As a teenager I deplored nationalism. I read Marx, Kropotkin and Bakunin, and wondered what it was to be an "Australian" in a "settler society". I had seen enough racism, both in the city and in the country, to know that white Australians were so uncertain about their place there that they had established what amounted - politically, socially, and economically - to systemic discrimination against any who threatened their hegemony. I didn't believe it was possible to excuse any white, myself included, from complicity in this exploitation and marginalisation.

As I grew older I realised that even within this white community there were degrees of racism; an Anglo-Celtic background was socially more acceptable than an Italian or Greek one, despite the fact that a system of discrimination also existed within the Anglo-Celtic binary. Then, toward the final years of my schooling, the prejudice against Asian immigrants by all other "Australians" was in full swing. This prejudice had come with settlement, of course, and after all, "ours" was a country that had developed a White Australia policy just for the purpose of excluding Asians. When I left school I would take to removing right-wing anti-Asian propaganda from lamp-posts and fences, propaganda that had been posted by Jack Van Tongeren's National-Front-inspired "ANM", which operated in Perth and Fremantle. On one occasion an associate of mine had her foot broken by an ANM soldier. Australia is and has been since settlement a nation of division.

Some of my earliest poetry explored the divisions between the "Irish" and the "English" on the Goldfields of Western Australia. In the poem "Voices from a Region of Extraction", I wrote, in the persona of a miner's wife:

And I said that if my church isn't good enough, then I'll be damned if I'll go into hers.

I often talk about International Regionalism - the preservation of regional identity and integrity while being part of a global village. I emphasize the need for lines of communication between regions, for the formation of a common space for discourse, a "neutral zone". For me, nationalism is the coagulation of a group of independent regional identities into a block with more common interests (whether real or perceived, chosen or imposed) than others in the global village; a coagulation that absorbs the power of each region in order to build up the strength of a "centre". Up until now, nationhood has been spatial and identified with a particular area (country) containing varying degrees of internal regionalism - the web may well be changing this. I would argue that nationalism is the natural enemy of regionalism. Nations have capitals. Regions might have, but it's not implicit in their definition.

I say this because for me, as a poet often identified with a particular space (wheatbelt Western Australia), questions of regionalism and conversely nationalism often arise. Even more so now that I am based in Cambridge, England - a fact that particularly confuses the binary. Does my absence from the space I primarily represent lessen the "authenticity", relevance, and integrity, of work associated with this, especially in terms of work written about that space in (or from) Cambridge? For me, the key is the global village, and how dislocation might increase the focus on the originating space. It's that "further one moves away the closer one gets" thing again. And being in a situation of having ambivalent, if not confused, notions about belonging in the first place, this
becomes doubly true. Being there, wrapped up in the guilt of occupation, of one's relation to a disinherting process, precludes a genuine feeling of belonging in any case.

I remember as a child being told by rural friends and cousins that The Farm was Australia. This says a lot. Apart from the occupation of Aboriginal lands, wheatbelt Western Australia was fairly racially homogeneous - that is, Anglo-Celtic and wanting to keep it that way. I recall jokes about Italians, market gardeners and red Dodge trucks. Of Sicilians with penchants for knives and stabbing people (Anglo-Celtic whites) in the back, and so on. Then, it was the Italian or Greek market gardener as the Other. Later, it would become the Asian market gardeners with their "exotic" vegetables, bok choy, Chinese cabbage, etc. One of my strongest memories from childhood is the association of the flag with guns. A friend of the family would often take me into his "reloading room" in which he kept an arsenal of guns. He was a competition shooter and a collector. He had a huge Australian flag hanging from his wall. Not unusual. I was to see it again in my teenage years, often accompanied by a Eureka Stockade Southern Cross and, not as strange as it seems, a Confederate flag. A school friend from Geraldton High School (a town about five hours' drive up the coast from Perth) whose father was a gun fanatic (right word), regularly mixed jargon of a perceived (American) "South" with separatist (WA has always been strong on this) and Nationalist talk into a rightwing convert-the-young rave. The son read Michael Herr's Dispatches over and over and over - ignoring its irony for his own racist and paranoid purposes: a worry!

While being, on and off, part of this environment, and deeply attracted to "the land", and wanting to translate its seemingly indifferent beauty, I was trapped in a negative appraisal of place. I just didn't like its nationalism, the way "its" people thought of themselves. The pride and exclusionism. Still, I respected tenacity and the ability to adapt - the strange combination of conservative flexibility. These traits are so much part of the Australia's self-perceived national identity, and consequently "our" nationalism, that they are clichés of complicity. I am an Australian, no matter where I am, and despite my fear and loathing, I'm part of the place. It's a love-hate relationship. Even now, years later, I have to go back to rural WA to get my landscape fix!

