

Speaking English with Country

Can the animate world hear us? Can we hear it?

Geoff Berry¹

In PAN 13 John Bradley responded to a rhetorical question put to him by Dinah Norman a-Marrngawi, a mentor of his in the Yanyuwa language and ways of North East Arnhem Land, which I have not been able to forget since: can her Country hear English?² For a fully committed animist like myself, this gentle interrogation works away at the crawl like a Zen koan: how can we live 'here' - wherever that is - as full ecological citizens, if we cannot do so in communication with the land and sea, forests and mountains and rivers? If this Country cannot hear English, it cannot receive my blessings, it can only sense my thanks mutely at best, and surely it cannot return any sort of grace when I speak my native language. My relationship with non-human kin is mute; or worse, marked by the violence, disdain and assumed mastery that comes with colonizing history.

Dinah's koan, like all good questions directed by an elder of a wisdom tradition, requires the receiver (if John is so generous as to allow us to also contemplate it) to explore in their own way. To receive the question with respect, we must test it where we live: can the Country where I live hear me in my language, if it is not Aboriginal? And to honour the question with all due respect, we must practice Deep Listening³ for possible answers, and let them work with or against our inherited assumptions. This means attempting to decolonize consciousness in ways both loving and empirical. Regardless of how much history has placed us at his enormous disadvantage, of speaking an alien language on the Country we live in and love, we can still express our love for it and show our thanks for the ancestors that enabled us to be here now, learning. Concurrently, we must seek the most refined eco-attunement possible, collating our experiences in response to this question and inviting them to work away at us, just as science (especially in its native guise as natural philosophy) begins to build a repertoire of possibilities out of experiment, observation and data collection. We must remain wary, because the muses may lend their power more directly to the voice of the resulting experience; the song of the earth we hear in response may be beautiful, but it must be honed at the lathe of the reality principle, lest we lapse too easily into wish-fulfilment or escapist fantasy. Entering into the reality of animistic conversation with place, our consciousness is bounced between experiences of deep listening and unflinching self-interrogation.

As non-natives on Country, a decolonizing ethic must be activated, which moderates results so that we are not consumed by affect and indulgence, even as we give ourselves over to the possibilities of communication with the more-than-human nature around and within us. The English language we use along this process may be alien to

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the Dreaming of our Country, but to ignore our responsibilities to either earth or tongue, and to miss such opportunities for evolution as better ecological citizens because we inherit a language of colonization, is mere defeatism. If we are inspired to serve Country then some of us must take our place in the long line of its storytellers as openly and honestly as possible; especially since we have been exposed to the voices and wisdom of First Peoples, as well as to the vestiges of our own ancestral wisdom traditions, such as they survive. Fortunately, we already benefit from some high calibre responses to the core problematic that is exposed by Dinah's question – how do people who inherit the benefits of colonization, along with its language, work back towards the Biophilia they inherently feel? How have English speaking mythtellers acted upon their desire to converse with Country, in light of the devastation wreaked upon it and its original people by our own societies and ancestors?

Sean Kane, in *The Wisdom of the Mythtellers*, relates how the oral storytelling traditions of his own Canadian Country weave and twist between registers, in ways that we have lost but that lie deeply rooted in the premodern traditions that also form part of the bedrock of western mythologies.⁴ David Abram, in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, dissolved some of the power of the written word by pointing out how its concrete nature was established as part of the law and order of large-scale settlement civilization.⁵ Then, in *Becoming Animal*, he continued the conversation into a realm of phenomenological arising, a chance for us to catch the moment and spirit wherein the more-than-human ecological web of life still emanates as stories of connection and interdependence.⁶ On the same continent, Martín Prechtel exhorts us to be enchanted by the beautiful words that flow from the same course as the universe itself, with all of its creative and destructive powers. From the forests of Guatemala to the desert of New Mexico, he honours the elders in his place and practices their traditions to offer healing and an enhanced consciousness I describe as the ecomythic.⁷ Likewise Martin Shaw, in *A Branch From the Lightning Tree*, drew upon the deep veins of lore he tapped during his own time in the wilderness, borne along through his grief by powers that seemed to dwell in and speak from the rocks and trees of Wales.⁸

In my own Country of Australia, John Bradley, across his lengthy oeuvre, has consistently challenged his readers to understand how the Yanyuwa people live in conversation with their Arnhem Land Country. I have consistently been pushed outside of the comforts of my inherited style of consciousness by Bradley's explanations of what songlines, or Country Lines as he more accurately terms them, mean to those who live with their sentience. Closer to home, for me, I have walked the same inner Melbourne parks described by Freya Mathews, in her 'Letting the World Do the Doing'.⁹ Her Taoist embrace of the built environment deepened my appreciation of the local Clifton Hill bricks as their sharp edges were slowly but surely weathered away over decades of wind and rain. Rounded off rectangles and rusting tin rooftops had their place here, too. And Deborah Bird Rose (vale), likewise through decades of research, digestion and generous communication, first generated the rich conversation around the word Country amongst a plethora of other gifts to the eco-poetically attuned community.¹⁰

Towards Deep Listening

Since I moved to Yuin Country on the south coast of NSW in 2015, I have been practicing intimate communication with this land, the sea and its creatures. On a scale of what would have been possible for an initiated person prior to contact (otherwise known as the invasion or 'settlement' of this land that proceeded with the First Fleet's landing a few hundred kilometres north in 1778), my efforts are, of course, pathetic. Yet efforts they are;

and not merely in a non-critical New Age or hippie mode, wherein wish-fulfilment and fantasy can lead the participant to believe anything that comes to mind.

