

STUART COOKE & DAN DISNEY / On Australasian Poetics

Stuart Cooke: You have written about Seoul as a kind of hyper-archaic metropolis, where thousands of years of traditional culture are being flooded by a wild, late-capitalist neon river. I wonder if this isn't an intensely poignant illustration of the Pacific more broadly? Where the dramatic confluence of tradition and frantic change in Seoul is a microcosm for what has happened in the wake of centuries of European colonisation, industrialisation, and war around the Pacific Rim. I suppose this is what fascinates me most about this geography, that, if we think about it in this collective sense, it constitutes rather unfathomable extremes of history and of climate that are nevertheless "bound" by their proximity to an equally unfathomable ocean. I think, for example, about the fact that I can head into the hinterland of the Gold Coast here and walk amongst Antarctic Beech trees, whose only relatives are scattered across South America. I am compelled to turn, therefore, and look out over the ocean to a continent with a history that is impossibly removed from this one, but which nevertheless bares so many historical and ecological echoes. If I were up north, I'd probably be thinking about all those flows back and forth between places like the Kimberley and Cape York and South-East Asia. But all the time, amongst and over the top of all of these spectral relationships, there is the more immediate fact that, over the last 100 years, much of this region has been blanketed in concrete and glass and drenched with increasingly acidic rains.

Dan Disney: Yes, and that tundra of concrete speaks in part of the massive exploitation of labor in the Pacific area over the last century, colonizers setting up infrastructures (military, capitalist) to access materials and means; who knows whether these processes in overdrive will come to flatten cultures into monovalent, monopolized narratives? The proposed Trans Pacific Partnership seems designed to add new gears to the machineries. I can't walk in the Korean mountains without seeing (a) smoke stacks belching from the floors of the valleys below, and (b) surveillance equipment poking from the highest points of the ridges around me. But up there I also see vast numbers of Buddhist temples nestled amid the rocks and snow-bent pines, and any day in the mountains around Seoul can be weirdly punctuated by monks chanting and gunfire from conscripted soldiers

practicing on their ranges. Perhaps there are many parts of the Pacific that perform to a similar military-industrialist mode . . .

SC: Yes, it's a military-industrialist mode no doubt and, indeed, the entire region seems to have meaning as a region primarily in the wake of the history of the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—i.e. from any point in the Pacific, the nexus for all vectors seems to be that West Coast (and beyond). This is how Australia might calibrate its relationship with the Philippines, for instance (in terms of the linguistic heritage of Anglo-American imperialism), or how Vietnam might dialogue with Nicaragua (in terms of North American communist paranoia and subsequent military invasions and government-funded coups).

I also think it's fascinating how these homogenising processes might be recursions of far more ancient linkages (but which were, of course, much slower to grow!). Amongst Polynesian peoples, for example, there is a literary imagination that spans as much territory as any other culture in the world. And people like Gordon Brotherston have followed narrative archetypes up and down the entire length of the Americas.

DD: Ecologically, Koreans live as a trans-national state: every year we experience what is known as “yellow dust,” that season where dust particles from Mongolia, China, and Kazakhstan sweep eastward, mixing with industrial pollutants . . . post-industrial weather for an Anthropocene era. And when Fukushima exploded in Japan, the government here immediately ushered in sedition laws, manacled journalists from reporting for fear of destabilizing the Korean economy. In this kind of milieu, it seems increasingly the work of creative producers to speak up, against, and out. Korean poets have long been doing so; during the military dictatorships after the war, increasing numbers of poets were summarily imprisoned, and I am friends with two who spent time on death row for publishing Samizdat-style dissident works. I am reminded of Adorno's “it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home” . . . and that, if truth never exists outside power (as Foucault would have it), then creative producers are ideally situated as outsiders (exiles ever since Plato's *agon* with the poets), compelled to find non-ideologized, idealist tropes. Are these discourses at large in Australia, do you think, either historically or now?

SC: Not nearly as much as I'd like, Dan. Actually, one of the reasons I was so drawn to Latin American poetry in the first place was the sheer abundance of poets who themselves were "compelled towards revolution." For a long while I've been very concerned by the overwhelming *complacency* of much Australian poetry, and of much English-language poetry in general. When one really insists on poetry, like Paul Celan in the Nazi work camp, like Raúl Zurita in the face of the Pinochet regime, like the remarkable Korean poets that you describe, it seems that one must also insist on learning "to speak again from total wreckage" (Zurita). Consequently, I've found myself roaming through and beyond Australia in order to conceptualise (and always reconceptualise) a necessarily restless, unsettled poetics.

For the past six or seven years, much of my work has been concerned with imagining a trans-Pacific space as a kind of assemblage comprised of "chunks" of various nation states: fragments of Australia, Chile, the USA, the Philippines, Nicaragua. . . . In my mind these places are moulded quite coherently into a single [very vast] region, but I often think that much of this trans-national drive comes from a more primordial desire to "map" the place I live in. In other words, perhaps the trans-Pacific is what comes after one tries to imagine "Australia"—itself a space that became a politically coherent "thing" prior to anyone figuring out exactly what that "thing" was supposed to be. After so many years in South Korea, do you [still] imagine yourself on the outskirts of an "Australian" field of poetics and linguistic inquiry? Other than a location for your childhood, does "Australia" constitute a particularly magnetic locus for your trans-Pacific imagination?

DD: In Australia—across the colonized "New World"—there is a palpable sense of *absence*. Of course, I am talking about connection to place; contrast the Latinate notion of culture, with its etymological roots in "tillage," with the millennia-old practice of songline in indigenous Australian communities. The former (tilling the land) instrumentalizes country, furrowing crops to feed market-based enterprises; I grew up in a part of that continent where the landscape was ravaged by drought, flooding, erosion, and the rusting inert machineries of generations of farmers. The latter (songlines) act as membranes connecting subjects to narratives enabling land to be traversed. Two different modes of habitation here (without wanting to flatten complexities into a too-wilful binary), as if the discourse of Australia shifts from indigenous care and connection toward colonized wasteland. The absence in Australia is perhaps an intuitive silence of disorientation. Don't

forget it took until 2008 for indigenous Australians to receive a formal apology from the government, but that promise-filled rhetoric has now been largely forgotten; the current conservative government is keeping Australia in some kind of nightmarish repetition compulsion (the latest barbarism being a proposal to defund 150 indigenous communities in the Western Australian bush). I have written very little about Australia; it is hard to know where to start. But Stuart, you have written extensively about land in general and about Australian country specifically; I am very interested to hear what imperatives (political, ethical, cultural) exist for you in contributing to these discourses.

SC: Actually, I suppose one of my most immediate imperatives is a fairly trenchant resistance to the kind of imagined absence that you mention above. I don't say this in order to negate the hundreds of years of colonisation, dispossession, and oppression that Aboriginal people have suffered, but rather to continuously acknowledge it—because it is *ongoing*, as you so powerfully point out. These people have not been rendered *absent*. I find a lot of young Australians derive their trans-national impetus (read: a desire to live and work in London or New York) from a notion that the mytho-geographical terrain known as “Australia” has no place for them, or that in other parts of the world “History” will be more apparent. While of course I appreciate that one can be easily overwhelmed by the “thinness” of Anglo-Settler Australian culture—indeed, this could be something of a trans-Pacific condition—I also think it is dangerous to pursue the notion too far. Perhaps a lot of Australians (and Canadians, and Chileans, etc. . . .) feel this absence because in a way they are still in that colonial moment, where *nothing*, other than signs of European culture, can be *seen*.