

Eventing: Wandering Through the Physiology of Australian Narrative¹

STUART COOKE
Australian National University

1.

I HAD BEEN INVITED TO ATTEND A CONFERENCE AT WHICH I would talk about events. Or an event. I could refer to any event, really, that I liked. But as I began to think about various events, sifting through my knowledge of Australian history as I did so, I began to realize that I couldn't find one. Of course, from a distance, I saw innumerable events rising like peaks above a smoky morning fog; the closer I got to them, however, they dissolved, and had dispersed into the fog by the time I was close enough to touch them. Australians come to this term, to "event," I then saw, within a particular style of discourse, implicit in which is a rather grand assumption about the construct of the nation's history. Omniscient, supposedly all-seeing writing talks of "events" as if they were separate, glowing nodes; history, then, becomes a relatively simple examination of the path that follows from one node to the next. Of course, what is implied with such ideas is that there is a direct path *at all* between these nodes. I thought it more useful to consider that these so-called "events" aren't in fact isolated *nodes*, but smeared and ill-defined conglomerations of passages forwards and backwards through time. Indeed, the term "event" itself also assumes a rather static and simplified version of time, which can be deconstructed if the historian first comes to an understanding of the evolution and physiology of the event: how subjects approach these moments, move through them, and then move onwards into the space of the post-event. In fact, on closer examination I saw there was no longer any event at all; history becomes the result of an infinite series of decisions which themselves constitute fluid and complex eventings. In the space of Australia, then, the need for a proper, composite history—meaning one which doesn't exclude for the sake of simplification, or one which doesn't ignore under the pretence of omniscience—is vital if Australians are to understand not only why we are here, but in what sense (politically, if nothing else) we continue to *be* here, where *being* relates to the truly poetic, sensual experience of the Merleau-Pontian body. For me, an Australian writer, describing this space and the history that occurs within it not only called for a different approach to

Australian history, but for a more fluid poetic—one which is at once very intimate with its spaces, and also completely comfortable with traversing long distances across them.

2.

I didn't want to return to the path that so much Australian writing has already taken, based as it is on a Romantic assumption that the outside world is a manifestation wholly dependent on the writer's own sensibility. And the sensibility of many Australian writers remains, unfortunately, European. Whether events are being described in poetry or in fiction or in historical studies, they are often incorporated in a writing that excludes diversity for the sake of smooth and comfortable narratives, and excludes a sense of ignorance for the pleasurable assumptions of *knowing*. As Paul Carter writes in *The Road to Botany Bay*, this is the sort of writing that invents, from thin air, a point of view, as if all along there existed an omniscient viewer to record the so-called "facts" of our daily lives. Such "imperial history," as he calls it, reduces space to a stage, and suggests that events unfold on that stage of their own accord, behaving independently of anything except time (Carter xv–xvi). The imperial writer, then, has been blessed with a front-row seat, and as a consequence is able to provide the reader with an exclusive insight into the entire spectacle. Carter's spatial history, on the other hand, focuses on the countless individual *intentions* behind events, on people's responses to the material uncertainties they experience as part of being in space and time. He removes the stage, as well as the front-row seats, and places the historian on his or her feet.

But what Carter is really writing about, I think, isn't so much a new method of historical research as a new approach to *writing*. I could see it myself: Australians are too preoccupied with a writing that, in Martin Harrison's words, is "a form of over-seeing, untroubled and surveying, leaping from point of interest to point of interest and uninterested in filling in the gaps" (*Who Wants* 26). *The Road to Botany Bay* urged me to work towards a more complex language.

3.

I saw a need, then, for the construction of a more agile, sensitive poetic and, luckily, I found others who had already explored some of the terrain. David Malouf went quite some way in his novel, *The Great World*, with a narrative that acknowledged the debt to the past of any present moment and thereby injected each moment with an incredible richness of meaning. Here, the concern wasn't so much with the description of a landscape as if it were some sort of static object, but with the way stories pass and intersect over it. *The Great World* described the landscape as a palimpsest: histories intertwine and thicken, and landscape is formed. By shifting easily between present and past and even deeper past narratives, and then showing how these narratives intersect, I was stunned by the way the novel deconstructed the notion that any event is a singular, atomic entity. Malouf alluded to this idea rather poetically in the following extract:

