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Kelly, Peter 2008, Breath : allegory, knowledge practices, youth at-risk, *in TASA 2008 : Re-imagining sociology : the Annual Conference of The Australian Sociological Association*, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Vic., pp. 1-15.

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Breath: Allegory, Knowledge Practices, Youth at-Risk

by

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Abstract

Youth and risk are *artefacts of expertise*, constructed at the intersection of a wide range of knowledges about Youth and so-called Youth issues: an intersection marked by institutionalised, scientific representations of education, family, the life course, risk, and so on. In this paper I suggest that the messiness of human experiences and existence requires knowledge practices in the social sciences that can rethink what counts as truth. These interests – which are grounded in the knowledge practices that frame the work being undertaken in a large scale, qualitative investigation of the *cultural drivers* shaping the alcohol practices of 14 to 24 year old Australian's - will be addressed through a discussion of the ways in which Tim Winton's (2008) new novel *Breath* can be read as an allegorical tale about the terror of being ordinary: and of the teenage years as being a time in a life in which the fear of being ordinary compels Winton's key characters to seek out, sometimes stumble upon, and embrace that which promises to make their's *a life less ordinary*. In these recollections risk is something that *breathes* energy and purpose into lifeworlds that are dominated by the institutionalised ordinariness of family, school, and work.

Key Words

Knowledge practices, youth at risk, governmentalisation, allegory, *Breath*

Introduction: Social Science, Youth at Risk, Evidence, Data, Truths.

I couldn't have put words to it as a boy, but later I understood what seized my imagination that day. How strange it was to see men do something beautiful. Something pointless and elegant, as though nobody saw or cared...In Sawyer...men did solid, practical things, mostly with their hands...there wasn't much room for beauty in the lives of our men [Pikelet recalling his first contact with surfing: Tim Winton (2008) *Breath*, p.23]

Since early2007 I have been working with colleagues on a project entitled: '*What a great night!': the cultural drivers of alcohol use by 14 to 24 year old Australians*.[i] Funded by DrinkWise Australia the qualitative, interview based project is examining two separate but related aspects of young people's alcohol use: the roles played by sporting clubs, as community hubs, in shaping young people's use of alcohol: and young people's drinking biographies over different phases of their life. At the same time as we have been working on this project a good, old fashioned *moral panic* about young people, risk and binge drinking has energised the minds (and mouths) of politicians, media commentators and health and youth experts (see, for example Albrechtsen 2008). Indeed, our own project has been framed by categories of *low*, *medium* and *high risk* drinking practices and what might be the influences shaping these different levels of alcohol use. In addition, at the time of drafting this paper there was much ado about the suggestion that the NH&MRC was going to release new guidelines that suggested that more than four standard drinks in any one session constituted 'binge drinking' (although an NH&MRC press release pointed out that it never uses the term 'binge drinking' [NH&MRC 2008]).

Elsewhere I have argued that Youth is an 'artefact of expertise', constructed at the intersection of a wide range of knowledges about Youth and so-called Youth issues:

an intersection marked by institutionalised, (*social* and *behavioural*) scientific representations of crime, education, family, popular culture, the life course, risk, and so on (see for example, Kelly 2006; 2003). Anxieties and uncertainties about young people have become increasingly *governmentalised*: that is, rationalised, institutionalised and abstracted under the auspices of a constellation of State agencies, quasi-autonomous non-government organizations, and non-government organizations (Foucault 1991; Rose 1999).

How we imagine these intersections produces our understandings of Youth. These understandings have consequences – material, symbolic and for a sense of self - in the lives of young people. As an artefact of expertise, Youth is principally about *becoming*; *becoming* an adult, *becoming* a citizen, *becoming* independent, *becoming* autonomous, *becoming* mature, *becoming* responsible. There is some sense in which *all* constructions of Youth defer to this narrative of *becoming*, of *transition.* Moreover, there is a sense in which *becoming* automatically invokes the future (Kelly 2006; 2003; 2001).

Youth, as it is constructed in at-risk discourses, is at-risk of jeopardising - through present behaviours and dispositions - desired futures. Discourses of Youth at-risk often mobilise a form of normalising, scientific, probabilistic thinking, about certain *preferred* adult futures and the present behaviours and dispositions of Youth. These behaviours and dispositions can span an array of spaces, practices and institutionalised settings: schooling, work, sexuality, the consumption and use of alcohol and drugs, physical activity and diet.

