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*(Hardly) anyone listening? Writing silent geography*¹

Bill Boyd

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Abstract: In 1984, J. Douglas Porteous challenged the geography world to silence. True geographical appreciation cannot be expressed in prose; the logical conclusion is for geographers to be silent. Given that they cannot be silent, Porteous advocated non-traditional writing, such as poetry. In 1994, Paul Cloke illustrated the power of reflective narrative for a geographer grappling to understand the world. In 1998, I started writing geographic poetry. In 2012, I draw these strands together in this reflective essay, drawing on a poetic journey over a decade old now. Can I reflect a sense of place or place-making that transcends traditional geographical expression? Did Porteous truly open a geographic window otherwise closed to me? I conclude the poetry does create geographical sense and sensibility, but more as constructed possibilities than as objective realities. The poetry provides glimpses into the experiences of geographical displacement encountered by many New Australians, and thus may best be considered as metageographical expressions.

Key words: experiential geography, geographical poetry, J. Douglas Porteous, geographical displacement, metageography

Introduction

“The publication of geographical insights in nontraditional forms could be the first step towards the goal of silent place appreciation”. Thus, in 1984 (p.373), the experientialist geographer, J. Douglas Porteous, challenged the then rather staid discipline of geography to break out of the “dull prose of academe” (Porteous, 1984: 372). For a young geographer making his tentative way into a career of physical geography, but even then with inclinations towards the cultural end of geography, this was simultaneously exhilarating and daunting. I read, with delight, Porteous’ four geographic poems, ‘Ionnina’, ‘New Delhi, 1976’, ‘Rangoon, 1976’ and ‘Bangladesh, 1976’, but could see no way to harness their power in my own geographic writing at the time.

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The next year, Porteous (1985) expanded the theme with structure: a home/away – inside/outside model. My scholarly challenge was now, how to use this? In 1994, Porteous responded to Marcus Doel's 'Proverbs for paranoids: writing geography on hallowed ground' with two poems – the entire text of the paper – 'Narrative: pornographic voyeurism' and 'Metanarrative: bodies without organs'. The challenge was truly set. The opportunity for me, however, only crystallized with the publication of Paul Cloke's 1994 '(En)culturing Political Geography: A Life in the day of a 'Rural Geographer'. This extended essay, born out of "something happening on the way" during a conventional research project on the nature of English rurality, tackled the implicitly poetic nature of the 'rural', its multiplicity and ambiguity:

The authors found that the 'rural' became the sticking point. Respondents used it in different ways – as a bludgeon, as a badge, as a barometer – to signify many different things – security, identity, community, domesticity, gender, sexuality, ethnicity – nearly always drawing on many different sources – the media, the landscape, friends and kin, animals. It became abundantly clear that the 'rural', whatever chameleon form it took, was a prime and deeply-felt determinant in the actions of many respondents. Yet it was also clear to the authors that they possessed no theoretical framework that could allow them to negotiate the 'rural' to deconstruct its diverse nature as a category. Rather, each of the extended essays in this book [there are five] is an attempt by each author to draw out one aspect of the rural by drawing on different traditions in social and cultural theory. (Cloke et al., 1994, back cover)

Reflective narrative, poetry, and a research question

The links between Porteous and Cloke are not immediately evident. They, however, lie in my personal response: Cloke validated the practice of self-reflection and reflective narrative as legitimate, indeed essential, scholarly activities. I now, for example, regularly ask students to read Cloke as part of their professional and academic development, and thereafter to write an equivalent, if somewhat shorter, account of their own relationship to their academic experience. The focus is predominantly on self-awareness. For me, however, Cloke's reflections on his academic journey were more important: they clearly shaped his approach to the theories of in his discipline; they can influence my own. He represents a 1990s acceptance of the utility of biographical reflection, not only for theory but also as methodological pursuit in its own right. Inspired, I experimented with writing styles, trying to break from the strictures of 'scientific' writing (Boyd, 1996, 1999, 2001). This culminated in the successful submission of a narrative doctoral thesis (Boyd, 2005a). I even attempted to write in a self-consciously 'post-modern' style: I think my extended essay – 'Rigidity and a Changing Order ... Disorder, Degeneracy and Daemonic Repetition: Fluidity of Cultural Values and Cultural Heritage Management' (Boyd et al., 2005) – got away with it!

