

KILLING TIME

(extract from work in progress with john kinsella, per se)

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Abstract

This essay is a fictocritical meditation upon the contemporary transformation of temporal experience as we find ourselves embarked upon an accelerating process of climate change and species extinction, including possibly that of the human species. The essay offers an extended reading of a recent villanelle published in John Kinsella's *Book of Villanelles* (Arc, 2020) that in turn responds to a controversial project by the Adani mining consortium to begin extracting coal over a large swathe of Wangan and Jagalingou country in the Central Queensland Galilee Basin. The essay is an extract from a collaborative work in progress by John Kinsella and myself, *Per Se: On the Imperatives of Place II*, that will appear in early 2021 with Narr, building upon *'temp(ə)rərɪnəs: On the Imperatives of Place* (Narr, 2018).

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Some months earlier, John Kinsella had sent me the manuscript of his new book of villanelles. There, I had found a couple of lines that kept going through my mind in that turbulent week of world politics, lines that enjoined one “to feel the shift of media politics to one based / in re-tunings and refrains, escaping anthropocene prolapse” (“Frolic Villanelle (+),” in Kinsella, *Brimstone* 69). It was certainly a week of “media politics,” and we got more than our fair share of “anthropocene prolapse” (relapse? proleptic collapse?) as well.

The day I began writing this piece, the UK Supreme Court in London ruled that Boris Johnson's prorogation of Parliament, which would have muzzled the legislature until ten days before the Brexit deadline, was null and void (Supreme Court UK). It was a decision that would most probably have seismic consequences for the constitutional landscape of the UK for a long time to come, so the commentators believed (Sedley).

An impeachment enquiry was initiated against President Trump, threatening to overshadow a possible second term in the White House (Gambino).

Ostentatiously attending a Chicago meeting rather than the UN climate summit in New York, the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison was evasive about when the current government would develop an emissions strategy for 2050, claiming that climate change was only one of a number of major issues to be tackled at the current time (Murphy, “Morrison Ducks”). This immediately sparking a worldwide petition on the part of dissenting Australians, which I, alongside many others, promptly signed.

Present at the climate summit, unlike the leaders of Canada, the United States or Australia, was Germany's Chancellor Merkel, who was hailed as taking a firm hand on climate policy – for a packet of measures that at home, however, were unanimously criticised by experts for being far too wishy-washy: they entail, for instance, an incremental price rise on petrol that is less than the customary daily price fluctuation at service stations (Klimapaket; Ulrich), and a coal-exit for 2038, almost a decade after the generally accepted cut-off point of 2030 (Kohleausstieg; Quaschnig).

At the summit, the young Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg delivered a distraught speech in which she launched a diatribe against world leaders for dereliction of duty with regard to the coming generations. She pilloried “the popular idea of cutting our emissions in half in 10 years [that] only gives us a 50% chance of staying below 1.5 degrees [Celsius], and [entails] the risk of setting off irreversible chain reactions beyond human control.” Addressing the politicians, she said, “Fifty percent [*sic*] may be acceptable to you. But those numbers do not include tipping points, most feedback loops, additional warming hidden by toxic air pollution or the aspects of equity and climate justice.” She then turned to the future, adding that such models “also rely on my generation sucking hundreds of billions of tons of your CO₂ out of the air with technologies that barely exist. So a 50% risk is simply not acceptable to us – we who have to live with the consequences.” Thunberg concluded: “You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you.”

Prime Minister Scott Morrison (Murphy, “Morrison Responds”) responded by condemning what he saw as stirring up “needless anxiety,” and demanding “a proper context and perspective,” adding,

I want children growing up in Australia to feel positive about their future, and I think it is important we give them that confidence that they will not only have a wonderful country and pristine environment to live in, that they will also have an economy to live in as well. I don't want our children to have anxieties about these issues.

Morrison's strategy for a perilous century entails downplaying the dangers and banking on his version of a strong economy – one that is buttressed by a tenacious perpetuation of the coal industry (Murphy, “Morrison Brings”; Paul).

In response to Thunberg's impassioned speech, an even more cynical twitter message from US President Trump read: “She seems like a very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future. So nice to see!”

A day later, Thunberg ironically hijacked the epithet, modifying her twitter profile from “climate activist” to “A very happy young girl looking forward to a bright and wonderful future” (Greve).