For a couple of years in the early eighties I worked on wheatbins in the northern wheatbelt town of Mingenew. This was a popular way of making money for students - and it was during summer holidays that I did my stints. I had spent much of my childhood and teenage years in rural spaces so it seemed the natural thing to do. I was comfortable among wheat and trucks. I loved the landscape. I knew and understood the farming community. I left partway through my second tour. The racism, or maybe one should say nationalism, was rampant. I would later write in the poem "The Millenarian's Dream":

Intaglioed on the silo walls

the cat and its litter inflected

the bloodier face of wheat: ASW,

Australian Standard White.

They hooted and cheered

in the pub that night, washing
it down straight from the tap,

while in the limelight

a stranger had sat, marking

dust and twisting a glass,

clenching a fist, wiping

rust from his lips.

I had become a stranger in my own community. When I heard of a bunch of "the boys" burning out a local Aboriginal family I decided to leave, but not before I was beaten up. A visiting South African white who spoke of shooting "Kaffirs" with his AK47 was lauded as a hero. A visiting "Pom" was persecuted, and "if any gook sets foot in this town we'll blow his fucking head off". They were going to defend "their patch of ground"! These were "the boys" - early twenties-so possibly unrepresentative of the community as a whole, but where there's smoke...

One way of resolving these issues poetically for me has been through palimpsesting* the landscape I now "occupy" with that I've left. I'm often tempted to think of myself as being involved in some self-imposed exile, but that's disingenuous. It would be truer to say I feel exiled through not being able to identify completely with the national character; but then again even the most misrepresented "redneck" would have difficulty identifying with what it is to be an Aussie, that media-constructed, socially-constructed ID that could just as well be an advertising logo created by Saatchi and Saatchi in London! This "palimpsesting" is a kind of reverse colonising process. I impose a reading of wheatbelt Western Australia over fenland Cambridgeshire.

The pastoral I write has always been "radical" or "anti". I don't seek to idealise this community. But I am part of it. The poetry wrestles with this dichotomy. It is poetry of paradox.

*Palimpsest: A parchment or other writing-material written upon twice, the original writing having been erased or rubbed out to make place for the second; a manuscript in which a later writing is written over an effaced earlier writing. Thomas DeQuincey uses this phrase as in What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain?

(definition taken from http://theliterarylink.com/palimpsest.html )
IN SUMMARY... John Kinsella is an outsider in many ways to his native Western Australia. He now lives between Australia and England, explaining: "I feel exiled through not being able to identify completely with the national character." Yet despite these misgivings he also feels “deeply attracted” to the beauty of Western Australia’s natural environment, and admires many modern Australians’ “tenacity and ability to adapt” to difficult living conditions. Despite his alienation to Australia, John Kinsella also feels deeply connected to his place of origin. As a result he writes about *palimpsesting* the landscape of his new home in England with thoughts of Australia.

READING _PERTH POEM_ AS A PALIMPSEST....

The concept of *palimpsesting* can also be used to understand *Perth Poem*. The focus of this work is strongly on describing areas, landmarks, and physical features of Perth. The repetition of the word “branch” indicates that this poem can be visualised as a mosaic portrait of the city; seemingly disparate subjects and characters are described, yet as with a tree or river system, “branching” interconnects different limbs or currents. In a sense this poem therefore also imitates the physical nature of Perth; a network of people and places interconnected by a river, roads, train lines, suburb names etc. As with a palimpsest, Kinsella partly erases how the subjects of his poem commonly appear in the mainstream, adding layers of reference to*: Perth’s past, comparisons to other places in the world, threatening issues, happenings often concealed from everyday view, tensions existing between different cultures, as well as tension between human life and Kinsella’s beloved natural environment.

(Lesson 8 handout)
TASK ...

SCAN PERTH POEM FOR THREE FEATURES OF PERTH THAT YOU FEEL PARTICULARLY FAMILIAR WITH (THIS COULD BE AN AREA OF PERTH, A GROUP OF PEOPLE WITHIN PERTH, OR A PHYSICAL SPACE OR ARCHITECTUAL LANDMARK). ANALYSE HOW THE EXCERPTS OF TEXT REPRESENTING YOUR CHOSEN FEATURES ARE CONSTRUCTED BY THE POET, USING THE NOTION OF PALIMPSEST TO CONSIDER HOW THE POET CONSTRUCTS HIS POEM TO CHALLENGE DOMINANT VALUES AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS PLACE AND CULTURE.

ANNOTATE THE THREE EXCERPTS OF THE POEM YOU HAVE CHOSEN TO FOCUS ON ACCORDING TO THE TYPES OF REFERENCE LISTED*. TOMORROW YOU WILL PRESENT AND SHARE YOUR ANALYSIS OF THESE THREE EXCERPTS IN A 10 MINUTE MINI-GROUP PRESENTATION.

AFTER DISCUSSION, AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK FROM YOUR PEERS AS TO THEIR INTERPRETATION OF YOUR EXCERPTS, YOU WILL CHOOSE ONE OF YOUR EXCERPTS AND BEGIN WRITING A ONE-PAGE ANALYSIS OF THIS IN YOUR JOURNAL. THE THEME FOR THIS WRITTEN ANALYSIS IS:

How has John Kinsella made you re-interpret or better understand your feelings towards Perth culture?