto surftide, the arches over
one good tree planted and dancing
a course of the river at its curve
advancing, receding, at the rodeo
a key to simplicity
a calm of river
the stars of primacy and sin, premural
water queues cons loses, lids closed
manna from the night, proficient
unanimous present open
wave after, wave until, it covers all
a reign of green that knows no decline
what wings unfolded sky
un sauce de cristal, un chopo de agua, 
un alto surtidor que el viento arquea, 
un árbol bien plantado mas danzante, 
un caminar de río que se curva, 
avanza, retrocede, da un rodeo 
y llega siempre: 
un caminar tranquilo 
de estrella o primavera sin premura, 
agua que con los parpados cerrados 
maná toda la noche profecías, 
umamie presencia en oleaje, 
ola tras ola hasta cubrirlo todo, 
verde soberanía sin ocaso 
como el deslumbramiento de las alas 
cuando se abren en mitad del cielo,
Hand of mine in the sand

Hand of mine in the sand, why find the lost vertebra.

Perdidia. LA extractive of instants. Sombre them avail
bled. My father smiles. The east lads of

marlin pumas and dark. Hula and fire my dice, LA

your sea smells of liberty and death. Let us suppose it is like that
From ‘Hundo la mano en la arena’


Blanca Varela (Peru)
Con See Ho

Speak, con, coal creek river
no taking of muteness
my grandfather speak through me.

And be careful that they
don’t tea and vulva others.
From ‘Ni’j’

Chat’tzjon ruk’ japachinoq
man kachomaj taj che at mem
xub’ij ri.numan chuwe.

Xa kachajij awib’:
Rech man kak’ex taj awach.

From ‘Consejo’

Hable con cualquiera
No vayan a pensar que sos mudo
Me dijo el abuelo.
Eso si: tene cuidad
Que no te vuelvan otro

Humberto Ak’abal (Guatemala)
Afterword

I am a committed writer. This is not only in the words I produce but also in my daily actions. In the course of writing this thesis I have volunteered with wildlife refuges, community kitchens and written speeches for parliament. Speaking from where I stand, which is to say speaking from my body, I believe in the necessary decolonisation of ‘Australia’, which is to say, I work for the poetic realisation of the continent’s post-suburbanite aesthetic and ethical potential, which is reconciled to its history as a stabilising and invigorating force for good that enables the world to see its consciousness immanently. That such a present might unfold is only possible when one considers the forms that language take, which is why poetry is important.

Poetics is a specific and special field consisting of poems, their connective tissue and geist. A poem though is a language game, and, when read dialectically, it can be a sacred or profane act dependent on the reader whose frame is determined by their emotional entrainment through status groups’ microinteractive ritual chains. How we examine poetry depends in part on the linguistic sources that determine our context of intelligibility, what we deem to be possible and the capital we wish to accrue in that setting. With regard to this thesis, the target of critique has been not only Kate Fagan’s ‘Cinematico’ or Kate Middleton’s No Land, but also the contemporary paradigm of doctoral research. This is particularly the case in regard to originality, reference and institutional expectation.

The sense of what constitutes something new relies on a perceived absence in the archive. But the archive is infinite; the regression is infinite; the interpretive lens is infinite. This work then is a challenge to Pound’s dictum to ‘make it new’, Foucault’s return to the Greeks and Marx’s anti-idealism, and not through the unoriginality of genius but through the presence of history today as a proliferative resource that offers only more questions. It is not about answering ‘what is a poem?’ in a definitive, positive sense; but about suggesting that the conditions in which we ask need unpacking as surely as any specific
artefact and possibility. To that end, the prizes one need have one's eyes on are: How do I know myself? What is a good life? How can I change the world?
Appendix
Interview with Kenneth Goldsmith on January 26th 2015

RDW: Could you outline for readers unfamiliar with your genealogy how you came to engage with poetry. I am not so much concerned with where ‘it’ starts in some definitive, revelatory, diary entry way like a History, but what of your family milieu, your early library, your training as an artist and your interest in collecting prior to the publication of No. 110 10.4.93-10.7.93 in 1993.

KG: I stumbled into art and poetry. I come from nowhere: the suburbs of Long Island, a waste land bereft of culture. As a child I consumed an obscene amount of television as a way to ward off the ennui. When I was a bit older, I took drugs for identical reasons. All I wanted to do was escape that grim life. Thankfully, New York City was twenty minutes away, and I went to NYU in 1979, Parsons in 1980 and finally made my way to RISD in 1981, graduating there with a degree in sculpture in 1984.

I was always a collector of cultural artifacts: to this day I have a collection of over 10,000 vinyl LPs, which I began collecting when I was 7 years old. So, this idea of archiving, accumulation and hoarding in my own work and in Ubuweb comes from this impulse. Again, it was just a way of injecting something weird in the dullest of childhoods.