What can be detected in these examples from the moment when I was writing this piece is an all-pervasive preoccupation with time: with the human time of policy implementation on the one hand, and with the planetary time of climate change on the other. Just after the turn of the century, Jameson (“End”) lamented the “waning” of temporality (cf. Jameson, *Postmodernism* 16), echoing Foucault's similar comments several decades earlier. But true to Wood's countervailing prognosis at almost the same moment, time seems to have resurfaced with a vengeance: not under the rubric of historicism, though, nor as a phenomenological

“spiralling return to the focus and horizon of all our thought and experience” (xxxv), but far more as what was once diagnosed as a “future shock” (Toffler). Wood’s proposal for a “programme for the analysis of temporal structures and representations of time” looks woefully inadequate to describe the sort of dizzying vertigo that is currently engulfing us as we gaze into the accelerating maelstrom of climate change (xxxvi).

Both the time of politics and the time of the planet have become more and more aleatory and unstable, apparently welded to one another in some sort of a fateful positive feedback loop. The tempo of domestic political events appears to be accelerating: “Harold Wilson said a week is a long time in politics, it seems like an hour is a long time in politics at the moment,” commented the UK Attorney General Buckland during the Supreme Court prorogation hearings (qtd in Sparrow). Similarly, climate warming appears to be accelerating. The UN Secretary-General Guterres noted that “Climate is much faster than we are.” Almost all data on climate change are out of date by the time they are published (Gooding 35; Morton 13). Rates of warming are rising faster than expected (WMO). In spite of the sense that climate change is accelerating, however, planetary time, and the global political time it spawns, appear also to be dilating. Whereas political debate was once largely restricted to the space of a three- or four-year legislative period, we are now routinely confronted with longer time spans, such as the ten-year window of opportunity for climate action proposed by the IPCC, longer prognoses for climate migration levels benchmarked at 2050 (Rigaud et al.), or the all-too neat cap of eighty years set by climate methodologies’ insinuation of a “plateau” from 2100 (Mann and Wainwright 66).

These are timescales that we once would have found absurd or consigned to the loony bin of science fiction. Now they have become increasingly familiar. But, as Morton (209–11) points out, despite a significant shift of scale, these timescales of looming catastrophe, even extinction, are nonetheless unrepentantly anthropocentric in their underlying frames of reference, and many of the ecological responses to them under the rubric of “sustainability” are still caught up in the logics of oil extraction. Is there some other alternative? How to think our own place within a time that might not be that of anthropocentrism?

These were the thoughts that, like a gathering storm, had been gradually coalescing in my mind since the end of August, when John had sent me this poem from the new villanelles manuscript:

Extinguishment Villanelle (–)

“Queensland extinguishes native title over Indigenous land to make way for Adani coalmine – Palaszczuk government did not announce decision Wangan and Jagalingou people say makes them trespassers on their own land”

The Guardian, 31st August, 2019

As Theia impacted Gaia to water our residence
is not as the coal mine is to the biosphere –
the “left” performs fascism to extinguish land rights.
Not *that* many pay packets or flicks of a switch
or recharging of devices will come before the last fires,
though Theia impacted Gaia to water our residence.
All the words for origins, all the journeys and treks
down to the present – the elision of histories to pyres,

the “left” performs fascism to extinguish land rights.
Whatever our manners of eternity, surely evidence
of some form of earthly dwelling seems core,
though Theia impacted Gaia to water our residence?
And in the commerce of this *new colonialism* you get that sense
that *old colonialism* is firing up its kilns and boilers,
the “left” performs fascism to extinguish land rights.
Let’s stand with the people who know the essence
of the soil and what goes deep, who know the spoilers –
as Theia impacted Gaia to water our residence,
the “left” performs fascism to extinguish land rights. (Kinsella, *Brimstone* 72)

John’s poem and its terse epigraph sent me scurrying to find out what had unleashed this burst of creative fury. The news was dispiriting. The Queensland government had surreptitiously extinguished native title over a large swathe of Wangan and Jagalingou country in the Central Queensland Galilee Basin. A small majority of Indigenous groups had consented, but the remaining groups who resisted were only informed after the act that their title had been rescinded. They were occupying their land in protest, with the Queensland government threatening police action to evict them by force (Doherty). The Labor government in question had a track record of renegeing on promises made to community groups and the electorate generally, so this in itself was not entirely out of character. What rankled particularly, though, was that an ostensibly left-leaning government could revoke Indigenous title in such a brazenly cavalier manner, and what was worse, to the benefit of a fossil fuel multinational.