Risk rationalities work to *responsibilise* both Youth and the Family (Burchell 1996). These processes of responsibilisation, in which the subject is compelled to prudently manage the institutionally structured and dependent risks of her/his own DIY project of the Self, produce a field that is 'characterized by uncertainty, plurality and anxiety, thus continually open to the construction of new problems and the marketing of new solutions' by the array of engineers of the body, mind and soul that populate the human, behavioural and social sciences (Rose 1996: 343).

In this sense the reflexive constitution of knowledges by Youth Studies expertise increasingly intersects with management, service delivery and budget knowledges to produce hybridized knowledges about 'appropriate', 'economic' and 'evidence based' forms of guidance and government of Youth at risk and their families (Kelly 2003). These diverse knowledge practices emerge from particular understandings of what constitutes knowledge, what constitutes evidence, what constitutes practices (eg Hopkins et al 2007). And, as a consequence, what constitutes a problem and what constitutes solutions to the problem (of, for example, young people and *low*, *medium*, *high* risk drinking behaviours).

Taking a lead from the work of John Law (2004), and others, I want to suggest, in the following section, that the messiness and complexity of human experiences and existence requires knowledge practices in the social sciences, and in policy spaces, that can rethink what counts as knowledge, evidence, truth, (best) practice.

In what follows these concerns will be addressed through a brief discussion of the ways in which Tim Winton's (2008) new novel *Breath* can be read as an allegorical

tale about the terror of being ordinary: and of the teenage years as being a time in a life in which the fear - the horror - of being ordinary compels Winton's key characters – the teenagers Pikelet and Loonie – to seek out, sometimes stumble upon, and embrace that which promises to make their's *a life less ordinary*. In Winton's narrative a middle-aged Bruce Pike (Pikelet) explores his memories of a time in his life when he became entangled in a range of highly consequential behaviours and practices through a complex (damaging?) series of relationships with the older, ex-champion surfer Sando and his (damaged) partner Eva. In these recollections risk, danger, harm – to be found, possibly, in increasingly reckless surfing adventures, drug use and sexual experimentation – are far from being things to be rationally calculated, or prudently managed with a wary eye to future consequences. Rather, they *breathe* energy, excitement, meaning and purpose into lifeworlds that, for Pikelet and Loonie, are dominated by the (imagined) institutionalised ordinariness of family, school, and work in the relative isolation of the small, rural, working class town of Sawyer on the southern coast of Western Australia.

As allegory *Breath* tells us something different about the nature, meaning and consequences of various behaviours, dispositions and practices that young people engage in: these things are different to the knowledge that we may produce about the cultural drivers of young people's alcohol use via the practices of interview design, recruitment, semi-structured interview, transcription, coding, data management, report writing, press release, advice to funding bodies and various agencies and departments.

My interests in the limits and possibilities of these knowledge practices lead me to ask whether, indeed, allegory has a place in the governmentalised knowledge practices that produce the truths of youth and of risk.

Allegory: Complexity, Presence/Absence and Other Impossible Things

'There is no use in trying,' said Alice; 'one can't believe impossible things.' 'I dare say you haven't had much practice,' said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast' (Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, cited in Law 2004: 1)

In the limited space available here I want to suggest that over a number of years John Law (2000; 2004) has made a provocative contribution to ongoing discussions about what he and Annemarie Mol (2002) identify as *knowledge practices* in the social and the hard sciences (see also, Hacking 1999; Haraway 1997).

If, as Law (2004: 2) suggests, so much of the natural, the social and the cultural is 'vague, diffuse or unspecific, slippery, emotional, ephemeral, elusive or indistinct', then can the institutionalised, even standardised, rule-bound knowledge practices of the social sciences *enact* understandings that can account for these realities? Or do we need, again as Law (2004: 2) and others have argued, to 'teach ourselves to know some of the realities of the world using methods unusual to or unknown in social science'.

