

## JACQUELINE TURNER & KATE FAGAN/ "Pacific"

Jacqueline Turner: Let's start with the term "Pacific" because you were mentioning in an Australian context it is a particularly loaded term. It might be good to discuss the political uptake of that word.

Kate Fagan: The Pacific is such a contested term still in Australia. If there is something that is identifiable as an Australian public imagination, if we can even say that, the Pacific takes a vexed place in that imaginary. Partly because of big settlement histories that are still recycled and are still troubling a sense of cultural identity, but also because the most public acknowledgement of the Pacific that has literally dominated airways for this decade is our response to refugee intake and what we're going to do in terms of our humanitarian responsibilities. It's so contested that you rarely hear the Pacific spoken about in public media in ways that are positive or acknowledge actual geographic location, except in romanticized or mythic terms that have to do with a tableau of climate or vacations. So it's hard for me as an artist to approach the term without filtering it through the extremely important lens of public discourse. How about you?

JT: In Canada, especially on the west coast, it's been more of an economic term linked in with the Pacific Rim, although that kind of spatial referencing has fallen, but it always seems to be marking the movement of money and economic scenarios. We also have historical issues with refusing refugee arrivals via the Pacific—the Fujian women who arrived in Vancouver 2000 and the *Komagata Maru* incident of 1914. Maybe it's more linked to geography here in a broader sense.

KF: It's impossible to say as an Australian author of the east coast not to have to engage with the "Pacific" just as the body of ocean that we watch and that we are involved with—it's the threshold. Across twentieth-century Australian poetics you get this constant return to "the beach" as a trope and it can mean so many things, particularly in a settlement context where we have a violent history that is still being encountered in all sorts of ways. The beach is a point of arrival and departure—it's a point that brings culture or mediates culture in various ways but it still holds as a threshold of hope. There's something very mobile about the Pacific so I like to remind myself of the small "p" pacific and the ways we can think about culture at the moment.

JT: Vancouver is similar in the sense of its locatedness around the ocean. We recently had an oil spill from one of the tankers that continually sit in English Bay so you see those aspects of commerce affecting the geography in a completely tangible way. And you see the public attention being drawn to that incident—otherwise the tankers just become part the architecture of the city; they just are sitting there all the time belying their actual function.

KF: I think some of that has to do with scale: the sense that we can encounter what a Pacific geography is about is mediated by scale. In Australia, if we are thinking geophysically about the land mass, so much of post settlement habitation is around that little edge, like a fringe of lace—of course, that's not the whole picture—but we are consolidated on the coast. That's where population density is. I've been thinking about how we can even conceive of a scale of knowledge outside of our own anthropocentric languages and frames of thinking, how we can even change the scale of thought to accommodate or incorporate or even understand a large ecology that is oceanic or planetary in its implication. One of the crisis points of thinking for western culture is around ecology and environment and it's easy to not see what's going on in an ocean—a lot remains concealed. There's a lot that gets dumped and appalling agricultural practices that affect the ocean and we just don't see it. It's not part of our imaginary and a lot of this is a failure of scale or sense of thinking through scale.

JT: In a poetic sense, do you think your use of the cento is a way to formally deal with these kinds of complexities in terms of the range of references it offers or even as a form of translation? Can the cento transpose place and time to create a new moment or use for poetry?

KF: It became for me a particularly resonant form for all those reasons and others as well, partly because of an idea of reading and writing as a gifting process. I started writing them as gifts for people. One of the Latin etymological roots of the cento has to do with the patchwork cloak that you would wear as a centurion to conceal yourself from your enemies. I don't know too much about it, but I gather that you would fashion yourself a cloak from part of your enemies' cloaks so that you would in some way conceal and have an advantage. I wanted to fashion these works from texts that I admire and love—friends of mine—not for that confrontational notion, but to recover the process as an act of gifting because I feel, of course, that all writing and reading practices are an exchange, a gift of ideas in some sense. So it comments on a sense of

contemporaneity reaching out of your own temporal moment and into a resonance of ideas that might be much older than you.

So I might be putting Emily Dickinson alongside Patti Smith and seeing what that means and forging a different, as you say, space-time continuum through that process. And there is of a kind of a salvaging in cento forms that interests me in terms of my practice in music and observing how sampling practices are so critical to a whole lot of innovative music, including electronically mediated music. We're very much in a culture where we think about salvaging and literally recycling. It does chime with all those big discourses.