It was a singular dense growth, its root system as extensive and deeply intricate below ground as above. Somewhere at the heart of it was the tap-root, but he never found it. Over and over again he thought he had; he put the machete in and dug out a fleshy tuber. But further in there was always another, tougher stock. (*The Great World* 227)

This is writing that turns away from the progressive temptations of linear narrative in order to delve into the many layers of things. Likewise, Paul Carter's spatial history never assumes direct paths between one event and another, and therefore completely denies any version of history as some sort of linear chain. For Malouf, who was very interested in Carter's book², to see *The Great World* was to perceive the myriad and often messy inter-relationships of all lives, phenomena and processes. And, if I continued to dig further, it was not only the white world that I saw, but a huge, thriving black one as well. Malouf's *Great World* was the first model of writing in which I could see the possibility of some sort of fusion taking place between what has been a predominantly white history (and white body of literature), and the Indigenous presence that has always inextricably accompanied it.

So it was by looking at the work of some of Australia's most innovative and exciting writers that I obtained many ideas as to how to re-approach Australian writing. For it was within the slower, more concentrated pace of the most interesting novels and poems that I saw the Australian writer take the time to re-examine the relationships between character and place. Indeed, what I saw articulated in such works could be an Australian "post-Romantic" tradition. Here, while the landscape is still manifest through the speaker's perception of it, there is a very clear suggestion in the narrative voice that the landscape could also exist *independently* of the speaker's perceptions and, by deduction, could be described differently by other speakers as well. It was at this point that I began to see language fragment time into its infinite shapes. The following extract from Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* is an adequate and illuminating example:

He was filled with a sense of his own lightness. Some heavier self had been laid asleep in him, and another woken that was all open to the westering glow in which the drab bush trees along his way found a kind of beauty, all their leaves glancing and the earth under them alight along its ridges, and the sky above a show, a carnival, of cloud shapes transforming themselves from forms he could name to others, equally pleasing, that he had no name for, but did not for that reason feel estranged from; he might, he thought, have a name for those later. He had the feeling that there were many things in the world that were still to come to him. (*Remembering Babylon* 92)

This distrust of omniscient voices and this acceptance of multiplicity and fragmentation is one of the most exciting features of not only Malouf's work, but of Patrick White's work, and of a range of poets including Jennifer Rankin, Martin Harrison and Robert Gray. It is an extremely important, although underrated, step in the progression of Australian art: post-romanticism, I saw, had opened the way for the acceptance of the real diversity and immensity of Australian space and history.

4.

One of the most important features of works like Patrick White's *Voss*, and of poetries like Jennifer Rankin's and Robert Gray's, seemed to be their employment of a syntax which departed dramatically from more typical, European forms. In Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra's *The Dark Side of the Dream*, they have made a useful distinction between this syntax, which they call "nomadic syntax," and the syntax of more traditional Australian works, which they call "expatriate syntax." European, expatriate syntax is obsessed with the distances *between* things: it works relative to the imperial centre; it looks with a bold gaze to the horizon and ignores everything in between (Hodge and Mishra 152). This is also what Martin Harrison describes as "over-seeing." Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* stuck me as the perfect example. Like *Capricornia*, Christina Stead's beautiful novel, *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*, is also an excellent example of expatriate syntax, yet perhaps *Seven Poor Men* is more significant for the way in which her poetic realism was to resonate so profoundly in White's work many years later. From the very outset of the novel a singular point—a Catholic church—is established, from which the rest of Sydney's landscape is described. Stead's emphasis is clearly on the *distances* of things from this point: we see ocean liners arriving from a long, exotic list of cities from around the world, while life in Sydney remains "poor and unpretentious." The ocean, therefore, provides the means, or the wind, to fill one's sails and *escape* (Stead 1–2).

Were Europe not the centre of the speaker's universe, however, were the speaker concerned primarily with his or her place *here*, in the present moment, the power of expatriate syntax would collapse, as I'd already realized. New forms would have to be found. In Hodge and Mishra's

nomadic syntax, the final destination of the gaze cedes importance to the immediate foreground (Hodge and Mishra 152). It indulges in the observer's *sense of*, or response to, the objects he or she passes. I remember sitting up in my chair: the crucial importance of such syntax is in its emphasis on evoking the speaker's current position within, and response to, the Australian landscape; attention is now turned to the experience of being *here*, in a part of Australia, rather than not *there*, in another part of the world. Attention is now turned to the detail and sensual experience of Australian space. In the following example from *Voss*, I saw this very experience of immediate space relieve the character of some of his obsession with distance, with the elusive horizon:

At once his matted hair began to stream out, and as the wind encircled the pale upper half of his forehead, he seemed to be relieved of some of the responsibility of human personality. The wind was filling his mouth and running down through the acceptant funnel of his throat, till he was completely possessed by it; his heart was thunder, and the jagged nerves of lightning were radiating from his own body. (White 242)

As far back as 1957, Australian writing had begun!