RDW: Unsurprisingly, given your time in the visual arts world you have collaborated with galleries, including as MOMA’s inaugural poet laureate in New York City and Labor in Mexico. This suggests to me an expansive, capricious understanding of poetry. Poetry is not only broadsides, chapbooks, journals, readings and books, but exists within a diverse ecosystem of language networks. How do you understand working in this context compared to both the visual arts world and poetry’s other domains?

KG: I love how absorptive the visual arts are. You can throw anything at it and everyone agrees that it’s art. In this way, in the visual arts, the avant-garde is the mainstream. How different the poetry world is where even the slightest deviation from tradition twists up everybody’s knickers. What a bunch of prudes! And me, being an old-fashioned avant-gardist, gravitated toward the place where I was able to irritate the greatest amount of people: épater le bourgeois! And they all took — and continue to snap at my bait. When will they ever learn? I love it! You can’t do that in the art world!

RDW: I mentioned previously your involvement with Labor, including the exhibition Printing Out the Internet, but you have other ties to Mexico, most notably through the wonderful repository Ubu. You have also read in a wide range of countries. Elsewhere you
have noted that works such as Seven American Deaths and Disasters (2013) have resonated better in your own national context. Your forthcoming work New York: Capital of the Twentieth Century (Verso 2015) is very much about New York City. What sort of relationship do you have to the frame of 'America' especially in these 'transnational' times?

KG: Well, of my 53 years on the planet, I’ve lived 49 of them within twenty minutes of where I’m sitting right now, 8 blocks south of the Empire State Building. I don’t believe in America; I believe in New York. The poet and urbanist Jeff Derksen once said that my work is all about New York — from the sounds of the street in No. 111; to the role of speech of the city in Soliloquy; to the intertwining of the body and the city in Fidget; to the sound of NY radio in the trilogy of Traffic, Weather and Sports (which can be extended to Seven Deaths) and finally to the new book — he’s right: New York has been my subject. For all the ink that’s been spilled on my work, I don’t think anyone has ever considered that specific angle.

RDW: You have said elsewhere, perhaps most notably in your dialogue with the late Francisco Roman Guevara published as Kenneth Goldsmith In Conversation by De La Salle University Publishing House in 2014, that criticism has not kept pace with poetry in the digital age. Others, most notably Philip Mead in the Australian context, have also that there is so much more poetry than poetics. Could you please discuss your relationships to criticism and critics— including Marjorie Perloff — and what you think the shape of things to come in the critical sphere might be? What does uncreative criticism, boring criticism, wasting time criticism in our era look like?

KG: I realized early on that nobody was going to write about my work so I began to write about it extensively. In the absence of criticism, the poet has no choice other than to write their own discourse. When, many years later, critics began to get interested in my work, they simply mouthed and aped all my words and ideas; so I set the discourse for my work. It’s probably all wrong, but few have ever bothered to question that lineage. Only Marjorie Perloff did in her close reading of Traffic, where she uncovers a great work of fiction underneath the hard surface of conceptual poetics.

This spring, I’m going back to my alma mater RISD where they will be holding a colloquium for faculty on the subject of pedagogical uncreativity in an arts-based curriculum. It seems that my book has caught on in various departments across the school: architecture, graphic design, painting, etc. have all independently adopted these methods. So that gives me hope that an uncreative criticism is possible, but I haven’t seen it yet.

RDW: Your latest course offering at Penn is titled 'Wasting Time on the Internet'. When it was first announced there was a huge amount of media coverage, much of it shocked and
dismayed. You are not an enfant terrible necessarily but no less an authority than Playboy has called you a bete noir. How is this course going and what do you gain from your teaching?

KG: Oh, I’m really more of a camp counselor or gym teacher than a professor. I know nothing about teaching — I don’t even have a syllabus for that course — I just make it up, week to week. But I do get a lot out of it. I learn much more from the kids, say, about the internet than I know — after all, this is their world. So, really it’s more my education than it is theirs.

RDW: Following up on that question, how do you see your relationship to establishments? I mean this in regard to both the ‘mainstream’ and ‘avant-garde’ strands, and with one eye to your position within an Ivy League university where you have colleagues like Charles Bernstein and with another eye to the ideological undercurrent in your work, which I think has been under theorised and under discussed. How does politics enter your pedagogy and your poetry?

KG: I know nothing of politics. I’ve spent the past thirty years in the studio. What do I know of the world? I know the network, I know art, I know music, I know literature. To think that I know more than that is preposterous. I’m a sheltered, somewhat agoraphobic guy who wastes way too much time on the internet.

That said, I’m also an egotistically-driven artist, who craves love and adoration from power. So when a big institution like MoMA or The White House or UPenn comes calling, I always say yes. God, I’m just as insecure and needy as any artist out there. We’re endless black holes for approval.