I've spent meaningful time with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians on Country (including here) and I've honed my own practice of silence and deep listening to the more-than-human world with just as many years as a Zen practitioner. When I quit living in the city, I started to spend as much time as possible on this coastline, building up my own repertoire of 'eco-attunement' practices. Does it all come to nought? In the face of John Bradley's challenging piece in *PAN* 13, following the question so impactfully imparted to him by his mentor Dinah Norman a-Marrngawi, perhaps it is even worse than that. I was born Australian, a fact for which I am eternally grateful, but my immediate ancestry is Norman and Celtic and very much English-speaking. To work my way briefly through some of the core points of Bradley's provocation, English is a colonial weapon, a frontline in the 'settlement' of Australia and other antipodean lands; it works as a chainsaw on the old growth forest of indigenous languages, mowing them down and replacing each place-based oral tradition (or 'emplaced language' as he poetically calls it) with an abstraction: as he puts it, "a dreadfully flat ontology, a homogenous and placeless void, which also leads to a new way of thinking about time. Thus it is, as the language of the country is no longer voiced, places become incidental, arbitrary backdrops for human events that could nearly have happened anywhere." He is right ... but here we are. As the 'old growth forests' of Yanyuwa and every other beautiful, sensitive, relational Australian language are mown down by the insatiable logic and language of late capitalism, "the spiritual entities of the land have retreated to the caves because they are only hearing English and they are dreadfully afraid" (Mavis Timothy a-Muluwamara).

The animate Country can still hear human voices, but not in English; non-Aboriginal languages merely scare it into retreat, whereas the original languages that rose out of this land manifested the relationship between the people and the earth, the sea, the elements and the other creatures. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians heard the language of their places and spoke it as their own, co-created with the animate world, colonists brought with them English, a tongue forged out of a millennia-old crucible of war and conquest, melded out of wave after wave of colonization across Europe and then the world. Hence its power, for better or worse; English is incredibly flexible and dynamic. And, for most Australians, it's all we have. The English language doesn't care where it is or who speaks; it defines a subject, an object and a relationship, regardless of the place, the ecosystem, the feel of it, or the season. Mastery over the earth is assumed as "places become incidental, arbitrary backdrops for human events that could nearly have happened anywhere". But, as in any critique of the power of modern industry to devastate our precious planetary home, there is no point in 'West-bashing' – English is only one of the powerful colonizing languages, like Spanish or Mandarin, that evolved out of the large-scale settlement societies that spread and conquer other lands, peoples, tongues and ways. All of these languages are capable of carrying the dominating logic of colonization that they represent, including the data-crunching equation of the lowest common denominator: the larger the size of an oppressive system, the more complexity it needs to compress within its bounds, therefore the simpler its law must be. Hence Orwell's combined horror in *1984* – the violent force and linguistic simplification of authoritarian rule.

Since the rise of large-scale settlement civilizations, the law of oppression in the name of forced unity has dominated over the lands, the seas and the traditional peoples that have been colonized. From Pharaonic Egypt to the Digital age, the ruler/King represents God, and in today's marketplace, the brand is the most simplified visual logic, which subsumes linguistic reflection, critique, commentary and enquiry. At its apogee, as with transnational brands I refuse to mention here, the brand is iconic, emblematic, and

mythic in its power. It draws the consumer along, it promises bounteous ephemeral satisfaction, it dissolves all questioning under its aegis of absolute authority.

In response to the devastating success of modernity, and to draw upon Heidegger and Hölderlin, we need the poets more than ever; to breathe life back into the way we consider Country, to appreciate it, revere it, and to send those blessings unto it, so that we cannot bear to allow Country to be devastated on our watch. In this sense, the earth certainly needs us to hear it cry, as Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh suggests. This two-way conversation is a healing antidote to the relentless appetite of modern humanity, in terms of the self as an intimate experience of being and becoming human *and* in terms of the self as ecologically-inspired political animal: we must continue to love and to be strong if we are to put up any resistance to the machine of planetary destruction. We have Seamus Heaney on the isle of Eire, our own Judith Wright, and the endless list of souls who have sung their love for the earth to the plaintive winds regardless of response. And no matter what it is called and where, some kind of Earth Dreaming calls the delicate ear of our souls forth. How to tap into this life affirming artery with the very language that overwhelms it, and feel affirmed as an ecological citizen and not spurned as an unforgivable hypocrite?

