

The Anthropocene Lyric: an affective geography of poetry, person, place, by Tom Bristow, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, ix + 139 pp., £45.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-137-36474-6

'The making of place as a dynamic of couplings,
as if love and trust are omens, odds in your favour.'

John Kinsella, *Jam Tree Gully*

The passage above, taken from *Arrival: First Lines Typed at Jam Tree Gully* is by no means an attempt at favouritism; the poem is in fact deceptive and highlights the hyperseparation that has occurred between the human and the environment. The human enters into an environment in which (based on historical events) his/ her presence is unwelcome. The desire to connect is underlined by the wrongness of this act which leads to the decalibration of an ecosystem that would otherwise be stable. The conflict between benefitting nature and wronging it is present throughout *Jam Tree Gully* and is a key issue of the Anthropocene for writers as well as Environmental Humanities scholars. Passages in Bristow's chapter such as *The World of the Jam Tree* stimulate a shift in perspective which is not only necessary but also welcome.

Following the poem in the *Prologue* with one titled *Arrival: First Lines Typed at Jam Tree Gully* is important in signalling the initial reaction to place, and this immediacy is necessary in order to observe the first palimpsestic layer of the landscape; the following poems peel layers one by one, and through this immersion it is the human that is left barren and not the landscape; nature ultimately has the power of restoring itself of regrowth even under extreme circumstances but the human conscience once depleted cannot regrow easily.

In his study, Bristow takes an in-depth look at the aforementioned collection alongside Burnside's *Gift Songs* and Oswald's *A Sleepwalk on the Severn*. Comparing and contrasting these works both to each other and to others, in order to place the first stepping stones across this 'new ground for Anthropocene scholarship' (4), but most importantly linked to humanities research.

Kinsella's *Jam Tree Gully*, is an anthro-po-invasion into the landscape that has had its pristine state destroyed by previous colonisers and creatures but also that of indigenous people, such as the Noongar. According to Hughes d'Aeth, it engages 'in a more radical process of deconstruction and reconstruction, one which changes the terms by which we are to understand the natural.'ⁱ Despite the fact that the term *radical* is being used more and more often in Anthropocene research in order to highlight processes, actions and the state of things, Bristow uses it with care, only a handful of times in *The Anthropocene Lyric*.

The landscape is perceived horizontally as an expansion whose pulse fluctuates from being conquered to being free, from being healthy to being damaged and so on. Kinsella's verticality extends past the trees and flying creatures (including eagles and bees) to the moon, in a similar way to Oswald, which 'ranges free'ⁱⁱ, its light 'so fierce'ⁱⁱⁱ blending into a 'phosphorescent darkness'^{iv} in *Insomnia at Jam Tree Gully*, a key poem towards the end of the collection.

From the very beginning Bristow outlines 'three anchor points' (2) to his study, these being "place perception", "more-than-human worlds" and "Anthropocene emotion" (2). They are all a part of the poems explored and linked to each other but they are explored individually. The three collections are carefully chosen and each outlines an essential area: the pastoral (radical), the urban and the uncountryside. The three poets have set themselves a difficult task: to try and capture environments which are divided between human and more-than-human *hands*, between cultural and actual geographies, the former only comprehensible to the human, the actual geographies often ignored by the latter.

The second collection explored, Burnside's *Gift Songs*, is approached by drawing on Heidegger's non-hierarchical views of the human and animal, and Rilke's distancing of the human from home or origin through 'a disorientating consciousness of time' (70). Bristow refers to Burnside's 'artificiality of the poem'(74) which remains 'tethered to religious lexis that indicates an event of the embodied soul, an advent of interconnection and the more-than-human in terms of *physis*'(74) in a Heideggerian sense. Drawing on Husserl, Bristow's take on *Gift Songs* outlines human connectedness to various places as opposed to a singular one, in which 'place is configured by the foregrounding *lebenswelt*' (17). The world is *erlebt*. What does it mean for the world to be *erlebt* in the Anthropocene, and by whom? Bristow moves on to outline the *Five Animals* in Burnside's collection which all live in and experience the world in a different way to the human. Compared to Burnside's previous collection *The Light Trap*^v, *Gift Songs* lacks the 'desire in any of the four quartets to communicate a deep connection with biological life' (76). Burnside's theology is rooted in the present and does not look to the future; it is this unconcern that links his work to the Anthropocene, according to Bristow (68).

Oswald's *Sleepwalk on the Severn*, featured alongside her previous collection *Dart*^{vi}, is the third and last collection in *The Anthropocene Lyric*. The journey undertaken is perhaps felt the strongest in Oswald's two works, and the voices that are collated such as: the walker, the naturalist, the fisherman, the canoeist, the swimmer, the oyster gatherers, the boatman, the ferryman, and many more who are in one way or another connected to the *Dart* take turns to tell their story, and their voices are coming together as if the river itself is speaking and 'mapping a collated human experience' (10).

One of the interesting aspects is the repeating pattern of the conclusions to each of the three chapters. The first conclusion to Kinsella's *Jam Tree Gully*, is a 'salutary' one to a 'golden age fallen and irretrievable' (45). The second, to Burnside's *Gift Songs*, is 'sanguine', drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's 'momentary law of the Anthropocene lyric that entails a body in space' (76). The third one, to Oswald's *Sleepwalk*, is 'provisional', it being read by Bristow as 'an incomplete dialogic interaction between human and estuary as a total sum of separate, dispersed and unfixed agencies' (106).

The Anthropocene Lyric has the feel of a much longer book due to the fact that each passage is important and the narrative flows lightly, even though the topics discussed are by no means light. The term Anthropocene has become common parlance in the Environmental Humanities and is not easily overshadowed by any other. It is a trigger for various kinds of related poetry: ecopoetry, radical landscape poetry, nature poetry etc. but there is an underlying sense that we are running out of time; this seems to weave its way through the altered landscapes featured in all three collections. Through a careful selection of writers and texts, *The Anthropocene Lyric* is a useful tool that can be used to explore the relationship between the human and more-than-human world within the context of the Anthropocene, where poetry has a firm foothold.

ⁱ Tony Hughes d'Aeth, 'The Fissured Future: John Kinsella's *Jam Tree Gully*', *English Academy Review*, 31(2), 2014, pp. 138-155.

ⁱⁱ John Kinsella, 'Lichen Grows in the Moonlight', *Jam Tree Gully*, New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012, p.51.

ⁱⁱⁱ Idem.

^{iv} John Kinsella, 'Insomnia at *Jam Tree Gully*', *Jam Tree Gully*, New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012, p.151.

^v John Burnside, *The Light Trap*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2002.

^{vi} Alice Oswald, *Dart*, London: Faber and Faber, 2002.