One of Cloke's lessons was that of the importance of serendipity. Significant career events may be the seemingly least important: the formative role of a fellow student rather than the Great Professor, for example. My serendipitous event was a 1998 field trip to Vietnam, where, cushioned by tropical humidity and the vitality of Hanoi, in

spare moments between geological site visits, I started writing poetry. I had now come full circle: Porteous 1984 – Cloke 1996 – Boyd in 1998. I was, at least, responding to Porteous' 1984 lament that "hardly anyone listens". My challenge now is to publish that, and subsequent, geographic poetry, in scholarly journals: will anyone listen? That is my humanist aim, my research agenda: to take the reality of geographical observation and experience, to break the silence that otherwise persists, to move beyond a personal reflection, and to inform the scholarly domain. Can I capture the essence of the places and landscapes I visit? Can I reflect a sense of place that transcends traditional geographical data? Did Porteous truly open a geographic window otherwise closed to me? These are my research questions. Drawing on all the components of Porteous' conceptual framework for humanist literary geography ('sense of place', 'entrapment', 'the traveler', 'journey, exile, yearning'; Porteous, 1985), my answers follow in this poetic essay.

To explore this landscape, I draw on Chapter 4: Reconciliation, a chapter in a self-published book of poetry (Boyd, 2005b), the opening chapter of a part entitled 'Resolution: Exploring New Land'. In doing so, I recognise now that I was seeking to engage Porteous' (2005) conceptual frameworks of 'sense of place', 'entrapment', 'the traveler', and 'journey, exile, yearning'. The Chapter was originally composed of four parts: 'Opening the Borders', 'Vitalis Verdant', 'Crossing the Language Lines', and 'Reconciliation'. I recognise now, in retrospect, that these sought to place me in historic places and landscape, in my then current fluid place in the world as a global traveler and as a migrant, and, finally, as a New Australian.

On the Border Crossing to the Land of Reconciliation

An abstract as such: a travel guide to the land of reconciliation
Crusty old servitor, man of words with tales to stir the imagination
Toothlessly smiling the possibilities
Hissing the awfulness of the past the unacceptabilities making them seem quite
reasonable
Bringing to life the shackles, the forced marches, the stolen children, the virtues of
transporting men to hell, the massacred people for simply being people.
Keen young student summer vacationer liberal with the truth
Telling other people's stories with authority commanded of youth
Unconditionally correct, no questions asked, the book says so the book says so.
Past employee reincarnated with tales of glory
Shedding years of dead end jobs low pay compromised health
To glorify the mine, the prison, the workhouse, the dust cloud, the asbestos, the poison
The days and the weeks and the months and the years of poverty of unemployment of
underemployment of being used
The rural, the ideal, sunset reflecting in the clouds of despair
All repackaged as a glorious past, a national identity
Only hundreds died, you know, more (proudly he said) than in the official records.
The volunteer, end of life, deprived of other meaning, coming alive in the past
The local knowledge holder, more tales than you could poke a stick at, more than you
need
The volunteer who won't go home: the tour is home, the museum
The abandoned factory, the water wheel that sticks, replete in moss, dribbling water

Hinting at his past.

Travel guides to entertain, to illuminate, to impress, the stay alive, to revive
Where are we going? What are we doing? Did you know? Did you know? Did you
know?

Gory pasts, glory pasts, significant people, kings queens peasants, landlords, governors,
rebels, sailors, bush rangers

Discovery, uprising, war, massacres, farming, settling and and and.

Travel guides: the front line troops of reconciliation taking sides in the culture wars

Re-writing the history again again again

Until the laughs and the gasps and the photostops are just right right, history has arrived
at its correct shape

Or perhaps until someone Understands What It Was Really Like

And says Sorry.

My tour guide will be less grand, desires to be less grand, is designed to be less grand

Will it end up just a slippery, just a politically (in)correct, just a historically re-written
as any other journey to reconciliation?