5.

It is in the open-ended narrative across open places that the importance of any sort of destination becomes so marginal that the gaze can turn to the present moment, and the impact of the past upon this present moment. Within this moment, then, the function of the body becomes more important. In writing, the character's body is no longer a "thing" in objective space. Instead, in the Merleau-Pontian sense of the word, the body becomes a system of possible *actions*.³ Places are therefore possibilities, or spaces that the body *might* come to. As a result, the movement of any body through space is the linking together of a number of possibilities selected from an infinite field. Furthermore, "movement" itself describes a process without a finite space—it too involves a kind of infinite restlessness. Our lives, in other words, can best be thought of as existing inside a field that includes both the continuous and infinitely complex textures of past, as well as the infinitely complex features of the space around us at any given point in time. Returning to Carter's spatial history, I could see why his emphasis on the *lived intentions* of historical characters is so important: this is a form of history that recognizes and attempts to record the enormous complexity of lived experience, of *being*. Moments of time mesh together into a continuous stream; small parts of this stream return to the mind in a non-linear series of recollections; we move through a world that is at once infinitely fragmented and undeniably singular. This is all to say, Australians should never come to a single "event"; rather, country is always *eventing*.

As I mentioned earlier, if I disregarded the assumption that characters would ever arrive at a single "event," my narrative would become open-ended. The dismissal of end-points

will allow stories to drift between places and voices with more ease, and with our gaze turned away from the elusive horizon we can look to the foreground more often. This is why Paul Carter reminds us that to "describe a country is not to stand back, as if it were not there, but to travel it again" (Carter 346). Central to our bodies' lived experiences are the senses of our surrounds; to record history with a detached, omniscient voice, therefore, is entirely unsuitable for the task at hand, which is to understand the decisions our historical characters were faced with, and their points of view as they stood there, *on the ground*. Historical narrative, therefore, should *move* as we ourselves move. The historian should become like the explorer, for whom experience is so intense, so *sensual*, because of the way his or her body always exists in relation to the earth around it.⁴ Now, similarities with Indigenous mythologies became startlingly apparent to me: in the Dreamtime, the ancestors traveled across the landscape and created meaning in trees, rocks and rivers (Muecke, *Textual Spaces* 167), places weren't discrete entities but wide-open, dispersed domains. For European Australians then, nomadic writing, by virtue of its constant, open-ended movement, allows places to be re-explored in the manner in which they were first discovered.

Writing, however, is a static, and even retrospective, activity. How could I make it *move forward* in the way that one might be seen to move through space? The authors of *Reading the Country* suggested a highly plausible solution. For them, a book or a poem would be "a set of traces," or fragmentary passages and images that seemingly flare up and then die away in a series of articulated plateaus. The reader moves *through* these moments, deciphering them like scenes, while there is no general idea of what the whole work is about (Benterrak 27). This is a literary form of wandering, and the sense of freedom, of one's ability to move, is heightened by a displacement in the text whereby the reader "moves" between fragments over the course of the work's duration (Mahoney 41–42). The white space of the page, as much as the points of text dispersed across it, becomes significant. In this way, writing can imply movement and still remain motionless.

6.