The larger irony of this story is one that pits the temporality of coal against the temporality of Country. What better an example of “anthropocene prolapse” (“Frolic Villanelle (+),” in Kinsella, *Brimstone* 69) could one find? It is bitterly ironic that the Australian government in general, and a state government in particular, is expanding an industry that is already out of date (see Quaschnig). The coal industry is an industry that had its heyday in the nineteenth century and was given an abrupt boost during the two world wars, but has in fact been receding in the face of other fossil fuel industries, notably oil and gas, themselves rapidly being overhauled by renewable energies. Coal is still much in style in some Global South nations, though countries such as China are leading the world in the transition to alternative energies. Elsewhere, though the age of steam is long gone, coal retains a residual role in fuelling old-style power stations, alongside various forms of synthetic fuel extraction such as that pioneered during the Second World War by Germany in the oil-scarce Third Reich, and later by boycott-hamstrung South Africa, where the home-grown Sasol initiative still exists today. Coal is, in fact, like the fossil fuel industries as a whole, “unviable,” not just at the local level of the Adani mine, which will only be economically sustainable thanks to gigantic state subsidies (Smee, “Adani Mine”), but on a planetary level, where our survival depends upon closing down the fossil fuel industries so as to cap the carbon emissions they cause. Perpetuating the existence of the fossil fuel industries is tantamount to hastening the end of our existence as a species of earth-inhabitants (Wallace-Wells); it is a form of “prolapse” (Kinsella, *Brimstone* 69), a “relapse” into a bygone energy age that is also “proleptically” ushering in the coming environmental “collapse” whose beginnings are already visible.

Conversely, it is paradoxical that the Australian Indigenous people, whose civilisation is one of the oldest persisting on the planet, with principles of ecological custodianship for Country at the core of its complex of beliefs (Rose, *Nourishing*), is being treated here as a hurdle to

technological progress, aided by anti-coal lobbies that “resurrect old and patently false and inaccurate claims” about fossil fuel industries (Adani). Such topoi recur again and again: Indigenous people are literally hindering the path of progress in Victoria, where modifications to the Hume Highway that threaten to destroy sacred trees near Ararat are being blocked by activists of the Djap Wurrung people (Martin). In Kinsella’s words, this “people who know the essence / of the soil and what goes deep” are being evicted from their millennia-old lands so that an international mining company can gouge ore out of Country and thereby advance the cause of late-Victorian industrial progress (*Brimstone* 72). In actual fact, it is Indigenous custodianship, focused here in Indigenous Title and in particular in sacred grounds, that offers a road map, ancient though it may be, for the future. Its message is very simple: respect and look after Country (and by extension, the planet), and it will look after you; neglect Country (or the planet) and you will finish by causing damage to yourself. Every introduction to Country rehearses the necessity of protocols displaying respect to the land on pain of incurring damage to oneself; such injunctions are to be found around the world, extending even to indigenous sea lore (see Mda 139). Kinsella’s villanelle describes “the elision of histories to pyres” in the relegation of this ancient custodian knowledge to the scrapheap of industrial pseudo-history (*Brimstone* 72). But in fact, what the perpetuation of the coal industry really means is careering faster and faster towards the end of our own history: Morton suggests that we should stop saying, euphemistically, “climate change” or “global warming” and have the courage to look the bleak truth in the face by saying “mass extinction” (44). In Australia, where increasingly severe droughts are cranking up the ferocity of bushfires, the shape of the future, and its cataclysmic, even apocalyptic heat as an unfolding “history [of] pyres,” are becoming increasingly visible:

Not that many pay packets or flicks of a switch
or recharging of devices will come before the last fires (Kinsella, *Brimstone* 72)
On 10 September 2019, barely ten days after the extinguishment of the Native Title by the Queensland government to give the deal to Adani, the Queensland Premier who had reneged on Indigenous land rights was forced to return from talks in Switzerland with the International Olympic Committee because of a pandemic of winter bushfires across Queensland and New South Wales that could not be extinguished (Bushfires). Even rainforests were burning under the influence of persistent drought, high winds and extreme heat (Smee, “Like Nothing”), precociously anticipating their transmutation into fossil fuel millennia before the due date.