I am

A teacher teaching science students about culture

Whose many words are just not enough

A writer of science who wants to touch the soul

A traveller of countries, a stranger in every land, slight familiarity, relatively at ease

A familiar with airport lounges, local transport, hotels small and large

An eater of everything, a brave stomach, a walker and pillion rider of asian streets

An unfamiliar with languages, snippets of many but lost to hand waves and smiles in
most others

A traveller in the mind the soul the words the flesh

Inner journey traveller outer journey traveller

Whose travelling started before time in a fractured Europe

In times less fair than now, in societies less forgiving, less able to forgive

Travelling to a rosy future society

To the land of reconciliation.

Kiss – reconciliation, a start

It started with a kiss

So the song goes

It started with a kiss

In a real life, more valuable than any pop hit

It started with a kiss

A mother's kiss to be precise

A kiss at the threshold of a life, a new life, all new lives old and new

A mother's kiss for a mother's child

A mother's kiss of a child of the changing world

A mother's kiss for her child in a new world for her, her first contribution to a new
world

A mother's kiss for a child who would travel unrestricted where generations had feared
to go

A child whose rules would move and flow, would be made anew

Whose life would slip between the crack of liberal acceptance so long denied others

A mother's kiss stretching across the fractured lines of a Europe finding itself again
A mother's kiss patching war torn refuge, the refugee's kiss of hope
A kiss promising no more lost childhoods, no more threatened youth, no more
dangerous futures
A kiss of stability, future, friendship across the barriers
A kiss where a new language was being learnt, new habits that may never quite work
A kiss nevertheless, meaning as much as the foreign tongue forced on the runaway, on
the new start
A kiss attached by threads to country now erased from the global map, wiped out from
being
Country assigned to history, reassigned in the future
Country of distant dreams of innocence, stolen in a moment
Closed to all but the imagination, ghosts whispering of what may be, may have been
A country hinted at in the kiss, the kiss tied to the web of history
The last kiss of centuries and communities wiped out with a single stroke
Country, dreams, community to be reconciled half a century later, reconciliation started
with the mother's kiss
Perhaps
It started with a kiss speaking of travel, always travel
Running away from the destruction, running towards a rebuilding
Travelling to flee, travelling to seek something
The mother running to live, running to escape time and again
I can never tell, but must assume, I assume the traveller's habit borne of that kiss
My traveller's eyes seeking something, an understanding possibly
Witnessing, if lucky confirming, the differences and the similarities
Thrilling in the uncertainty, perhaps seeking it in safer ways than the mother had to
Finding the reasons for intolerance, for misunderstanding, for non-understanding
Seeking the reconciliation needed to tie the threads, to patch the cracks, to solve the
historical riddle, seeking seeking.
It started with a kiss, a mother's kiss to be precise
And ended with this, my footloose search
And may end in a reconciliation.

Vitalis Verdant

Preface

I write
Responding
To a good friend's challenge
You, J. Douglas, old friend
Who provoked the world to write
Geographic Poetry

We never met
Save through words
Yours, to be precise, have remained my companion
And at last I try
Geographic Poetry

To silence! Your clarion call
You geographers who deign
To understand place
Who profane
To speak upon it
And if not, Silence!

Otherwise, Geographic Poetry

Hanoi, May 2001

Dark
Sticky
Room
Inhabited by streetscapes of sound
In tropical distraction
I think upon Geographic Poetry
How, JD?
Do I distil the poetry of place?
The essence
Of being in someone else's land?

Humid words seep
Into my consciousness
Vibrant city enveloping my mind
Thickness of approaching tropical rain
Whispering: Vital, Verdant

Vital ...

Constant
Motion
Movement
Forever
 Vital
Pulsing: people people people
Cities, towns, villages

Vitality springs
From excited tongues
Bus horns, street-side stalls, badminton in streets, tai chi in parks
Shared action, experience
Common to the crowd
Doing, simply doing

Rural trucks,
Spluttering overloaded
Honda Dreams escape faltering Simsons
Black soviet limousines, green government jeeps

Geriatric buses
Skewed, sporting trophies
Of roadside close encounters
Still alive alive alive
Windshields boasting: who loves ya, baby?