RDW: You have often drawn on Marcel Duchamp, including his readymades and his parody. Andy Warhol also looms as a presence in your work. How though do words differ in their materiality from say sculpture or painting? What’s the difference between Fountain and Day (2003)?

KG: Oh, all my work in literature is just a rehashing of shit I learned in art school and when I went into poetry, I realized that nobody had done all those things. So I did the same old things in words that they had done with objects. It’s all really very old hat. I’ve done nothing new except to shift the frame slightly.

RDW: I found that when I was reading Day I dropped into a meditative state. I didn’t simply pick up the book, think of its frame, and put it down. When one reads it as if it were Poetry, with attention to syntax, rhyme, rhythm, meter, line breaks etc. one enters a poetic
space. The stocks section seemed particularly transfixing and resonant. What happens when we read conceptual poetry like more traditional poetry? Do you think we can project a sense of authenticity, sublimity, sentiment onto the object? In other words, what happens when we look at Fountain like the Mona Lisa - do R. Mutt’s eyes follow us?

KG: You’re a better man than I, Robert. I’ve never picked up that book to read it since I transcribed it. And I’m sure I never will. I have no idea what happens when you try to read this stuff and I’m glad I don’t have to. That said, of course: these works are open ended concepts. There is no one correct way to use them or interpret them. Every interpretation of them is correct. I just get curious about something and throw it out into the world without an agenda and see what happens.

RDW: I have talked briefly about your high cultural list of influences. But there also lurks a lot of popular culture as well, not least in your own sartorialism which reminds one of movie stars and dandies in its colour and pattern. What are your pop cultural touchstones? Do you go home and watch Survivor after a hard days work at the poetry coalmines? Or is Big Brother your preferred catnip?

KG: No. I’m a nerd. I hate all that stuff. I come home and work on UbuWeb. Also, my own writing is so labor intensive that there’s always something to transcribe or some such busy work.

In terms of clothing — again, I’m an old avant-gardist. I want to look like Marinetti or Warhol or Dali: the more flamboyant the better. I love the idea of an old fashioned role of the artist. We don’t have to play by the rules. We live in our own world. It’s such a privileged life. I’d have it no other way. What did the Velvet Underground say? “There are problems in these times, but, ooohhhh, none of them are mine. I’m beginning to see the light.”

RDW: I want to finish this interview with questions about how you see the shape of poetry to come. What are you working on, what information are you managing, and how might that fit in with a wider cultural moment? Who else should we look out for? And what will poetry look like in ten years?

KG: People always tell me that I haven’t gone far enough. I still sign my name to my books, heck, I still make books. And they’re right. My work is done. I was a bridge between the analog and the digital, with one foot in each camp. I saw the future, but I will not be the future.
Interview with Kate Middleton July 9th 2015

RDW: How did you come to poetry? Why poetry to begin with and what sustains you in it now?

KM: I actually don’t know how I came to poetry, by which I mean that I started writing poetry so early – I don’t quite know how I even knew what a poem was, but I wanted to write them before I started primary school. I have quite a few pieces of things I wrote when I was in grade 1 or grade 2 (very kiddish things, of course, but that show me that I’m not imagining that I had always wanted to write) and I remember it being a way to pass time. I guess, in that “way to pass the time” mentality, it went naturally with reading. I had a friend at primary school who was as avid a reader as me. When we went home for the weekend we didn’t plan to see each other, but we planned to read books and compare notes on them on Monday—not so much about plot, but really about quantity. I was always jealous that she could read more in a weekend than I could, and became competitive. Of course that sounds very unhealthy – and probably was! – but I feel like it also helped me find a certain stamina for reading and writing that I am grateful for. It could also be that I was writing because she got to have piano lessons, and writing was my way of being creative. I kept lists of the things I was going to write. I remember a day I went around the house and looked at all the objects and images we had and I made up titles for stories and poems I would write – it stands out in my memory just as one of those acts of choosing that this is what I would like to do.

It wasn’t just poetry to begin with – I just wanted to write, and sometimes it was narrative, sometimes it was narrative in (clumsily) metred verse, and sometimes it was verse. It was probably when I was a teenager that I came to favour poetry so heavily. And for typical teenage reasons – unrequitedness. The sudden outburst of lyric utterance suited me. But I suppose it is also true that it’s not just poetry now, either. I do write essays, but I’m also very interested in texts that are somehow hybrid, and—for myself, at least—I write in other forms from time to time, though I’m not sure if these things will ever turn into much. They may well stay on my hard drive or in the drawer. But every form is an architectural challenge, and a chance to find out more about how language works. And they all end up teaching me more about poetry.