And to touch on another issue that you've brought up here, there is also always a big engagement for me of authenticity, for want of a better word, and of cultural location. I feel like it is our responsibility as cultural creatures to understand the anxieties and competing discourses around what we do and so in Australia that means for non-Indigenous Australia that a lot of understanding still has to happen about aboriginal Australia and place in aboriginal Australia. You have to be careful about making representative claims on behalf of country in Australia, as a visitor to the place. So there is something going on here too about authentic expression and an acknowledgement of dialogue rather than pretending an originality or an ownership of origin.

JT: I like the idea of not pretending. It's important because there is still the persistent drive for those originary claims for language and the sense of the problematic divisions of history that still need to be pushed at and critiqued particularly in an indigenous context.

KF: One of our Australian poets Ali Cobby Eckermann spoke recently about a way that she observes her elder women in her traditional community speak about country and land: softly spoken and undebatable. So I think we have to be mindful about those undebatable discourses as well as understanding something about origin that is entirely debatable in Australia. It's very interesting pressing dialogue that for me is one of the major ones of my time that I feel compelled to address. It's hard to say, though—I'm having a smile about the optimism that a poetic form can enter this dialogue.

JT: Yes, onward, ever optimistic!

KF: But, I'm totally with you, I feel like when I go to a poetic form, the back history is political and it's energized by history, but I'm not consciously putting that at the front anymore. It's just in my sedimentary layers as an artist. I gravitated toward

these forms because they seem to offer the most possibility for acknowledging these questions.

JT: That is where a poetic language can be useful too—to be able to imagine a future where things might be going better or where relations might be less strained (without getting too utopian). Having that insight is important as a way to challenge a political or economic system that is forcing certain ways of thinking or putting pressure on people to act in certain ways.

KF: I'm still hopeful about the capacity of language to revitalize our perception, to pull us out of our habits of perception and say there's another way of comprehending this encounter with the world and its many materials, and poetic language can enable that by setting adrift some of the big habitual chains of association that we make and by making possible another way of thinking.

JT: I'm also curious about your own shift in location since you used to live in an urban area in Sydney and now you live in the nearby mountains.

KF: That change of place has a huge impact for various reasons. I spent a lot of energy in the city blocking things out. Everything is so busy and noisy and so fueled and driven by the idea of getting stuff done. And sometimes I would do less when I was in that thrum and thrall than I do in the quieter spaces of the mountains. I've become quite accustomed to choosing the limits of noise where I couldn't choose the limits of sound in the city.

There's no doubt that living in such a pristine beautiful ecology impacts the work for all kinds of beautiful reasons. You can look out onto any of the many valleys up there and see hanging plants that carry the genetic material of prehistoric plants, that have that deep deep ancestry, and if anything is going to mess around with your sense of time and scale that's it. A lot of that was really virtual for me in the city and now it's actual.

JT: It's interesting to think of it as a changing soundscape. We tend to think of visual aspects of place as a mapping or moving through space. Those interfaces among urban/natural divides in the city is something my film is taking up and the idea of how we read those shifting spaces in this moment of perpetual access to technology.

KF: I adore cities and I'm realistic about where people have to live. You can romanticize a place and what often gets lost in Australian dialogues about city or rural is the

suburban experience. Most people live in the suburbs. They can't choose to live in a high attraction inner city of zooming possibility and they can't afford in their employment experience to live far outside the city. We've got flexibility in our employment which is why we can live where we do and it would be remiss to ignore that a lot of people can't choose to live this way. I feel lucky to live where I do now. There were some very basic reasons we moved to the mountains having to do with all of that urban infrastructure and how to afford to live there.

JT: We face similar challenges in Vancouver where real estate is out of control with endless condo projects and eastside bungalows selling for two million dollars and all the implications of gentrification. People can't afford to live where they are living. The space of the city is extremely contested.

KF: This also touches on issue of identity in Australia and how commodity markets affect your identity, your sense of success, your sense of community at the expense of seriously underprivileged communities in that environment who don't show up on the radar. There are bigger discussions about where you get to live and do your work and the choices you are even able to make. In a local material sense it has a massive impact on what my poetics is trying to do.

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