Blackened coal towns
Dusted beyond belief
Every coal dust grain alive
Vital blackness

... Verdant

Verdant Indochin: French colonial legacy
What else defines?
Overgrowth
Tropical vines
Rice
Forest
Even imported gums are verdant!
Their antipodean cousins barely green
Verdant eucalyptus! Swaying
Competing with bamboo
For airspace thick with tropical promise

Verdant!
The European word could hardly have imagined
Lush
Vital
Energy
Hardly imagined tropical verdant

Verdant Memory: Celtic Dreaming

Celtic greenness creeps
Into my Hanoi room
Decades gone
My tropical mind soggy, trying to recall
Geographical Origins
How far have I come?

Celtic verdant at the other end of this continent?
I wade through tropical downpours and think: Drieck

The word means nothing
To most of the world
But everything
To the poor wee souls
Trudging through porridge
Scotch mist

Tramping through puddles
Of misery
Tropical wet
But cold cold cold and dark

Dark Glasgow Streets 4pm
Shimmering sleet, engine oil
Illuminating nothing
But scowls
Driech memories
Like snot
Verdant from perpetual cold noses

Tropical joy: Celtic memory

Vita Vitalis: Vita Verdant

So, JD, are you satisfied?
I say nothing
Of Populations, Maps, Landforms
Of Areas, Elevations, GDPs, Latitudes/Longitudes
...
Are you satisfied?

If I was older
A medieval scholar, an enlightened mind, a modernist,
I might classify my visions
In frantic science envy
Varieties of national spirit, natural species
As Vita Vitalis
As Vita Verdant
Vitalis Verdant

Byron Bay 2004 – Bad Poetry and the Great Poet

Did I tell you that I once met a Chinese Poet?
At a poetryreading it was, vicariously
He was on the stage, and I was not
But I did met him, I say, although he met the air above our heads
Gazing across a sea of eager ears he was
Ears glazed by the doldrums of clever poetrytalk.
Yes, I once met a Chinese Poet.
He was waving words at us, shockwaves of anger and frustration
Of inbetweenness, of needing to be placed and needing to be placeless
Words, perhaps, if he could admit it, of regret.
But he was too clever for that.
He was a Poet, after all, trading on words of cleverness
Turning the light off to make things clearer
And revelling in his smug multilingual skills, dipping and slipping between words

Eloquently fluent in his almost broken English
Eloquently fluent in his almost broken command of language
Eloquently fluent, as a Poet Should Be
Parading his designer Chinglish, challenging us with an intellectual orientalism
Forcing our interstitial cross-cultural senses, Bhabhaesque
Playing with an exotic, invented, pictographic language
Englese teasing us willing recipients.
Chinese and English and English and Chinese and Chinese and English and English and
Chinese
Extolling the advantage, indeed virtue, of being between, within, outside, inside,
nowhere, and everywhere
Translating, transposing
Inventing and growling and yapping and laughing at the world
Discussing the unknowable, the incomprehensible,
And being articulately incomprehensible
He tells us How Important It Is To Be Unpublishable.
He took a breath and then asked us:
Bad Poetry, Can You Write Bad Poetry?
So Bad that it is Truly Awful, for that is the Only Really Good Poetry
Why be Good? Why be Average? Why say Nothing Worth Saying?
But before our collective minds could answer, he declared:
Fuck You Australia!! Yes!! Fuck You Australia!!
As never before declared in Australia
A Poem for Australia, A Poem of Australia, A Poem in Australia
A Poem never to be recited in Australia.
We all nodded, wisely
Yes, we were probably all thinking
And yes, we were probably all reacting
(Inwardly, for it does not do for a PoetryAudience to be outwardly shocked)
Just as he probably wanted us to think
And just as he probably wanted us to react.
But
This Is Poetry
So, sagely we all clapped, laughing with nervous edge, feeling just a Little Bit Clever
Our middle class minds patting our middle class backs
Our middle class intellects congratulating our middle class abilities to be Daring
To accept profanities, and rudeness, and shocking and seemingly anti-Australianness
As something Rather Clever.
Our collective in-breaths applauded the Audacity, accepted the Audacity
How Clever!!
Nodding in silent Australian agreement, a conformity of recognition
How Clever indeed!!
For He Is A Great Poet.