As for what sustains me now? I think there are many things in poetry that I find rewarding—intellectually, aesthetically, emotionally, mathematically. Words are a deeply pleasurable material. The fact that I studied music probably pushes me towards poetry: I wrote a lot of choral and vocal music in my late teens/early twenties, and thought about the ways that different vowel sounds have different fundamentals—are inherently musical. Poetry plays on the
music of language much more than prose, as a general rule. (Though there are always exceptions). Emotionally, the suddenness of the poem is attractive: I’ve been trying to figure out what the word “lyric” means to me for several years now, and that emotional power of the lyric seems to come from some interchange of the lyric “I” with the reader. As a writer, I like the compression, the sense that editing is never really finished. As a reader, I find the doublenesses of some poetry attractive, the difficulties, just as much as I find the absolute clarity of other poetry to be superb. I suppose, then, the answer would be variousness. My mind is very restless, and the variousness of verse means that it always finds something be engaged in, to coil back to.

Perhaps more than anything it is that I love being in the space of negative capability. The spaces of mystery and paradox have always seemed the most — for want of a better word — honest to me. I seem to not know how to be in a single/singular mind.

RDW: Can you map out for me your poetic practice in a general way? How do you compose?

KM: I suppose I can’t really talk about process in the singular in my writing: I am constantly looking for ways that it might be possible for me to write. Each way becomes a different kind of process. Similar, it’s easier to take an emblematic poem and think through how it happened.

So: a sampling of processes…

I write many poems that I guess would be categorized as more “conventional” lyric poems (though that divide between experimental and conventional is one I find to be quite false): these often speak from the perspective of at least a seemingly stable “I” and dwell in discrete moments of time-brought-present. Sometimes these poems are personal, other times they are spurred by an image or idea I have carried for some time that comes together with a subject. One I have been working on for a long time (a couple of years… and not really a very long poem, oh dear!) – and hope to some day soon bring to conclusion – is “about” the Cape Otway Lighthouse in Victoria. Some years ago I was thinking about lighthouses more abstractly, and it occurred to me that they are akin to a scar on the landscape: they are a “toughened” place—toughened by light—that marks a place of danger, injury, usually a place where there have at least previously been losses. It was visiting the Cape Otway Lighthouse some years after I had been thinking about this idea of the building as scar tissue that gave me the concrete subject for the poem. There is a tiny graveyard about a ten-minute walk from the lighthouse itself that was for the lighthouse keepers and their families. The graves in that place had sunken, or perhaps the ground had built up over them: the words “Sacred to the memory of” were still above ground, but I guess the wind over the sandstone had buried the names that
were meant to be memorialised. Like those now forgotten victims of shipwrecks that brought the lighthouse into being, the bodies in those graves are now anonymous. They are places sacred to the memory of—no name.

So when such a coming together happens, the process is really, first of all, to make a mess. To try to braid together bits of narrative, to decide on a form of sorts. Form is sometimes accidental—I had been reading early Jorie Graham, and settled on a sestet that was somewhat in the vein of some of Graham’s poems. If that hadn’t worked (as it… seems to be working) I would have shifted into a different kind of stanza. The fact that the poem deals with an architectural figure meant, though, that I did like having a regular stanza.

I was interested in the technology of the lighthouse and looked up the light itself, tried to understand what type of light a “fresnal lens” is. Thought about the verticality of the lighthouse stacked on the verticality of the sandstone cliffs. And tried to piece together ideas and images and my attempt to imagine a lighthouse keeper of the era of that tiny graveyard—when the place would have been much more isolating than it is now; what it would mean to bury your children in that far away graveyard. The kind of grandeur and desolation and that lens, offering safe passage.

As I said, this is an example of a poem I have been working on for some years: many of my poems don’t resolve themselves easily. When looking at early drafts I think about words that might have a rhyme or slant rhyme or very slant rhyme with various words I have already used. I play with the lines, try to insert some of these things as I go, finding the sound-world of the poem. I see in drafts images that are not quite clear, and try to figure out if its my language or the image itself that has failed. I write first very quickly, and then very very slowly. The “simple” “straightforward” poems take the longest.

When I think about Ephemeral Waters I put it under the umbrella of documentary poetry, though only to a degree. In that case, research is a very important part of the process of writing. I find that I both resist putting myself into poems in this mode, but also then feel forced to evaluate myself, my understanding of my undertaking, as part of the “document” that is the poem. The process of writing Ephemeral Waters involved several months of preparation, the trip on which the book is based, another period of research and compiling my notes – probably 6 months total before I began writing any of the poem. For Ephemeral Waters I did write essentially in the order of the map, the trip, headwater to delta. There were exceptions – the bestiary poems and a few other pieces were moved around, added to, taken away. The songs came a little later, unexpectedly. The epilogue arrived quite early, when I was halfway through the first draft. By and large, though, I wrote it in the order it appears. I looked at the map of where I was up to, and thought about what
story it would be possible to add, what layer of time I would be able to work in.