I have to take a little detour here and emphasize that to talk about Australia's historical characters as nomadic explorers, or as having traveled through space nomadically, is in no way creating an unrealistic picture of things, or brutally pushing the facts into some sort of ideological box. If I return to earlier moments of exploration, we can see why this is so. Imagine for a moment that you are James Cook. It is April 1770. You are moving away from *The Endeavour* as your crew row towards the shore of soon-to-be Botany Bay. There are a group of Aborigines on the sand; they all flee at the sight of you, save for two, who wait while you approach. One of them throws a rock at you, and you fire a useless warning shot in reply. Now you aim directly at the one on the right and hit him in the leg; you climb out of

the boat onto the sand. He flees, along with his companion. "Stop!" you shout, as you and your men run up the beach to give chase, but you quickly lose them in the scrub. Now, come back to the present. Just from this little fragment, we can realize that not only was this land an occupied space, but the very first movements of my European ancestors⁵ across it were enabled, were brought into *being*, by the movements of the Aborigines who fled from them. The way the tracks of the Aborigines were subsequently utilized for exploration and road building purposes is well documented (Carter 337), as is the way Aboriginal assistance was crucial in establishing cattle stations and outback communities. Any narrative that attempts to describe the experience of existing and moving across Australian land *must*, therefore, acknowledge the influence of the continent's Indigenous owners, who enabled and facilitated such movement, and who did so with nomadic knowledge of place.

7.

I saw some of the best examples of white nomadic writing in Robert Gray's poetry. The sparseness of Gray's line enables a heightened sensitivity to the very smallest changes in texture and pace. Despite such sparseness, however, Gray's landscapes seem to *glow* after the speakers have moved through them—it is this glowing, this brilliance of life and color, which recreates such powerful and vibrant simulations of place. It was important I remembered, however, that a richness of life and color was not synonymous with a bold, all-seeing gaze. Rather, the large amounts of white space around Gray's poems on the page are symbolic of the space he chooses not to touch. In his poetry there is rarely a mention of Indigenous presence, for example, but his voice doesn't suggest that there *isn't* any to be found. To take Stephen Muecke slightly out of context, Gray's seeing "is glancing, it is not gazing full on so as to possess a scene, take it away and store it." It is "an aesthetic of the glimpse where things half seen can be imagined as something other, beyond and magical" (*No Road* 214). Gray's recent poem "The Creek" is my favorite example of a spare, gentle voice speaking for nothing more than itself:

Grey weather between the high-grown, thickly gathered
trees, the lean
sparse-leaved eucalyptus poles,
parsley-
shelved, but with frail
grey-green leaves, and down the slope the kettle-black
lower boles
among which the water's glimpsed—the secret creek in
khaki that beats
like a vein at the throat
of someone
who's lying hidden. (qtd. in Craven 28)

But fluid, drifting, nomadic writing does not only imply a nomadic form of movement, but a nomadic process of *thought*, too. Just as the body can wander through the infinite

field of choices presented to it by space, the mind can float between past and present scenes with perhaps an even greater ease. It can also reflect upon infinite choice, and *imagine it* at any moment in time. Jennifer Rankin had a brilliant ability to isolate and manipulate such parcels of time to stunning effect, as we can see in this extract from her poem "Forever the Snake":

And then it is here.

Snake. Flashing its back
arrowing through grass
black missile with small guiding head
firing off reflexes, straight into attack.

And the spade. Lifeless and foreign
under your hand raised in the air.

This black speeding nerve is cutting through space.

Somewhere forever your hand is raised
in far-off space fields the snake is racing.

Now the thick spade crashes down from above
snapping the nerve that even in death sends its messages.
(qtd. in Rodriguez 58–59)

This incredible poetry exchanges present with past in a way that is crucial to a proper Australian poetic. In Australia, if not in all countries, understanding that our present states of relative well-being are so dependent on what has occurred in the past is of utmost importance; a poetry that can recognize the immeasurable influence of the past upon the present moment, and the way in which past and present are constantly communicating and interchanging with one another, is a great one. Indeed, a poetry that so integrates the past with the present could shed more light on The Great World, and repair what many see to be a gulf between Indigenous and white Australian histories; the separation of white from black could be deconstructed by acknowledging the absurdity of any suggestion that somehow one does not play, or hardly has played, a part in the other. If it creates a channel by which past and present can be seen to connect, the Australian poetic can reveal how the rope of past is formed until the present, and then how all of its twines are inextricably linked.

8.