Picture this – Hong Kong August 2004

Picture this a bar with Abba playing and English oaks and special Heineken on special
In tropical airconditioned airconditioning except when it doesn't work International
Hotel

AND forget the rest

The trickity trackity trams and the MTR and the smog and the bits and the pieces
spilling onto street side from shops bigger than a postage stamp but not much more
and a million times livelier

The highrise rise rise rise everywhere everywhere walls of protection
high high into the smog and the disappearing into the sky such as it is
And the boats floating on nothing the tide floating and the stillness of polluted water in
the bay

Tide swallowing

When I read the tourist brochures I realize this is HONG KONG

Wonders Never Cease Hong Kong Wonders on Tour Highlights Highlights Highlights
Highlights ever Highlights

except for the one million the two million the three million and the more

who live a million feet above the street and ignore the

Hong Kong Dolphin Watching Morning Tea and Tai Chi Tour the Heritage the Heritage
the Heritage

Heritage Tour Horse Racing Happy Valley Lantau Island Monastery (full day tour with
vegetarian lunch)

da da da da

Here come the busses double decker double decker double decker double back back
wheel

in imitation of the old country but only in Hong Kong could these dinosaurs look just as
they should

And I don't mean China me old china voices English voices China China China
American voices

Dutch German China Scottish Lost in translation Chinese Chinese Chinese

It's all Chinese to me but no one really cares

Do they notice the tourists there's no bumping in crowds there's no threat

Bugger them all 'cos no-one knows what they're doing here least of all them

Let's get back to that Tourist Trail the Real Hong Kong Harbour Tour by Night
when all decent people are scurry scurry scurrying shopping when the heat's not too
hot

and the life's the street spilling cheap clothes and plumbing and colours and and and
and and and on the street

medicines and magazines jackhammers by night

AND it's down there on the Java Street and it's out there on the Electricity Street

And the King's Road and the Causeway Bay and the North Point and Kowloon

and it's Hong Kong Island and it's places and it's places and it's places

and it's people and it's people and it's people

The great history of street names ignore the business and walk all over them

The buses keep rumbling and the trams keep rumbling and the MRT just smooths
along

gliding ferries ferries ferries trams and people

So picture this lost in translation with Abba and Tom Jones and the sixties crooning to a
drum machine

Romantic ballads bold as Cher white chiffon and amazing cover stuff just as well we
came to Hong Kong for the genuine cover
young singers too young to know
and from the other end of the world ageing tourists nod sad memories
You've come all this way for sad memories from seventies Midwest for
recognition for a lost youth beyond the ken of Hong Kong

Business men white shirt black slacks lost from the west and happy from the east
Consuming the Abba the whiskey the flushing flushing and flushing drunk in a way the
strutting white fellow business men cannot
Lost tourists sitting upstairs lost lost and lost foreign land in the foreign bar foreign land
in the foreign street
the guide it not here for the Real Hong Kong

Picture this.

My words must be careful – Ngurrara

My words must be careful I must be careful how I craft my words
for my words must be careful they must care how they craft my voice
My words your words are spirits and the spirits are everywhere
Not the ghostly passages of European tales
although they are here too whispering regret
Not the angry spirits of protestant repression of catholic beatification
although they are here too in glorious redemption falling over
But the spirits of the soul of the earth of the air of the existential now
The spirits beyond my words the spirits who so carefully crafted this earth
And gave us what we call with hesitation law

Yes I must be careful how I craft my words
for they will also be hesitant inadequate
Too shallow too deep too other world to other history to touch the meaning
But they are what I have and they are what I must use
They are the reality readily labelled words just words embedded in my vision of the
world
As entity idea physical visual sensual conceived in my present and past experienced

Deeper karma nirvana heaven holy ghost intrudes reminders of other worlds
Not mere spiritual trinkets faeries playing dancing teasing
or leprechauns prodding kicking biting stealing with malevolent joy
But deeper the joy of existence I feel it in my words
Words stumbling over ripples of other worldliness a heartbeat missed the deja vu of
coincidence
The crying country weeping in pain ageing before its time sad to see the passing of old
friends
By chance my words crawling limping falling over
meet an old unknown a new friend
Ngurrara

I have to talk of my words for this is all I have words is all it is
The flow of words like water over stones hiding mirroring shaping reshaping
speaking of the riverbed the catchment sheep grazing trees murdered water running
away
words words words water words shapeless in themselves yet shaping and shaping and
shaping our futures
formed in reflected depth formed of a history and forming the history
the flow of words is all I have