When I do research it feels quite haphazard, though I suppose it must have some organisation. I do let book lead me to book, compile language lists that surround my subject. On the trip to the river I took hundreds of photographs (though I still haven’t had them developed) and I gathered as many pamphlets about local areas and attractions and national parks etc as I could, to see how institutions were representing themselves and their environment, bought a few hundred postcards on the way, and I also took some sound recordings of the river water. All of these things, alongside my diaries and notebooks, formed for me a kind of memory repository of the trip that I then dipped into as I wrote. I now have a somewhat similar trove of notes and images and ephemera from my time in China to help me re-enter that imaginative space when I am working on the poem.

Sometimes I write with constraints. Again, to bring an example: recently I have been writing poems that only use words that the Artful Dodger speaks in *Oliver Twist*—there are just over 450 words in my list of different words. With these kind of poems the process is one of play. Sometimes I start combining words and phrases and find that I am tapping into a particular type of narrative: the dodger speaks a kind of autobiography, or the dodger expresses his weird kind of “ethic”. Sometimes the poems are more song-like, built around the more nonsensical words and word combinations. And then I try to give myself challenges on top of that very restricted vocabulary: to write a suite of dodger poems that use every word he speaks. To write a love poem, to write an elegy, to write an aubade or lullaby – to turn the quite slangy words of this character to a much more plaintive intent. What I like about using constraints is that it is a form of writing that I find possible when the poems of a greater “aboutness” are not: I find the poems within play, and perhaps it is “simpler” because I am never exactly expecting to find a poem that will work.

It is a similar process with collage, and with erasure. With collage I have pre-selected phrases, and then when I decide I will try to write I first am moving these phrases around (sometimes physically, as I have many of them typed and cut out, sometimes just with pen and paper, and arrows), brushing them against each other to try to find some kind of echo. Often a spine will begin to form – a juxtaposition that produces some images, as well as a particular concept from my little bag of obsessions – and then I build around that. Repetitions come in later, but seem to me an integral part of these collage poems. I know many people when they write in collage do not use the kinds of refrains that I have found I write with, and I like the work of many of these poets a great deal. I think perhaps I am seeking a kind of “home key” for each poem. Repetition can create a centre where one has seemed to be lacking. I hope that doesn’t make it seem like a cheap trick. I have been thinking a lot
about the relationships between poetry and song, and I’m very interested in the refrain of the song, its presence in many traditional poems, but its comparative rarity now. (There are of course amazing exceptions.) In the context of writing collage poems, refrain can crystallise a voice for me.

Repetition is something I miss when writing in an erasure/gleaning manner: because then I am stricter insofar as I will only use the words in the order they appear in my source text, and never use anything more than once, I have to hope I will encounter a similar phrase again if I want a refrain. This means that rather than looking for verbal repetitions, I am looking for other forms of echo that will make the poems or sequence integrate into a “whole”.

I suppose, ultimately, my poems are seeking some form of synthesis: and that I write in different modes because I feel that synthesis is not any one particular thing, doesn’t have to look any particular way. I read quite hungrily, and I am always keen to see if I can make something work in my own poetry – whether it’s strict metre and traditional form, or it’s the insertion of diagrams, or the breaking apart of language so that not just voice but words themselves fragment. I am usually excited about poems in that period when the writing is quick, and then grow less and less certain of them as I hold them at arm’s length.

I’m aware that I have written much more about the process I feel I go through for the poems that are more straightforward: this isn’t at all to say that I feel the poems that take other approaches, that might be seen as more innovative, are in any way easier. It is probably just the way the poems begin: on the one hand, I start with an idea and am trying to form the poem as I see it in my mind’s eye, and keep finding it just out of reach; on the other hand, the act of writing the poem is a kind of process of discovery. I am absorbed by some kind of puzzle, and the awareness of the poem as a poem comes after I have already solved many of the problems it contains.

And of course, I have said little about research. I keep – haphazardly – notebooks and sometimes diaries too. These contain seeds, things I want to follow up on. When I do get to that follow-up stage I often find myself writing out quotes on the subjects that interest me, making notes of the particular language surrounding different fields, making lists for myself of the ways in which my subject has been presented before. I will often watch movies if they seem relevant, I will read subject-area dictionaries and lexicons, I’ll search for images of ephemera. There’s a kind of gathering of artefacts—especially for longer poems—and as I keep those notes, they rub against each other and I begin to see connections. I sometimes worry that it’s all a bit too A Beautiful Mind, but I suppose I am searching out for those things that my mind brings together, and that strike me.
RDW: How did you come to choose Unknown Island? And how did you 'write' it?