I was extremely excited to find in very recent poetry by Martin Harrison the past actually swelling and *spilling* into the present; in the poem "The Past" fragments of intellectualization are spliced into memories of daydreaming, of conversation, and even simple sensing. "The simplest impulse," he writes, "reaches from one end of consciousness to the other, from one moment at the remembered beginning to the on-going moment of immersion. I wake up, for instance, with a single feeling of concern and with the parallel sense that the feeling

the boat onto the sand. He flees, along with his companion. "Stop!" you shout, as you and your men run up the beach to give chase, but you quickly lose them in the scrub. Now, come back to the present. Just from this little fragment, we can realize that not only was this land an occupied space, but the very first movements of my European ancestors⁵ across it were enabled, were brought into *being*, by the movements of the Aborigines who fled from them. The way the tracks of the Aborigines were subsequently utilized for exploration and road building purposes is well documented (Carter 337), as is the way Aboriginal assistance was crucial in establishing cattle stations and outback communities. Any narrative that attempts to describe the experience of existing and moving across Australian land *must*, therefore, acknowledge the influence of the continent's Indigenous owners, who enabled and facilitated such movement, and who did so with nomadic knowledge of place.

7.

I saw some of the best examples of white nomadic writing in Robert Gray's poetry. The sparseness of Gray's line enables a heightened sensitivity to the very smallest changes in texture and pace. Despite such sparseness, however, Gray's landscapes seem to *glow* after the speakers have moved through them—it is this glowing, this brilliance of life and color, which recreates such powerful and vibrant simulations of place. It was important I remembered, however, that a richness of life and color was not synonymous with a bold, all-seeing gaze. Rather, the large amounts of white space around Gray's poems on the page are symbolic of the space he chooses not to touch. In his poetry there is rarely a mention of Indigenous presence, for example, but his voice doesn't suggest that there *isn't* any to be found. To take Stephen Muecke slightly out of context, Gray's seeing "is glancing, it is not gazing full on so as to possess a scene, take it away and store it." It is "an aesthetic of the glimpse where things half seen can be imagined as something other, beyond and magical" (*No Road* 214). Gray's recent poem "The Creek" is my favorite example of a spare, gentle voice speaking for nothing more than itself:

Grey weather between the high-grown, thickly gathered
trees, the lean
sparse-leaved eucalyptus poles,
parsley-
shelved, but with frail
grey-green leaves, and down the slope the kettle-black
lower boles
among which the water's glimpsed—the secret creek in
khaki that beats
like a vein at the throat
of someone
who's lying hidden. (qtd. in Craven 28)

But fluid, drifting, nomadic writing does not only imply a nomadic form of movement, but a nomadic process of *thought*, too. Just as the body can wander through the infinite

field of choices presented to it by space, the mind can float between past and present scenes with perhaps an even greater ease. It can also reflect upon infinite choice, and *imagine it* at any moment in time. Jennifer Rankin had a brilliant ability to isolate and manipulate such parcels of time to stunning effect, as we can see in this extract from her poem "Forever the Snake":

And then it is here.

Snake. Flashing its back
arrowing through grass
black missile with small guiding head
firing off reflexes, straight into attack.

And the spade. Lifeless and foreign
under your hand raised in the air.

This black speeding nerve is cutting through space.

Somewhere forever your hand is raised
in far-off space fields the snake is racing.

Now the thick spade crashes down from above
snapping the nerve that even in death sends its messages.
(qtd. in Rodriguez 58–59)

This incredible poetry exchanges present with past in a way that is crucial to a proper Australian poetic. In Australia, if not in all countries, understanding that our present states of relative well-being are so dependent on what has occurred in the past is of utmost importance; a poetry that can recognize the immeasurable influence of the past upon the present moment, and the way in which past and present are constantly communicating and interchanging with one another, is a great one. Indeed, a poetry that so integrates the past with the present could shed more light on The Great World, and repair what many see to be a gulf between Indigenous and white Australian histories; the separation of white from black could be deconstructed by acknowledging the absurdity of any suggestion that somehow one does not play, or hardly has played, a part in the other. If it creates a channel by which past and present can be seen to connect, the Australian poetic can reveal how the rope of past is formed until the present, and then how all of its twines are inextricably linked.

8.

