

University of Technology, Sydney and University of New South Wales

Martin Harrison and Deborah Bird Rose

Postscript

Connecting: a dialogue between Deborah Bird Rose and Martin Harrison

MARTIN: It's hard to be conclusive at the end of this collection of essays and probably a mistake to try to be. I hope everyone enjoys them and also that they find them thought-provoking in terms of their future writing and their future thinking about teaching writing. I certainly don't want writing programs to become enclaves for ecology. After all, it has always been the case that literature proceeds directly and indirectly in relation to the great themes: writers don't just spell out good ideas. But serious, imaginative writing is alive always to the period in which it is written. And good writing responds to a problem and a technical challenge – a challenge of structure and ideas – as to what *can* be said and written i.e. also to what *can't* be expressed as much as to what can be. My own view is that it is this tension which produces innovation and new forms of writing. The great danger is that writing programs only teach what is already available, what can easily and effortlessly be said, and what is already known.

DEBORAH: Like a dog with an old slipper, I've been tugging at the relationships between text and ecology. I love the idea you've laid out in your essay concerning the performative potentials of writing. Just at the moment, thinking about ecology and writing, the context that comes to the fore out of your complex essay is that of ecological writings performing structure, pattern, and flow in a manner that sets up a buzz. In short, that ecological writing does in the text what life does in ecological connectivity. There is motion in flux, perhaps oscillation or, considering pattern, it may be best to think of orchestration. Now you're talking about the buzz between what can and can't be expressed, and you are showing a pathway by which the reader becomes implicated in the buzz / text / world.

When the four of us wrote up the call for papers for this volume, we were explicitly open-ended. How delightful it is that the essays also set up a buzz amongst themselves. And is this perhaps one of the most captivating expressions of the value of diversity?

MARTIN: Yes, it's a diversity. A plurality. And it's one based not on polemic – that is, merely different points of view – but on a more natural engagement with process and cognition. To be frank, I'm tired of all the 'my-point-of-view' emphasis given to so many young, inexperienced writers in writing programs. Finding out who you are and what you think is a risky business because, once you have done so, you can all too often discover you have nothing further to say. Among the several things that writers

do is that they discover ‘deep’ design concepts to do with experience and living and relationships and human nature. They may not set out to do it in a clear-headed ‘Heh, I’m off to discover the South Pole!’ kind of way. Far from it. But a revelation of what you so elegantly call structure, pattern and flow is what eventuates. Good writing is, in this way, a sort of map for living no less than it is symptomatic of the world in which the writer lives. A particular concern of mine in that essay was that we don’t forget the humanness of all of this: humans may well be the agents of ecological catastrophe but we are also part of the picture. To understand the non-human world is key to ending the current holocaust of species, landscapes, natural resources, air and water. But to get a sense of the non-human is not straightforward. For one thing, perhaps we can’t talk (as I just did) about a non-human ‘world’.

DEBORAH: I am struck by the fact that so many of the essays in this collection are seeking to bring human and non-human together in broader patterns and quests, and that for the most part they are working with specifics rather than generalisations. This is essential for pattern, structure and flow. I had another dip into the essays, encountering Kluscap mountain, Wollombi Creek (and its Boggy Arm), the Yorkshire moor, and of course: magpies, wolves, coyotes, bloodwood trees and Tasmanian oaks; and clouds, perfect waves, and the eccentrically named ‘Look At Me Now Headland’; ravens, wallabies, lorikeets, nymphs, ducklings, butterflies, elephants, Gondwana swamps metamorphosed into coal, and much, much more. Several terms for ‘non-humans’ show up in the essays; I’m particularly taken by Hatley’s ‘fellow creatures’, and ‘living kinds’.

As I look through the essays at all the specificities of living kinds, I am struck, too, with the human complexity that comes to life in these essays. Here we are, as we are: daring, creative, thoughtful, biocidal, modest, angry, saddened, responsible, witty, conscientious, scathing and, in many of the essays, slightly stunned. If writing is both map and symptom, we might reasonably think that many of these terms apply also to our fellow creatures. Are they not also daring, creative, thoughtful, responsible and conscientious, and is there not from time to time anger and sadness? Indeed, are they like us, often slightly stunned?