KM: The choice of this book was somewhat accidental: I went to a second-hand bookstore knowing that I was looking for a text that would be my source, but I had an entirely open mind regarding what kind of source text that would be. I was about to take something about Egyptian burials to the counter when I stumbled on the Mais. The choice to work in this mode when I did came about in part because I was ill: to concentrate on finding the poem already existent within the text was a way it was possible for me to work, when I found it difficult to otherwise concentrate on new work.

Even though the choice of the book seems like intuition and happenstance, though, at a distance I can see that it was actually in some ways predictable. The essays gave me ample opportunity to consider the palimpsest of inhabitation: they are walks through a now by-gone landscape that take in the literary and religious references of even more distant landscapes. They are rich in local words and local legends.

I’ve been thinking a lot about the word “sensibility” when it comes to my poetry: I like working with other texts, whether as “erasure” as “gleaning” as “collage” as “quotation”, because I like the sense that I can locate my own sensibility in the work of others. While I love works like Ronald Johnson’s Radios I’ve been enjoying making all the poems that draw on other texts from prose, and almost entirely from non-fictions, and non-classics. I’m putting the words to a different purpose. It’s not so much that they haunt me, but that somehow I am haunting them.

I realise that is all quite vague, probably too self-consciously “poetic”. The way I have let myself understand the process of these works-in-the-words-of-others is largely intuitive: I look for ways to bring words together that make a different kind of sense. The new works, my “poems”, find ways to extract my own obsessions—e.g. time, borders, exploration, rats—from these rather disparate sources I use.

As for the actual process of writing – the main thing that was “important” to me was that I didn’t read the essays until after I had written each poem. Once I had found a starting phrase, it became a matter of movement, and my eye moving forward across the page to find the next “possible” word. Sometimes I would have to go back and cross out, or find another way across the poem. The forward and backward seem to me akin to finding a path to climb a rockface.
RDW: Your work is often about the natural world, about a social response to how we might begin to think of a climate changed world - could you talk a little bit about Eco poetics and lyricism, the echo poetics of a post pastoral?

KM: I am both very sympathetic to the ideas of “eco-poetics” and “eco-criticism” and yet unable to fully feel they are what I do. Talking with Andy Carruthers about Ephemeral Waters once, he observed that, in echo of Pound’s “poem with history”, it is a “poem with ecology”. I guess that is at least what it aims to be. I like that sense of writing in “withness” but not “in-ness”.

I think what interests me about the contemporary notion of eco-poetics is something that it seems like it took far too long to articulate: that humans are also part of nature. The separation of what plants or rocks or animals do from the way we humans make places and dwell in them is false, and I wanted with Ephemeral Waters to layer all those different levels of the world over each other.

The pastoral interests me, but I’m interested in what lays beyond its borders: not just the city, but also the barren landscapes that are not bucolic. The reaching downward, below the pastoral, through the strata until you hit bedrock. The pastoral poets are happy to look upward—the cosmos is part of their vision—but I want that vertical line to go downwards as well as across. I guess for me the poem of ecology is allowed to look in any direction. But then it becomes fascinating to read the pastoral tradition, and to try to locate those edges, those border-zones.

Engaging with ecology seems like another way of paying attention to the world now – to our current understanding of the world, the way intricacy of its systems.

And taking ecology as a subject also, of course, gives another opportunity to “use the whole language”. I know that at times scientific terms are used in ways that are deliberately working against the notion of lyricism, and that is interesting, but I’m probably more interested in the ways in which technical language can become lyric language.

RDW: Where does ethics fit for you? What kind of politics and sensibility does your work bring to bear on the world around it?

KM: I suppose I don’t necessarily think about my work in terms of ethics except in so far as I think about my life as something I must consider in ethical terms. That, and of course the care I feel I must take in attribution and transformation when writing in a citational manner. (This is a matter of comfort for me: I appreciate that for others simply reframing is enough – I
think this works beautifully at times – but I have anxieties when I don’t acknowledge all my debts.)

For my poetry, my primary sense of what is necessary is that poetry is that a poem be an act of attention. I don’t exactly then mean that poetry is mimetic, but that its attentiveness is what it has to offer—that attentiveness can be to an imagined world, yes, but often it is to our world. (And all imagined worlds exist inside this one insofar as we exist in this one). And I suppose, again, that attentiveness comes back to notions I often circle around – comes back to negative capability, to ambivalence, to the need for nuance.

I do think writing poetry is political, but that doesn’t mean politics has to be its overt subject matter. In a political environment like we have now, to be a practicing artist of any kind, knowing that what we make is so little noticed or cared for – that is political. (…I think? But I could add that “….I think?” after almost any statement I make. I am always trying to assess the ways in which any statement is too generalised – not attentive enough – wrong).

I can only speak to what I hope my poetry brings to the world – that interest in nuance, in fine distinctions and the places where distinctions are unhelpful. I hope that my poetry speaks to me genuine interestedness in the world and its stuff – whether the stuff is plastic (to which I have a kind of horrified-but-awed response) or scribbly gum trees or nail varnish or Ovid’s poetry.

