

It's great to be here today at Lake Bolac, in Boolucburrer and Tjapwurrung country, at this extraordinary festival, this rich celebration of the place where we stand.

I'd like to begin by thanking Neil Murray for asking me to say a few words. Neil's music, poetry and other work has influenced my own thinking about history and land over the years, and I think Australia is lucky to have him.

I'm not from around here. I grew up on the southwest slopes of New South Wales, in Wiradjuri country, wheat and sheep country, near the Murrumbidgee River, many hours drive north and east of this place. Even though I'm from a long way away, I hope that what I have to say has some meaning for this place, for Lake Bolac, and for you here today.

I don't live anymore in the farming region where I grew up. I now live in a city. Like millions, probably billions of people around the world, my family became part of the ongoing and quickening process of rural depopulation, of a process where rural places are losing people to big cities. Every year since the 1950s in Australia, about 2000 farms have been incorporated into other farms. That's 2000 farmers or farming families leaving their land each year. And this doesn't include the tens of thousands of farm workers and their families who have left farms over the same period.

In Australia, no efforts are made by our governments to stem rural depopulation. Farmland and grazing land like the country around us here are seen by policy makers and industry as raw material for a modern primary production system, as a physical or natural base for globally competitive agribusiness. To compete in the global marketplace, farmers are encouraged to get big or get out. They must push more produce from their paddocks, and lease or buy more land.

Land needs people. And in Australia and in many other parts of the world, land is losing people. I think this is a problem.

The belief that farmland is a raw material for an industrial, export-oriented type of agriculture reflects a belief that land is inert, unresponsive, dumb, simple, and able to be incorporated or pushed into mechanistic systems of production.

But as many of us here know, land and the many species and natural forces that are part of it are complex, unpredictable, dynamic, expressive, and alive. A widespread and traditional denial within our modern industrial culture of the complexity, dynamism, and differences of land and places is, I believe, one of the main reasons why we are facing major ecological problems like dryland salinity and soil acidification in Australian agricultural regions today. Over the last fifty years, I learnt the other day, the salinity level here in the waters of Lake Bolac has tripled.

The denial of land within western culture, the denial of land's dynamic nature and the ability of land to speak to us, is reinforced in Australia and elsewhere by modern economics. Today like never before, as we all have experienced, the market rules. When the British colonisation of inland Australia began, the

inland slopes and plains became bound to global systems of production, trade and consumption.

For about two hundred years, the ways people have engaged with land at places like Lake Bolac have been shaped by forces arising elsewhere, by the insistent demands of distant marketplaces for food and fibre. As I see it, farmers are pushed and encouraged by market dynamics to put economic demands before the ecological needs of local places. There's little choice, flexibility, or independence. If they resist the forces of the global marketplace, they often can't make a living.

Responsibility for the wellbeing of rural places, I believe, lies with all of us—whether we live on a farm, or in a city or town. We are all nourished, our bodies kept warm and alive, by the scattered rural places where food and natural fibre are produced. Agriculture connects everyone in a very intimate way with farmland and with living natural systems. From this close connection, I feel, there rises an ethical obligation to care for the wellbeing and life of the places that give us life.

The city/country divide of which we hear so much about today does appear to be growing. As inland regions lose people and cities grow, there are less people living in cities with historical and cultural ties to the bush. Without much or any knowledge about rural places and people, it isn't easy for urban dwellers to care about what happens beyond the city.

Maybe the city/country divide is actually serving a purpose, serving powerful interests. If everyone in cities and in the country did take up their ethical responsibilities to care for the rural places that nourish them, if we collectively made sure that land was not subject to the intense, inflexible, and ecologically blind demands of urban and global marketplaces, then the changes in thinking and acting required would certainly clash with powerful economic and industrial ideologies and agendas.

The really valuable and unique thing about this festival here at Lake Bolac, I reckon, is that by being here and taking part in it, we're helping to place value on and communicate what is distinct and special about this place. When land is subject to powerful market forces, it seems to me that the complexity and distinctiveness of places is denied. If the market demands wheat, or blue gum woodchips, then wheat crops and blue gum plantations are forcefully imposed onto places. Powerful machines and industrial chemicals are required to push these standardised products from the land. Inevitably, a disordering and disruption to the local ecology will happen.

But if a group of locals can find ways to celebrate and communicate what is distinct and valuable about a place—like the eels of Lake Bolac—then maybe people from elsewhere can be gently drawn into relationships of care with this place. Maybe people elsewhere, whose decisions affect the wellbeing of rural places like this one, will begin to respond to the particular needs of this place, one of the many rural places that nourish people who live elsewhere. Relationships of mutual care—of places giving life to people, and people giving life to places—may then develop.

Maybe then, we can create a situation where the expressiveness, dynamism, complexity and differences of places can be widely acknowledged and engaged with. Many farmers in Australia are trying to develop alternative styles of farming, styles better suited to and integrated with the particular natural patterns of their farms. These farmers, it seems to me, are often entering into a dialogue with land, listening and responding to the expressive nature of places, other species and natural forces.

Because land operates in complex and unpredictable ways, because the challenges posed by ecological disorder in Australia seem to be mounting, and because the economic constraints imposed by governments and the global marketplace are fairly brutal, I think that farmers who are seeking alternative ways of engaging with farmland, who are entering into dialogue with land, are extremely brave. To see land as a complex, dynamic and wounded entity, and to begin to engage with land while knowing this reality, is a pretty formidable task. People taking on this task need our support in my view, and I think festivals like this one—festivals that celebrate the distinctiveness of places—help to give that support.