Law (2004) is at pains to stress that traditional knowledge practices craft realities that, in many instances, produce knowledge, outcomes and consequences that have been, are, important – if not necessary. In our own work investigating the cultural drivers of

young people's alcohol use and consumption practices, our interviews have produced data about a range of activities, practices, relationships, settings, feelings and rationalisations that appear to have some influence on the ways young people grow up in the presence/absence of alcohol, and develop understandings and emotional responses to the uses and roles that alcohol plays in their lives. As the data gathering, management, coding and analysis progresses we will produce forms of representation (reports and papers) that will play their roles in crafting realities about the cultural drivers of young Australian's alcohol use. And these truths – produced within approved knowledge practices - will join the flows of knowledge that will both create, and try to make sense of, a supposed crisis of *high risk*, *binge-drinking* by large numbers of young Australians.

But, in many respects – not least of which are my own memories of heavy, incredibly social, lots of times very funny (*I'm so funny when I'm drunk!*) drinking in my teens, twenties, thirties, forties – these truths seem to come up very short in capturing what it is about alcohol - parties, sessions, meals, trips – that makes it an important part of many people's lives (young and old). These issues have been topics of conversations as we have framed the knowledge practices that structure our research – we have been engaged in what Law (2004) calls *ontological politics* as we struggle over what to include and exclude in our research design/*method assemblage*: both explicitly and by repression/suppression of thoughts and emotions because it seems impossible to think of the issues, problems, representations in particular ways.

Law (2004: 2-4) introduces and develops a number of frames to shape the ways in which the social sciences might think and know differently (a number of these draw

on feminist and post-structuralist discourses). For example, he discusses knowing as embodiment where we come to know 'through the hungers, tastes, discomfort, or pains of our bodies'. Knowing as 'emotionality or apprehension' suggests, for Law, exploring 'private emotions' that bring into view the 'worlds of sensibilities, passions, intuitions, fears and betrayals'. Echoing feminist problematisations of discourses of objectivity and generalisability Law proposes that we need to consider 'how far whatever it is that we know travels and whether it still makes sense in other locations and if so how. This would be knowing as situated inquiry'. In a final suggestion that points to allegory as a key motif in his discussions Law argues that we need to think about and embrace the sense that our ways of knowing – despite our desires to dress them up in pretensions of validity, certainty and rigour – are, indeed, imprecise and that, therefore, we need to 'find ways of knowing the indistinct and the slippery without trying to grasp and hold them tight. Here knowing would become possible through techniques of deliberate imprecision'. In this sense allegory, suggests Law (2004: 88-89), is the 'art of meaning something other and more than what is being said'. Meaning something *more* requires that allegory also invokes the 'art of decoding that meaning, reading between the literal lines to understand what is actually being said'.

Breath: Allegory, Memory, Presence, Youth, Risk

Tim Winton's novels – including *Cloudstreet* (1991), *The Riders* (1994), *Dirt Music* (2001) and his latest, *Breath* (2008) – are international best sellers and award winners. Their appeal lies at many levels. Ronan McDonald's (2008: 19) review of *Breath* in the *Times Literary Supplement* touches on their appeal to me: '*His work is preoccupied with wounded or troubled characters, often haunted by their past, who*

set out on actual or psychological journeys in search of purpose, meaning and redemption'. Winton's themes are not unique to his work, and his appeal is not universal. But his sensibilities, his rhythms, his language, and the landscapes (material, symbolic, psychological) that his characters inhabit and are shaped by, speak powerfully to my sense of self, of place, of time, of human failings, limits and possibilities. He readily reaches into what might be called my soul to reveal truths (partial? situated? universal?) about things that constitute the human condition. These truths do not speak to all. They also do not answer to social scientific ways of understanding, describing, analysing, or generalising what it is to be human. But they are powerful on their own terms, especially as allegory. As Neel Mukherjee (2008) argues: '*Who would have thought that a novel about an extreme sport, surfing the wild swells and sets off the south-western coast of Australia, would be about nothing less than the infirm glory of the human condition and the damage left in the wake of tasting the limits set for our human frame? Tim Winton's Breath is as much a novel about surfing as The Old Man And The Sea is about fishing and Moby Dick about whale-hunting*'.