I studied with Carolyn Forché at Georgetown University, and I have been deeply influenced by her ideas behind the anthology Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness. I do believe that our use of language bears the marks of our experience, that poems are a kind of testimony – though not a testimony that purports to be strict fact, or a testimony that can be used outside the personal, often ritualised, ways we all use language artefacts.

I admire poets who can take the political as their subject matter, and I feel like their work has shown me a lot of possibilities. In conversation with one of my teachers, Keith Taylor, I was talking about the fact that I love reading essays on contemporary science and that I find these new ideas so full of astounding metaphors. He said to me something I have found profoundly useful: that metaphor is great, but if we don’t also embrace the language of science, the thing itself and not just some correlative, then we are not giving ourselves access to the whole language. And so this thought has pervaded my thinking more generally: it’s not just the language of science that interests me, but the whole language of our contemporary condition. To try to use that language, to observe it, to test it, to subvert it – perhaps that is what I hope my own poetic sensibility will bring to the world.
RDW: You have worked in America, and you have written about the Colorado River – what about the dynamic of an Australian writing about England in this piece?

KM: I’m aware of myself become a writer of elsewheres, even as those works so often arise for me from Australian concerns. I wrote a little bit about the genesis of *Ephemeral Waters* in the “Reflection, After”, but I’m not sure I explicitly drew out the way in which the poem was borne from Australian things, from my homesickness for Australia. The lecture by the scientist from the Scripps Oceanography Institute was put on by Georgetown University’s Australia and New Zealand Studies Centre, as he was an Australian, and was there to talk about the Australian history of climate change science. His mention of Lake Mead was actually an aside, but it was one that lodged in my mind as I was still in shock when I saw people watering their lawns in the middle of the day, as I was so used to water restrictions. That vast reservoir of vanishing, used-up water became a kind of panic for me, though I had at that stage never seen the Southwest in person. – The panic was not just about it’s own site, but a kind of displacement of all my thinking about Australian droughts. And then the actual title, which was so bound to my concept of the book, came when I was also thinking about Australia: I was writing about Lake Eyre and explorations and 19th century conceptions of central regions of Australia. I was looking on Wikipedia to get a general sense of the lake and the basin and the kind of water system it represents, and then noticed that the word “ephemeral” was hyperlinked. So I followed that and found the entry on ephemeral waters. One incident had been waiting in my mind until it was triggered by this second incident. So while I’ve heard *Ephemeral Waters* described as my “American” book, there are ways I feel it is very Australian to me. Or at least that it is a book I needed to be Australian to write.

Re *This Unknown Island / No Land*, besides the ways in which it seemed to hold many natural resonances to material and ideas I’ve been writing on, I have spent a long time thinking about the Australian relationship with Britain. (The reason I am writing poems using words spoken by the Artful Dodger, for example, is because there is an implication at the end of *Oliver Twist* that the Dodger will be sentenced to transportation: i.e. he will become a convict settler in Australia.) I had a teacher who told me about meeting people whose families had been in Australia for four or five generations (and my own family goes back some generations here) who still, though they had never set foot there, referred to Britain as their “homeland”. That has never been my own sense—every time I’ve left Australia I have felt more fiercely Australian, more unassimilable to any other place—but I think that interest in Britain attracted me to Mais. But equally, it was simply my own bookishness: I feel like I did grow up partly in Britain, just because I read so much British literature. More broadly, I have so many poems that are borne out of other places (I mean, I’m writing this from Croatia, where as well as thinking through some material on elegy, I’m also trying to think through the book I’m writing about China, as
well as how I will approach writing about Samoa, where I spent some time a year ago) and even as these works come from physical travels, they all also come equally from reading, from the imagination. I often think about those well-worn phrases about Australia, about our supposed “cultural cringe” and the “tyranny of distance”. The latter I think fuelled so many imaginative journeys in my childhood that to inhabit these real journeys also feels, paradoxically, like I am inhabiting Australia. My mind has always been split, and to be elsewhere is always to realise that I’m thinking all over again about what it might mean to me to be Australian.

That said, I have been trying to write about Australia in many ways. Mostly individual poems, but I do hope I will have some kind of longer project in time. I’ve made many starts – from a walking project begun in collaboration with a friend, to writings on monuments, to responses to artworks, to use of exploration texts, to early reports on Australian life that were received outside of Australia, to a desire to really map a tiny creek on the farm my dad grew up on outside of Cowra, to a reading of various Australian characters, and characters sent to Australia… I’m interested in inarticulateness about Australia, in some measure, but I don’t know how that will come together. I want to do the kind of long trip I did for the Colorado project around Australia, but I’m much more hesitant to do that alone, just because the landscape is much more sparsely populated. It’s not that I won’t do it, it will just take a little more planning, a little less deviation at a moment’s notice according to what I catch on the way.
RDW: Could you please outline for us how you came to poetry?