I was extremely excited to find in very recent poetry by Martin Harrison the past actually swelling and *spilling* into the present; in the poem "The Past" fragments of intellectualization are spliced into memories of daydreaming, of conversation, and even simple sensing. "The simplest impulse," he writes, "reaches from one end of consciousness to the other, from one moment at the remembered beginning to the on-going moment of immersion. I wake up, for instance, with a single feeling of concern and with the parallel sense that the feeling

the boat onto the sand. He flees, along with his companion. "Stop!" you shout, as you and your men run up the beach to give chase, but you quickly lose them in the scrub. Now, come back to the present. Just from this little fragment, we can realize that not only was this land an occupied space, but the very first movements of my European ancestors⁵ across it were enabled, were brought into *being*, by the movements of the Aborigines who fled from them. The way the tracks of the Aborigines were subsequently utilized for exploration and road building purposes is well documented (Carter 337), as is the way Aboriginal assistance was crucial in establishing cattle stations and outback communities. Any narrative that attempts to describe the experience of existing and moving across Australian land *must*, therefore, acknowledge the influence of the continent's Indigenous owners, who enabled and facilitated such movement, and who did so with nomadic knowledge of place.

7.

I saw some of the best examples of white nomadic writing in Robert Gray's poetry. The sparseness of Gray's line enables a heightened sensitivity to the very smallest changes in texture and pace. Despite such sparseness, however, Gray's landscapes seem to *glow* after the speakers have moved through them—it is this glowing, this brilliance of life and color, which recreates such powerful and vibrant simulations of place. It was important I remembered, however, that a richness of life and color was not synonymous with a bold, all-seeing gaze. Rather, the large amounts of white space around Gray's poems on the page are symbolic of the space he chooses not to touch. In his poetry there is rarely a mention of Indigenous presence, for example, but his voice doesn't suggest that there *isn't* any to be found. To take Stephen Muecke slightly out of context, Gray's seeing "is glancing, it is not gazing full on so as to possess a scene, take it away and store it." It is "an aesthetic of the glimpse where things half seen can be imagined as something other, beyond and magical" (*No Road* 214). Gray's recent poem "The Creek" is my favorite example of a spare, gentle voice speaking for nothing more than itself:

Grey weather between the high-grown, thickly gathered
trees, the lean
sparse-leaved eucalyptus poles,
parsley-
shelved, but with frail
grey-green leaves, and down the slope the kettle-black
lower boles
among which the water's glimpsed—the secret creek in
khaki that beats
like a vein at the throat
of someone
who's lying hidden. (qtd. in Craven 28)

But fluid, drifting, nomadic writing does not only imply a nomadic form of movement, but a nomadic process of *thought*, too. Just as the body can wander through the infinite

field of choices presented to it by space, the mind can float between past and present scenes with perhaps an even greater ease. It can also reflect upon infinite choice, and *imagine it* at any moment in time. Jennifer Rankin had a brilliant ability to isolate and manipulate such parcels of time to stunning effect, as we can see in this extract from her poem "Forever the Snake":

And then it is here.

Snake. Flashing its back
arrowing through grass
black missile with small guiding head
firing off reflexes, straight into attack.

And the spade. Lifeless and foreign
under your hand raised in the air.

This black speeding nerve is cutting through space.

Somewhere forever your hand is raised
in far-off space fields the snake is racing.

Now the thick spade crashes down from above
snapping the nerve that even in death sends its messages.
(qtd. in Rodriguez 58–59)

This incredible poetry exchanges present with past in a way that is crucial to a proper Australian poetic. In Australia, if not in all countries, understanding that our present states of relative well-being are so dependent on what has occurred in the past is of utmost importance; a poetry that can recognize the immeasurable influence of the past upon the present moment, and the way in which past and present are constantly communicating and interchanging with one another, is a great one. Indeed, a poetry that so integrates the past with the present could shed more light on The Great World, and repair what many see to be a gulf between Indigenous and white Australian histories; the separation of white from black could be deconstructed by acknowledging the absurdity of any suggestion that somehow one does not play, or hardly has played, a part in the other. If it creates a channel by which past and present can be seen to connect, the Australian poetic can reveal how the rope of past is formed until the present, and then how all of its twines are inextricably linked.

8.

I was extremely excited to find in very recent poetry by Martin Harrison the past actually swelling and *spilling* into the present; in the poem "The Past" fragments of intellectualization are spliced into memories of daydreaming, of conversation, and even simple sensing. "The simplest impulse," he writes, "reaches from one end of consciousness to the other, from one moment at the remembered beginning to the on-going moment of immersion. I wake up, for instance, with a single feeling of concern and with the parallel sense that the feeling

is, itself, a signal—like a sail trajected between water and sky . . .”⁶ And his poem “Rainbow Snake” is a more condensed, visually potent example of such agile, nomadic thought, from which an extract is below:

The vase stands there, shining, on the table.
Parts are like islands in a shadowy wash.
The body’s razor-bright in changing dusk.