MARTIN: That’s a wonderful way of putting it. And a great question. When you talked earlier about buzz and connectivity, I couldn’t help but think of that extraordinary sense of exactness and balance which occurs when the buzz is also trill and hum and rustle and clink and paw print and fragrance and stillness and moon-rise and leaf shadow - when, as it were, the whole place is alive and at work and communicating. When in your essay you talk about a kind of mindfulness, my sense is you are meaning a mindfulness that is something we are part of and orient ourselves in rather than something which we own or have. In fact, my sense of all of this is perhaps counter-intuitive: I think our own mind-body sense of the world is brilliantly limited, niched into the biosphere in a startling but very specific way. The more we can be aware that our own perceptions are operative as a self-sustaining ‘closed’ system – or as the biologists would have it, perception is systemically created and autopoietic – then the more sensitised we will be to all the new information around us and, at least, we will be conscious that there are huge territories we don’t process. In the best of ways, humans are caught in that moment of transfer between thing and

thing, no less than the flying foxes and the flowering trees are caught in dialogue (I'm thinking of another essay of yours) or the corpuscle and the virus. Are mountains, winds, plants, beetles, flowers, wallabies and yabbies (to mention just a few!) all as stunned as we are? My reply is something as follows: anyone alive and well from a time, an imaginary day, back in the 1980s will be aware that the natural 'world' has been looking at us across a larger and larger gap. You could even say it has been making its farewells. At first, very few people noticed the goodbyes. It may still be the case that not enough people understand how irrevocable those goodbyes are and how much we are losing as each one occurs. (It would be merely to quote Heidegger to point out how the source of the problem is that we currently have too much humanness in the world: too many things reflect humans, mirror humans and speak humans and the loss to human understanding is irreplaceable.) At the same time, as the natural creation goes away, never has it been more beautiful, more tragic, more valued – indeed, never has it been more scientific and studied and researched and photographed. We live in a time of maximum natural beauty, so to speak. Richard Attenborough could belong to no other period. Deserts are now complex living systems. A trace of water flow from millions of years ago on the surface of Mars is the most hopeful sign of life. These paradoxes present real challenges for those of us who work with language and poetry and creative mindfulness (to borrow your term.) They also offer something quite new and different in how we write and how we gather focus in the work we are doing.

In other conversations, you have wanted to talk about my poem *White-Tailed Deer*. It's true that in that poem (hopefully) a rich diverse system has come together. This is not because I wanted it to, but because in order to be a poem it had to come together. There is even the risk that it will all fall apart and that it won't make sense that the local sunset had to meet the up-state New York night and that the deer have something to do with it. I had been entranced by them, by their watchful presence, in that deep, often re-growth forest. It was on the border between New York State and Vermont. It took me a couple of years to get the original drafts unfocussed and then re-focussed. You see, I'm not just a slow writer but a really lazy one!

DEBORAH: You know yourself best (maybe!), but I'd dispute the term 'lazy'. The multiple time dimensions through which living beings speak, and the terrible slowness with which many of us humans manage to respond, is not so much laziness, I think, but more like struggling through some awful nightmare. The terrible realisation today is that to wake from a nightmare is to emerge into another one. I keep thinking (always) of the flying foxes who are at this moment being tortured in the effort to force them to leave and never to return to their home camp in Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens. For them, as for the flying foxes in Queensland who are being shot, each day is a fresh nightmare, each generation is subjected to a new biocide, and in spite of the dedicated, sometimes heart-broken people who protect, defend, rescue, care, and seek to assist them back into the symbiotic life of blossoms, nectar, nourishment and pollination, nothing is ever enough. And so the loss of generations, and the loss of ecosystems, and the loss of the human capacity to stretch outside the boundaries of this self-made prison of righteousness and knowing goes on rendering more suffering,

more death, more distance, more loss of all those within whose company we could have thrived, and who could have thrived with us.

The time scales are outside our ordinary frames. The poem that speaks beyond the frame, that takes minutes to read but years to write, takes even more years on the part of plants, animals, and human culture to have arrived at that particular nexus. If like yours it succeeds, it becomes an achievement in binding time, species, place, and culture; it lets us glimpse through the membrane of closure into other worlds, times, creatures, and forms of love, and to grasp, again, that moment in which the future was (is?) still open.