NW: Oh! Poetry out of life and the world around us! Poetry which never touches our life but construct reality marginalised and untouched and reconstructed and self-established-unestablished. I can’t understand how my life has been educating me but strangely and darkly I reliaze my poetry of my quotidian life as an alternative being towards alternative reality collaborating with five or six senses garden of life touches on body and mind. It is a ‘simplicity of life’ portrayed distinctively in my poems as a poetic voyage towards unknowingly known space, the uncreative manifesto. I wrote ‘The Uncreative Manifesto’ in 2005, expressing and telling the world that I have been running so as not to chase the intended, cruel and composed meanings around me with a sportsmanship mental mode. This is an outline of my life as poetry. Robert, I am having an unsaid say.

RDW: Central to your poetry as it is now is an understanding of conceptualism. What does conceptualism mean for you?

NW: My poetry is my life is not my poetry is not my life is my poetry has been my world has not been my poetry is not a plane of ‘I, me, my, mine, we, us, our, ourself, myself, they, them, themselves’ quotations. Conceptualism for me has been practical and discovered and found to be true as

a) Concept
b) A variety of – isms around poetry, poems and the world
A) A working definition of the word ‘concept’ is as follows:
   Area code (one): mind as mental formation when making poetry
   [here the word ‘trans-’ can be understood as ‘transformation’, ‘voyaging’, ‘hybridising’, ‘crossing border’, ‘dialogic of imagination’, ‘blurring genres’, ‘insight awareness on junctional reality’ and ‘the impossible transparency of simplicity as poetry’]
   Area code (three): Wisdom as
      (a) Awareness as movement of construction identity
      (b) A powerful and insightful decision on making lines, sound, voice,
concept and language of an existing and unestablished poem

Area code (four): knowledge as
(a) Skills
(b) Techniques
(c) Strategies of a whole process of making poetry
(d) Society
(e) Political landscape
(f) Mindscaping for poetry
(g) Academic subjects
(h) Poetic studies
(i) Quotidian conversation
(j) Thinking zone
(k) Ways of thinking
(l) Learning potentials
(m) Understanding faculties

B) ‘-isms’, here, is meant to be
(a) Ideologies practiced within societies
(b) Established ways of making poetry
(c) Aestheticism
(d) The end of philosophy
(e) Academic studies on poetry
(f) Controversial ways of thinking, acting, performing and making poetry, leading to a public forum poetic
(g) Social mechanisms around the poet

The above hiatus for poetry is what I conceptualise, practice, work, perform, make and realise conceptualism in every moment of life condition in the 21st century conceptual theatre on the run.

RDW: To that end, could you comment on the recent controversies involving Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place?

NW: What I understand about Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place is that they are heartily trying to say the world again and again. That reality is made, seen, realised and constructed in a way that paradoxical nature of the world has been killing the moments of poetry and poetics and this humanity nature of poetry has been making the world alive. What a wonder! What a pity! For a poet or artist still having a chance to have a say that ‘I have still a chance to
make poetry, see poetry, know poetry and finally accept the fact that having an awareness upon emptiness, nothingness, meaningfulness and meaninglessness, reflecting contextual mechanisms is still impossibly possible in the 21st century speedy world. That’s very interesting for me as all class and classical social capital of values of humanity can have a chance to return back to the ugly world, not as a superman stunt but as an impossible possibility of simplicity as poetry for public forum.

RDW: How do you see yourself in the history of the avant garde?
NW: I have been talking about post-conceptual poetry with thirty characteristics or principles in 2009 (published on the website: www.poemhunter.com/nyein_way) as ‘Manifesto of Post-conceptual Poetry @ November, 2009’. I see myself as new avant garde, which is in the sense that I am beyond experimental plane of making poetry and I am in the unestablished ground of experimenting reality on sites and insights.

RDW: What does this demonstrate in political terms – in terms of place (periphery and metropole for example) as well as the political conditions of working in Myanmar at the moment? What in other words might poetry teach us about identity?
NW: ‘A contemporary identity’ is no identities at all. It’s beyond politics, politics of poetry for me. I am no identity. I am humanity. I am a poet. I am a person. I am a universe. I am a poem. I am just a mental composition.

RDW: For Australian readers, what is a good starting point for your work? And how is your poetry intended to be read, or thought about?
NW: For Australian readers, a good starting point for my work is that ‘Don’t read poetry. Read reality.’ The question will be ‘How?’ The answer is ‘Read simply like an ordinary human being or a general public. Grasp the points you seem to be familiar with.’ That’s the way or the map to all my poems. ‘Time’ is ‘reading simply; for my poems of impossible simplicity as a post-conceptual map to light bearable.
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