Your flow is Ngurrara and I hear a glimpse of Ngurrara
The Ngurrara the country that speaks of love and being and creation
Ngurrara listen to the Ngurrara Ngurrara I and Ngurrara II
If you listen close still and shut eyed if you listen to the words rippling across country
You will hear Ngurrara and you will see Ngurrara
And you will listen for the Wangarr and you will listen for the Mangi
Rumbles of the tongue foreign to mine rumbles so slight you may miss them
If you do not listen rumble of the fundamentals the Wangarr and the Mangi
If you do not listen you will walk blind across Wangarr Mangi and that would be wrong

The ghost spirits the spirit ghosts the images of the soul the soul of the image
Of the reality the images remain forever
Listen to the Ngurrara echoing through the earth
The gentle feet the voices the gentle shoosh the rumble of stories
telling the ever present past and present the very being
Echo across the years and through the years and against the years
Through the forever timelessly alive a law a spirit a spirit law

And yet with this help my mind and my voice are stumping settler blind through the
dust
My feet stumble blind tripping blind over Mangi Mangi of the earth of the place
Of all the ancestral beings who wince at my clumsiness if I am lucky they pity me
Here and now
My feet and my mind stranger blind to the soil the dust the ochre to the air to the water
to the beings alive alive alive
The desert is in my mind the desert is alive and wakening to the Wangarr and to the
Mangi
to the Wangarr words to the Wangarr
for it is there for all to see if we tread lightly listening sightening

But Ngurrara also made me cry for it is not mine and I am sad to loose something I
never had
I read of auctions of sales of money of masterpieces and I sense the loss
the value so much greater than the money
The Mangi is enduring I must believe so much more enduring than the money and the
moneyed lives
But my sadness must pass
for the gift of the Ngurrara is so much greater thank you
Thank you thank you thank you Skipper and Chuguna and all the others whose names I
do not know
Thank you thank you Geraldine who opened the window to let me meet Ngurrara

Thank you all for telling your stories for sharing the Ngurrara

For lifting my eyes my words for lightening my step for opening the way to Ngurrara
and Wangarr and Mangi

To Ngurrara the country the language the law the story the everything the flow
though I will never really know it

To Wangarr the ghost image as best as a white fellow can translate the ghost image
englishword

That I can imagine all things remain memories alive

although I can never really know Walmajarri words Walmajarri Wangarr I am sorry

And to Mangi the spirit the soul the reality the discernable after the departure

the discernable long after the person has gone the englishwords failing again

But I can imagine lover's memories palpable real enabling in their certainty

But not the Walmajarri words the Walmajarri images my words mere dotes and strokes

Infant fumbblings of language

White imagining Walmajarri reality

I am sorry but thankful for the glimpse.

A discussion – So What?

Given this poetic, geographical and, admittedly, personal journey, I now return to my original research questions. Have I captured the essence of the places and landscapes I have visited? Do these expressions reflect a sense of place that transcends traditional geographical data? And did Porteous truly open a geographic window otherwise closed to me?

I would argue that the answers are yes; part of the evidence lies in a growing sense of my own global place in the world, of a clearer sense of the groundedness of here and now, and of my emerging acceptance with being, as a New Australian, displaced and placeless. However, is better to characterise this affirmative as being not only (or rather than) capturing the essence of the places and landscapes I have visited, but I have captured *my* essence of these places and landscapes. Clearly the poems simply represent my own personal and subjective understandings, a given that the reader will have to take as given.

However, returning to Porteous' (1985) conceptual framework for humanist literary geography, it is possible to claim that these poetic essays genuinely depict a 'sense of place' – albeit couched in terms of overlapping senses of many places – in ways that other media, more objective geographical writing, for example, may find harder to. The great travel writers – the Eric Newbys of the world – also create poetries of place, drawing on their ease of language to create prose grounded in the personal experience. Other themes from Porteous, furthermore, abound in these poems. While they are all explicitly about the 'traveler' – that was, at that time, my sense of self-being – they all, as I re-read them, more strongly capture a sensibility of 'entrapment'. The places are inhabited by people struggling to belong or to escape; the places are entrapped by externalities other than what might be considered to be their objective realities, the impacts of war, the clashes of East and West, the weight of history, the shackles of cultural stereotypes ... We could equally identify (Porteous') elements of 'journey, exile, yearning'.