The Adani spokesmen say that the scientific reports proclaiming the unviability of the mine are biased and inaccurate, based on “out of date data,” playing the modernity card against those archaic stragglers who cry extinction. In actual fact, their pillorying of scientific study does exactly what they accuse the scientists of doing: they reverse the real order of things. It is the entire fossil fuel industry that is unviable, even though fracking and last-ditch open-cut mining are extending its lifespan a little longer: however, modelling of energy production prices suggest that fracking and similar technologies mean that resources “collapse is not avoided but simply delayed by one to two decades [...] and when it occurs the speed of decline is even greater” (Turner 14). By contrast, more and more indigenous knowledge is coming to the fore as a repository of strategies for resilience, caches of futurity, in the face of climate change (IPBES 6, 8, 20, 21, 32, 33, 36, 37; IPCC 18–19, 37, 44; Mishra; Muecke; Nakashima, Krupnik, and Rubis). Such strategies are anything but anti-modern. Rather, they can be seen as hyper-modern, thanks to the resources they make available for climate adaptation and the way they point to future modes of existence. The Adani stance evinces a chiasmic inversion dating from the colonial period (see Cruikshank 18, 19–20, 255) that

accuses the Indigenous people of myopic benightedness, whereas in fact their archaic wisdom has in many ways been revealed to be more futuristic than modernity itself.

Kinsella's poem approaches these issues obliquely, initially via a negated parallelism. The villanelle compares the apparent catastrophe of the collision of the archaic planet Theia, which is thought to have collided with Gaia, the early earth, with the catastrophe of life-extinguishing work of a coal mine.

As Theia impacted Gaia to water our residence
is not as the coal mine is to the biosphere –
the “left” performs fascism to extinguish land rights. (Kinsella, *Brimstone* 72)

The debris that ensued from Theia's collision with Gaia subsequently coalesced into what became the moon (Young et al.), but it appears that much of the water that allowed life to emerge on the earth was owed to Theia (Budde, Burkhardt, and Kleine). By contrast, Kinsella's poem raises the questions of today's futures: What forms of debris will arise from the Adani mine, with which long-term consequences? Will they give rise to life, or “extinguish” it? The rest of the poem takes these refrains and weaves them in and out to construct its own temporality of repetition and alternation in a time of extinguishment and extinction.

Kinsella employs the villanelle form, setting up a double refrain in the first tercet, then alternating it in the subsequent tercets, only to cite the two parts of the refrain as the final couplet of the closing quatrain, and in this way performs a version of time that is highly apposite under the current epochal regime. The poem uses the negative comparison of the first and third lines as a chiasmic reversal that mockingly mimics that of the crossed-temporalities of the coal industry and the custodianship of Country. The superficially baleful collision of the celestial bodies generates life, whereas the presumably benign party-of-the-working-people reveals itself as a fascist eliminator of custodial responsibilities. Concomitantly, the celestial catastrophe generates planetary time, whereas the Left instantiates a “performative” (and thus generative, if we are to believe Butler) temporality of extinction. This chiasmic structure is perpetuated through the poem in the doubly embracing structure of the two refrains as they alternate in the second to fifth tercets. In the final couplet, the two refrains come to rest alongside each other in a forced apposition that once again inflects their constantly refracted implications (Gasparov 155). In this way, they deliver caustically ironic praise for the short-term greed of a state government that is “left” in name only.

By the same token, even as he takes the government to task for encouraging the retrograde inroads of predatory multinationals, Kinsella performs his own “anti-fascist” counter-temporality in the materiality of poetic diction. If rhythm is the texture of embodied, sensually experienced time, then poetic metre is a cognate of this tangible temporality. It is no chance that rhythm is also related to ritual (Han, *Vom Verschwinden*), for ritual's repetitiveness (“re-tunings and refrains,” in Kinsella's words (*Brimstone* 69)) *takes* time and *makes* time in a manner that is inherently resistant to the logic of extraction, accumulation, consumption and surplus value that currently dominates our epoch (Han, *Burnout; Transparency; Scent*). This is no mere literary-critical waffle: if we accept that the ecoverse is a single dynamic, interlinked whole, then the performance of rhythms of sustainability in one place will make a tiny but not totally negligible contribution to planetary negentropy in the whole (cf. Serres; see also West-Pavlov 99–101).