In *Breath* Winton enacts realities in which knowing is *embodied*, is *emotional*, is *situated*, is *allegorical*. In the space available here these ways of knowing can only be briefly illustrated, but what they indicate, allude to, are things such as the following:

*	Risk and danger can be felt and experienced in ways that heighten the experience of being alive, of drawing breath:

I will always remember my first wave that morning. The way the swell rose beneath me like a body drawing in air...And though I've lived to be an old man with my own share of

happiness for all the mess I made, I still judge every joyous moment, every victory and revelation against those few seconds of living. (pp.32-33)

He absolutely loved a dare. He would actually dare you to dare him. This wasn't optional. He required it of you, insisted on it. When it came to things like this he was completely compulsive. Being with him was like standing near a lethal electric current. The hairs on your arms literally stood up and you were afraid and mesmerized, always drawn to connect. (Pikelet talking about Loonie's need for excitement, p.31)

* Risk and danger, and what these might mean and the possibilities they provoke, the limits they transgress, are not always generalisable across time and space: they may, indeed, be situated in very particular configurations of time, space and place. To a middle age man exploring his memories they are things that look very different from the ways they appear from the standpoint of a young man struggling against what is seen to be the monotony, the sheer ordinariness of breathing:

More than once…I've wondered whether the life-threatening high jinks that Loonie and I and Sando and Eva got up to in the years of my adolescence were anything more than a rebellion against the monotony of drawing breath. It's easy for an old man to look back and see the obvious, how wasted youth and health and safety are on the young who spurn such things, to be dismayed by the risks you took, but as a youth you do sense that life renders you powerless by dragging you back to it, breath upon breath upon breath in an endless capitulation to biological routine, and that the human will to control is as much about asserting power over your own body as exercising it on others. (p.41)

* Risk and danger can be easily, accidentally stumbled into; embraced out of emotions (embodied feelings) as diverse as fear or joy; rationally and prudently identified, weighed up and calculated (*or not!*) in situations and relationships which

have a range of characteristics – these may be dependent, peer-based, characterised by bravado, shaped by masculinity and femininity, provoked by a need to belong, a desire to feel alive, a hunger not to be - a horror of being - *ordinary*.

…before I could get anything straight in my mind Loonie took up his board with a strangled, angry cry and ran down to the water. A few moments later, hapless and terrified I followed him…That's how we surfed Barney's the first time, with Loonie taking on every wave enraged, and me just trailing along, dry-mouthed and shaky, until the exhilaration of the rides themselves inoculated us both against the worst of our fear. [Pikelet, recalling surfing an isolated, shark infested break called Barney's – named after the white pointer christened with the same name – stumbling into the risky and dangerous egged on by Loonie and Sando, p.73]

Conclusion

The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there. L. P. Hartley (2004 [1953])

In the discussions about the ontological politics that shapes our research our own youth, our own memories, have been an explicit dimension of our discussions about culture, young people and alcohol – our experiences growing up with alcohol, the drinking, the parties, the fun, the intense sociability, the stupid things we did, the risks, the almost complete lack of focus on future consequences or possibilities.

Part of the power of Winton's narrative is, for me, that it is a story told from the vantage point of middle-age. From this standpoint - hindsight - I can selectively

review a life and identify and locate missed opportunities, successes, failings, thwarted ambitions, un-realised dreams, unfulfilled fantasies:

It was a boyhood that now seems so far away I can understand why people doubt such days ever existed. If you tried to talk about it you'd be howled down as some kind of nostalgia freak…So I don't discuss it much. In this I suppose I am my father's son, a bad communicator, a closed book. I've bored people in bars and lost a marriage to silence. (p16)

As a technique memory gives us the chance to reflect on and reconstruct a past with a certain worldliness, an insightfulness, a sense of possibilities (lost and taken) that we often – especially as young people – don't possess in the now, in the moments when we choose, embrace, stumble upon things that may be far reaching in consequence and significance.

Yet so much of social/behavioural science, policy and service delivery discussions construct risky practices in ways that suggest that current generations of young people ought have this as their focus, ought have developed a risk aware, prudent, responsible disposition to present practices and future consequences. I have sketched here a suggestion that allegorical knowledge practices, of the kind used by Tim Winton in stories such as *Breath*, provide other ways of knowing about youth and risk. My interest in the future is with exploring how different knowledge practices – such as allegory/metaphor/story telling - can find a space in the governmentalised knowledge practices that structure how we tell truths about youth and risk.

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