The opening poems – ‘On the Border Crossing to the Land of Reconciliation’ and ‘Kiss – reconciliation, a start’ – represent a self-reflection during the few years that had past since I first visited my mother’s homeland in central Europe. She was a refugee after the war, and had not had the opportunity to return to her home in half a century. I was returning to stories and pictures; she was returning to her life. It took fifty years for her to return to her village, for her to meet the people now living normal lives in her home – not her home now, it was then; it will always be her home but never can be. I had lived long enough in Australia to be aware of the importance of reconciliation. In a village a million cultural miles away, I first plumbed greater depths of reconciliation – not just the worries and uncertainties of the displaced and the replaced, the refugees and the incomers, the former and the new citizens, the march of history and re-history, the writing and the re-writing, the marks it these all leave on all involved.

But how was I to write about it? I gifted myself a set chronicle of pre-war memoirs from the village – several volumes is what might be taken as objective writing about this complex place – and almost wept when I saw the faces in the photographs, faces of comfortable lives, normal lives, lives with futures, faces with the innocence that only comes with having no idea what can possibly come, what can possibly destroy everyone’s future. I cannot tell these stories; they are part of me, but are not mine. Can I really write about them? How do they tie into my own story? I did tell stories on my return, but who can really appreciate my faltering sense of history? My accent is wrong, it comes from the other half of my history, and my displaced history remains hidden: school in post-war Britain taught me that much. Hidden histories. Aboriginal friends became my best listeners. One in particular is most articulate about his family’s disarticulation, disruption, forced moves, loss of country, constant reassertion of being. Sharing personal histories one day, he heard me out, remaining silent and thoughtful. His comment, finally: we are all the same really. I thank him.

In the meantime, I traveled: was that the ghost of my history? Denied the forced displacement of my forbearers, I seem to have sought voluntary displacement. In review, many years later, I ask whether this the fate of the New Australian? In an untroubled life, travel provides a modicum of anxiety, tension, uncertainty. It also opens a small window on difference, a possible reconciliatory window. I see much and forget more; snippets end up as words in letters, notebooks, scribbles on maps, book margins; poems trickle out. They guide me across the world to a reconciliation. And in this travel, I wrote, in bits – because it was only bits of the world that I would visit – the poem ‘Vitalis verdant’. This poem contained a poetic footnote². That footnote explains

² Footnote

J. Douglas Porteous

This is your Vitalis Verdant

Thank you:

Your Arctic Canoe: white life

Your Indian Poetry: brown life

Your Sacred Spaces: life beyond life

Your Environmental Aesthetics: beautiful life

Transcendental Geography

Thank you:

Your braveness a shot of human vitality

As brave as

Speeding bareheaded pillion riders

the convergence of geography and art, validating my efforts at writing geographical poetry. 'Vitalis verdant' won a prize somewhere for its capture of sense of place(s). This is evidence that Porteous can open a geographic window otherwise closed to writers.

The next step looks to other poets for validation. Opening with 'Byron Bay 2004 – Bad Poetry and the Great Poet', it gave license for the more frenetic 'Picture this – Hong Kong August 2004', another attempt to capture the vitality of place. Bad Poetry emerged after a day at the Byron Bay Writers Festival, an indulgence of listening to those who do the writing better or more successfully or more self-effacingly than I do. Words rattled around the mind, refusing to go away. Amongst these is a reaction to a Great Poet, whose name I have long forgotten, entering the consciousness in the car on the way home, nagging away, itching, annoying and laughing at me: can you write Bad Poetry, my subconscious is asking? Bah humbug, I'll show you. Let's forget the folly, but the Great Poet refuses to vacate his lodging in my mind. I gave in, and wrote the words a couple of weeks later. He will not go away, so here He is on paper. And in the end, I thanked him for the entertainment, education, a refreshing view on multiculturalism, cross-culturalism. I don't know if I am any the wiser, but it was fun. And it had given me license (again). Not long afterwards, it is 34 degrees, humid, and I am in Hong Kong. What can I write, objectively? It must be the most amazing city in the world! And I am scurrying around the streets, under the ground, through the lobbies of hotels, the street side shops, overpasses, along with everyone else. And I mean *everyone* else. There must be nobody at home, because they are all out here in the street. Except for the lost tourists, whose entrapment I share: this is my view of Hong Kong, at least it was for one evening. Next day it would be different. In rising to the challenge of Geographic Poetry (Porteous) and Bad Poetry (The Great Poet), I sense a convergence of Porteous' humanist literary geography framework elements: I am, explicitly now, a traveler rather than just an observer, seeking to capture some sense of place, equally explicit in my own entrappedness and that of those I chose to write about. It is now clear that this is writing about people rather than place *per se*. The geography was becoming more complete.