White-tailed deer

The small thump from nowhere, someone turning
 a piece of tin, a door's buffeting noise closing across the gulley,
 a neighbour – what are they doing out there? – dropping a trailer or a drum
 in a paddock where damp grass's been drying out these last twenty minutes
 in a final sun cube whose shattered gleam just now has
 flooded through sprays of half-grown bluegums
 traced on the shed-wall –

it happens – where? –

closing in mid-air between two never identified twigs
 six metres up, or caught behind a bird song (was it that?
 or just some other sound) caught the thousandth time
 from outside the kitchen door, magnified for a second or two
 then forgotten just as many thousand times. Like the thump,
 it's forgotten so intensely that we all hear it as an event
 not really known as an event, one which shifts
 the breath, the blood-surge, and how we see,
 back into shape. For a moment you understand
 dazed ecstasy – it's a squawky wattlebird landing
 (no, that's a dream half-merged with a memory)
 or it's the elbow's jerk with which the car boot slams,
 happenings which aren't noticed or which can't be,
 how the shopping brought home brushes the passage wall,
 how events change time's flow beneath perception.
 Really, you've no idea what's going on. You hardly grab a thing.

Networked. Transformative. Yes, the world glimmers.
 The flash lies in the grass, is something and is nothing.
 The yellow-throated bird scrabbles in the rangy grevillea.
 A great ocean withdraws into perspective over my shoulder,
 in the shadows of untended trees. A hum overtakes the orchestra
 and a striated sense of inevitable time surpasses each local thought.
 It's as if you can be fearless – a second or two – about
 what's inextricable in feeling and movement and mood.
 A dance becomes a fight, bodies tangled, then a dance again.

The light goes down like a glittering dark boulder buried in the soil.
 An aurora flares in the half-heard resonance around the thing –
 the thump, the door closing, the click that passes you by –
 while intangibility takes a serpent's shape of wind-brushed molecules.
 And how will it end? this half-traced ecstasy at merely being here.
 Could anything be heard other than the after mode
 of how we got there, made it out? Suddenly you realise
 you're hearing a night-time forest floor, a twig snapped –
 not this last light with its thin, gold trees and ragged openness –
 but a moment's hesitation one night in a foreign country:
 I was in up-state New York, there was a house in the woods,
 there was indoor light of a dinner party, good people, drinks.
 I'd stepped outside to get a sense of things, their loitering depth.
 Earlier I'd seen startled deer leap a stone wall tumbled into bracken.¹

Endnote

1. 'White-tailed deer' appears in Martin Harrison's chapbook of poetry, *Living things: five poems* (2013).

Works cited

Harrison, Martin 2013 *Living things: five poems*, Sydney: Vagabond P

Poet and essayist, Martin Harrison's most recent book Wild Bees: New and Selected Poems (UWAP 2008) was shortlisted for the Western Australian and South Australian Premier's awards as well as the ACT poetry prize. His work regularly appears in journals in Australia and in the UK. A further selection of his poems, A Kangaroo Farm: Selected Poems, translated in parallel texts of Mandarin and English, appeared in Nanjing in 2008. A French selection of his poems is currently in process. His essays and talks mostly are about poetry, writing poetry and the relationship between art and the environment. Some of these were collected in Who Wants to Create Australia, nominated as a Times Literary Supplement Book of the Year in 2004. He is a founding member of the Kangaloon Group for Creative Ecologies. He lives in the Hunter Valley in New South Wales and is a Senior Lecturer at University of Technology, Sydney, where he supervises in the areas of poetics and philosophy and teaches writing and poetry.

Deborah Bird Rose is Professor in the Environmental Humanities Program at the University in New South Wales. Her research focuses on multispecies communities in this time of extinctions. She is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia, and a founding co-editor of the new journal Environmental Humanities. Recent books include Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction (University of Virginia Press, 2011), the re-released second edition of Country of the Heart: An Indigenous Australian Homeland (2011), and the third edition of the prize-winning ethnography Dingo Makes Us Human (2009).