Sunset behind it deepens with a mallee glow.
Re-fired by skylines, it comes from the earth,
a bulb, taut, marked, sinuous. Each side’s
again that snake. It bends time. Until about to soar,
pure thing, burnished as desert, it builds rock-towers.
(*The Kangaroo Farm* 31)

In this magnificent poem, Harrison drifts through both space and time with incredible clarity and ease. In “Rainbow Snake” the object becomes so closely related to the speaker that it enlivens him and then draws him across space. Consequently, the poem becomes, in a sense, a form of dreaming track: a meditation on the vase gives birth to a journey within a compression of time. What “Rainbow Snake” highlights for us in particular is the crucially *mental* aspect of travel, the way in which immersion in the “there” necessitates isolation from the “here” so that both reader and speaker must constantly reevaluate the properties of this “here” (Where is it, after all—“there,” or “here?”) (Bartolini 79). By overcoming the expatriate’s syntax, “Rainbow Snake” discards the obsession with the distance from “here” of “there” in favor of exploring a blurred middle ground. Such exploration leads to an exhilarating experience in which the reader is thrown into a fluctuant and suspended dimension. Moving on from one seemingly inconsequential vase, a journey through a brilliantly colored interstitial zone revitalizes, and *recreates*, the place. Like a snake weaving through time, the poem exhibits a stunning agility in its movement between past and present, and recalls the perpetual relationship between past and present of the Dreaming. It is a bold attempt to re-imagine an Australia that is no longer certain, but is now a multi-layered, mythical text.

9.

For me, the most exciting features of poetries like those I have just mentioned were not only their shifting, moving abilities, but also their willingness not to *know*. These speakers were not standing above, but *in*; and they were not speaking for other selves, but of themselves. After all, if one is to recreate the lived experience of being in Australia, one must first come to terms with the fact that in many ways Australians are, as predominantly urban beings, living in and walking through dark space. Outside of the cities (and, sometimes, even within them⁷) most of the landforms are unfamiliar, and Australian agriculture is still coming to terms with the best way to use them in sustainable ways. An Australian poetry that pretends to understand all that it sees would be a false one and indeed, many of our most canonized poets,

including Francis Webb and A. D. Hope, as well as a very famous contemporary poet (whose name I won’t mention) are all guilty of writing false poetries.⁸

A part of a poem by the exciting young Sydney poet, Kate Fagan, voices many of the ideas that I have hitherto discussed and suggests an incredible future for Australian poetics. Strangely, it was one of the last poems I came across in my wanderings, and immediately presented itself as a fitting (albeit, temporary) conclusion. Fagan’s “Ecologue” is to be admired for the way it tracks space in fragments, in brief flashes of thought and sense and image. If the voice seems shaky or uncertain it is because it is speaking of an *ecology* of uncertainty, where the meanings of the landscape are unclear, and the light the speaker sheds on it is only partially effective. This is an account of a journey that was in no way a linear one, which hopped and skipped between points to create a blurred, ill-defined middle ground. Rather than reaching a point of certainty, or an event of epiphany, “Ecologue” both begins and ends in this blurred territory:

As if in burial country
where all interlopers and tourists
shift with immersion, something exposed,
a precondition for history

Spitting into density,
thick beaching crops of spinifex,
permission to wander; no boundary
without an opening

A common stranding place
for minke whales, skeletal signs
appear overnight in rain, skin macabre,
rots in sanded decoupage

...

Collapsed tracks were
a site of entry for steel,
following a previous invasion
to bring an idea of light

The detail evolute,
for a moment there is no field,
background not surreal but hyperreal:
our history of displacing (69–72)

10.

It was clear, and yet also smudged and de-centered like a John Wolesley painting: the Australian narrative would drift with caution as it negotiated a landscape rich with Indigenous history and mythology. It would pay attention to the very smallest details of things in an effort to recreate some of the experience of *being* in a place, showing how one moment bleeds with intensity into the next, and how the collective experience of moments—of what we can now call history—

is a process of eventing. This physiology of the moment—the way place constantly interacts with body, the way perception of space now leads to decision, now to movement onwards—is perhaps the most important single feature of a genuinely Australian writing, because it is concerned with paying attention to a space, to a highly complex *place*, with which we are largely unfamiliar—or at least uncertain, or unsure.