To close my poetic journey, my exploration of Porteous' opening of the door, the poem 'My words must be careful – Ngurrara' provides an attempt at resolution. Bringing me explicitly back to Australia, and, importantly, to Australian place-making, I sought them to find a place as a New Australian in this continent. The poem, however, remains as exotic and not-mine as anything I had written previously. I stumbled across this one, global jet-setting, an accidental find at 35,000 feet, a gem that sparked an "ah ha!" moment. But it was a tricky one. The ideas are rich, but they are not mine; they can never be mine, not anywhere near mine. But they resonate, and so I worried about the words – Ngurrara, Wangarr, Mangi. Could I use them? They spoke something to me, they meant something ... They sparked an agreement, a sense of how it is. But was I just another word thief? Was I just another land taker, another country taker? Could I use the Walmajarri words without cultural rape? Could I pretend to even part understand? Did they really talk to me or was this just an imagination?

Green city/red river Hanoi rush hour
Still alive
Vitalis verdant

And there was worse. I entered this Walmajarri world second hand. I was standing outside, on the edge of this Walmajarri world, perhaps a mere speck of dust on the edge of the Walmajarri country, courtesy of a second hand experience. My entry was through a whitefellow's writing – another edge of country – that were the writings of a journalist (Geraldine Brooks) who told another story, not really the story of the country, the Ngurrara. The real writing, however, was the work of Pijaju Peter Skipper, Jukuna Mona Chuguna and the many other residents of Fitzroy Crossing who painted Ngurrara I and Ngurrara II. I was mediating several times over; was I also compromising several times over? And yet as I read about Ngurrara, about Wangarr and about Mangi, something stirred in my heart – or was it just a romantic tear? I thought it might be something deeper. I did feel moved, I have to say, if ambiguously moved. I felt moved to explore further, walk into the country. Was I no better than the rest of them? Maybe so, but I explored anyway. I explored the borderlands, the only lands I could explore, the borderlands between me and the Walmajarri, the borderlands between whitefellow and Ngurrara, the borderlands between many different realities. My apologies if my explorations were blind. My apologies if my feet were not as kind to the soil as they could have been. My apologies if my words were uncrafted. My apologies for all the sins of the past, the sins that I may commit again. But apologies are no bad thing these days, so please accept them as the best words I can find.

Conclusion

This essay charts a personal literary journey, grounded in fluidity of time and place that might be claimed to be typical of the place-making nature of geographical thought. Reflecting on poetry written nearly a decade ago, it provides an opportunity to reflect on whether Porteous' (1984) call for silence, and if not that, then poetry, can be true expression of geographical understanding place. It acknowledges the pragmatic in Porteous (1984: 373): "The publication of geographical insights in nontraditional forms could be the first step towards the goal of silent place appreciation". The geographies described above are non-conventional, subjective and personal. They are filtered geographies that could be emerging from the interstitial spaces that inhabit the place of interaction between cultural meanings (Bhabha, 1994). As such, they are constructed possibilities, rather than objective realities, and so reflect well Porteous' desire for an experiential geography. As a reality, however, they provide glimpses into the experiences of geographical displacement, that are probably encountered by many New Australians, and may, on reflection, be better described as expressions of metageographies, the "enunciative space(s) ... that ironizes the notion of geographical space itself ... the framework that presents the condition of possibility for geography, the architecture within which various geographies are housed" (Hegglund, 2012: 6).

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