Kinsella's use of the villanelle form, with its insistently repeating double refrains, is peculiarly apposite to his undertaking. The villanelle is a poetic genre that goes back to early modern France. It has been recycled by a number of poets, in particular such luminaries as W.H. Auden ("Villanelle"), William Empson ("Slowly the Poison the Whole Blood Stream Fills") and Dylan Thomas ("Do not go Gentle into that Good Night"), as well as being satirised by Ezra Pound (Robinson 22–38). Unlike the sonnet, whose origins were courtly and elite, the villanelle has its roots (and etymology) in rural peasant culture and popular folksong, whence the alternating refrain structure that owes much to dialogical call-and-response patterns in oral culture (e.g., Finnegan 252–55). Kinsella uses the form in part at least because it implicitly references rural economies that, though they may have been intensely conservative and provincial, were frequently sites of resistance to elite power. Such elite power, connected to capitalism and the state, was increasingly loosed from connections to specific places and little interested in the natural logics of the landscape, in particular the cyclical rhythms of the seasons and agrarian practices (Scott; Williams). The villanelle is thus a distant relative of all those indigenous traditions of oral narrative, dance and music that encode and transmit millennial knowledge of the ecosphere that is part and parcel with indigenous custodianship of Country.

The use of the villanelle thus activates *longue durée* traditions of speech and song, merging in poetic form, which are related to the land, and that are then brought to bear upon even longer *longue durée* traditions of indigenous knowledge not merely of landscape, but of the agency of Country itself as a non-human actant with its own forms of terrestrial memory. It is important to note that Kinsella makes no claim to some sort of bogus indigeneity or rootedness in Country per se: however strong one's attachment to the Australian earth may be, he and I, as scions of white settlers, can never ingenuously or innocently stake such a claim (see Kinsella, *Beyond*). He refuses to indulge in ersatz jindyworobaking or "cric crac" mimicry. Rather, he draws judiciously upon a form that is European in origin but which has been migratory for much of its history, one marked by "journeys and treks / down to the present." It is a form that makes no claims to purity of origins because recycling, retooling and experimentation have become the substance of its tradition – if, that is, a lineage so subject to change can be still called a tradition. Kinsella ostentatiously signals his awareness of that anti-tradition by placing a "re-versioning" (see West-Pavlov 181–97) of the ur-villanelle, Jean Passerat's "A mon tourterelle" at the opening of his collection (Kinsella, *Brimstone* 8). But he has fiddled the form: Kinsella's rhyme-scheme is looser than Passerat's, and the opening line reverses the relationship between self and lost object. Where Passerat writes "J'ai perdu ma tourterelle," Kinsella inverts this into "My turtledove is lost," thereby displacing the self, albeit one hollowed out by loss, as the point of origin of the poem. Not such a bad idea, one might think, for a French early modern period where a notion of the self as we might understand it was still being negotiated (see, for instance, Barker; Compagnon; Greenblatt). A similar displacement concerns the poem as a whole: Kinsella's generic "Villanelle" is not in first place, but rather, constitutes the second piece in his anthology. This originary villanelle is not quite an origin, just as its speaker is not allowed to remain as the ultimate origin of speech.

But reading Passerat's villanelle with its expression of loss through the refraction of Kinsella's "re-versioning" emits one last irony. The contemporary enunciation of "My turtledove is lost" takes on a chilling immediacy if we remember that the turtledove is on the way to extinction. In the space of forty years, the British turtledove population has dwindled by well over 90 per cent, the German population by 90 per cent and the global population by 80 per cent (BTO; NABU). Passerat's poem can no longer be read as a metaphor for the

mourned demise of love. Five centuries after its original composition, at a time of “anthropocene prolapse” (Kinsella, *Brimstone* 69), it demands to be read, rather, as a literal expression of the processes of destruction that have unfurled since it was composed.

What we are experiencing at the moment, as our sense of temporalities and timelines undergoes tectonic shifts, is the recognition that we are not the origin of things (though it would seem that “we” as a species, and in particular “we” as the Global North, have quite a bit to answer for). Even more, we might come to see ourselves an anti-origin, a species so caught up in a delusion of its exceptionality, centrality and superiority that it has actually obliterated its own time-framework by destroying its immediate natural neighbours and the world around it. We are the species that has committed “aeonicide” (Rose, “Multispecies”) in an attempt to kill time itself. “Now I kill time and time kills me. Country ways! How I long for country ways,” Coetzee has one of his settler narrator figures say (80). But perhaps we may not be the “end” of things, as our own extinction begins to loom: older rhythms and patterns may carry on after us – Country, for instance, has been around for a while, and it’s likely it may outlive us yet. Are we perhaps mourning, correctly but in vain, our own anticipated demise?

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