I decided to head down to La Perouse the other day, the southern-most suburb of Sydney's east. At first I was looking across Botany Bay to the official "landing site" on the other side. But it wasn't this landing site that interested me as much as the small beach on my own side of the bay. It was the way the small waves were collapsing and falling into one another. Thin lines of foam raced towards the shore, some converging and bubbling together, others becoming long arcs of lace, all slowing, slowing, stopping, almost floating momentarily, and then drifting back, then racing back out to sea. Some lines would become lost in freshly broken waves. The whole lot of it was a gracefully churning chaos: lines were fluid, white wriggles of air and salt and foamy water. This is history, I thought, more than the empty green pastures and phallic monuments on the other side of the bay. □

NOTES

1 This paper is based on one I presented at a postgraduate symposium at the University of Melbourne, 1/7/05.

2 see Carter, P. & Malouf, D. (1989). Space, writing and historical identity. *Thesis Eleven*, 22, 92–105

3 see Casey, E. S. (1997). *The Fate of Place: a philosophical history*. University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles. pp. 228–32

4 see Casey, E. S. (1997). p. 306. Deleuze and Guattari's exploration of the nomad's relationships to space are explained well here.

5 By "our ancestors" I am referring to the ancestors of our nation-state rather than to any genealogical relationship.

6 Harrison, M. (2005). *Music: prose and poems*. Vagabond Press: Sydney. p. 21. For my review of *Music*, refer to *Jacket Magazine*, number 28.

7 Most residents would be quite unaware, for example, that the world's largest outdoor rock art gallery is in their own harbour.

8 Here, Harrison's discussion of A. D. Hope's poem "Australia" is particularly interesting. See Harrison, M. (2004), pp. 25–28.

WORKS CITED

- Bartoloni, P. (2003). *Interstitial Writing: Calvino, Caproni, Sereni and Svevo*. Troubador: Leicester. p. 79.
- Benterrak, K., Stephen Muecke, and P. Roe. *Reading the Country: introduction to nomadology*. 1984. Freemantle : Freemantle Arts Centre P, 1996.
- Carter, Paul. *The Road to Botany Bay: an exploration of landscape and history*. U of Chicago P: Chicago, 1989.
- Carter, Paul and David Malouf. "Space, writing and historical identity." *Thesis Eleven* 22 (1989): 92–105.
- Casey, E. S. *The Fate of Place: a philosophical history*. U of California P: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1997.
- Craven, P. *The Best Australian Poems 2003*. Black Inc.: Melbourne, 2003.
- Fagan, Kate. *The Long Moment*. Salt Publishing: Applecross, 2002.
- Harrison, Martin. (1997). *The Kangaroo Farm*. Paper Bark Press: Sydney. p. 31
- . *Music: prose and poems*. Vagabond Press: Sydney, 2005.
- . *Who Wants to Create Australia? Essays on poetry and ideas in contemporary Australia*. Halstead Press: Sydney, 2004.
- Hodge, B. & Mishra, V. (1990). *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian literature and the postcolonial mind*. Allen & Unwin: Sydney, 1990.
- Mahoney, J. (2002). "Coming Home: a novella." University of Technology: Sydney. pp. 41–42
- Malouf, David. *The Great World*. Pan Macmillan: Sydney, 1991
- . *Remembering Babylon*. Vintage: London, 1994.
- Muecke, Stephen. *No Road (bitumen all the way)*. Freemantle Arts Centre Press: Freemantle, 1997.
- . *Textual Spaces: Aboriginality and Cultural Studies*. University of New South Wales Press: Sydney, 1992.
- Rodriguez, J. (1990). *Jennifer Rankin: collected poems*. University of Queensland Press: Brisbane. pp. 58–59
- Stead, Christina. *Seven Poor Men of Sydney*. 1934. Collins/Angus & Robertson: Sydney, 1990.
- White, Patrick. Voss. 1957. Pyramid: New York, 1968.

STUART COOKE was born in 1980 and grew up in Sydney. He now lives in Canberra, where he is writing a Ph.D. thesis on poetry and philosophy at the ANU. His poetry and prose have been widely published, and he is working on his first book of poems.