There seems so little we can do to overcome the enormous gulf of ignorance, between ourselves as members of modernity and the Country we share, when we speak English and do not have native ancestry. Yet here we live, separated from the realities of animate Country by history and language, which are in turn intimately related to the physical traps of modern society that also hold us apart from the 'spiritually enlivened cosmos' we inhabit, to cite Deborah Bird Rose. The combined weight of our minds and words, our buildings and cities, our fossil fuelled cars and roads, our schools and warehouses and now digital screens ... never have we collectively existed so far away from the intangible voices of rivers and seas, creatures and trees the surround us. What to do? If we want to help 'care for Country' and become better ecological citizens, we have to try something. We can't all learn the local Aboriginal language for our place, for the stark reason that so many of them and their associated wisdom traditions are tragically extinct or unused in everyday life.

Ecopoetic Language and Resilience

Thankfully many such languages are being rediscovered and their beauty retooled for a new era; but still, for most Australians, let alone those that live on other lands where the native languages were overwhelmed centuries if not millennia ago, this option is not available, for many reasons. We are left with whatever language we have, which brings me to the only response I can mount in response to Dinah's koan: perhaps these can be retooled? There is no foreseeable future in which this could replace an original language that arose from Country and was learnt by its original inhabitants. But perhaps there is a present in which any language can be turned towards a practice of Deep Listening. Given the paucity of our possibilities, I need to at least put this forth; and take a lead from David Abrams, a fellow traveller on the path of seeking communication with the more-than-human world. In *Becoming Animal*, Abrams points out that the only language you can approach a non-human creature with is the one you are most comfortable with. Only in this way can you express your openness to its existence, its right to be in the same place as you, the possibility that it could communicate something to you in a language that is more-than-humanity's linguistic consciousness. Since reading this some years ago I became more confident in speaking to animals and birds, elements and places, in English. And such experiments also followed my reading of John Bradley – especially after I stared out at the blank faces of an undergraduate creative writing class, who didn't even know

how to respond to my question, posed after a reading of his 'When a Stone Tool is a Dingo': how would you feel speaking to a place?¹¹ Could you see yourself speaking greetings to a stone tool quarry, for instance? I had to admit, in response to their flummoxed negation, that I couldn't either. So far, my part in the conversation was theoretical only.

So then, I did. Start to try. Speaking to place. Especially to the ocean and the sandy banks and dunes that hold our sacred land up from the ocean's eternally roiling maw. This practice has resulted in some remarkable results, including the lyrics for an album and a more generally increased capacity for meaningful dialogue with the spirits of place that arise along this coast.¹² And there must be some open space for this ecopoetic, because as Jung noted, archetypal powers arise in the psyche spontaneously, in every generation, regardless of our commitment to more rational modes of discourse. As the growing field of ecopsychology points out, psyche is indistinguishable from earth, consciousness arises interdependently with animate life, and sentience exists beyond human intelligence. Perhaps I can live with the idea that the Country I inhabit shies away from my voice because it represents colonizing violence; but I cannot resist the attempt to call its name in English and to give thanks for its bounteous gifts in my language, which can be beautiful and generous as well as alien and voracious. And in my attempts to speak to Country, I know that my voice is soothing, there is care for Country in my words, and there is the offer of my being capable of listening for intelligent more-than-human responses. When this is coupled with a ceremonial body language that 'says' all the same things, there opens a space laden with the possibility of meaningful communication. I cannot dissolve all the flaws of the language I was born into, but I can modify the way I am using it to engage with Country at this basic yet experientially real level. The dominant paradigm (let's not avoid the use of the out of fashion but still relevant term 'military industrial complex') that is carried along with colonizing languages like English cannot be escaped; but we can undo some of its barbs and limits in the way we use it.

Yet, ultimately, this ceremonial attempt is itself only a doorway of perception, because more-than-human discourse is not about English or any other modern language not originally 'of' a place, as Yuin Dhurga is where I live. Deep listening, as a practice that promises to make us better ecological citizens no matter where we live, is about decolonizing consciousness and opening the individual self to the more-than-human communications going on all around (and within) us all the time. Such practices dissolve an outmoded assumption of human mastery over the world, as if the earth were a collection of "incidental, arbitrary" places acting as mere backdrops for events "that could nearly have happened anywhere". Speaking beautiful words of thanks and regret, blessing and grief, and at least *trying* to sense how the earth and all its other creatures must feel in the face of humanity's unrelenting appetite, requires us to become more finely eco-tuned. When our body/mind enters a deeper sense of silence, when we practice an impersonal selflessness, we can paradoxically become more self-aware embodied consciousnesses in place. Many meditative traditions will recognize in this a 'witness' type of awareness, but the attempt to converse with more-than-human nature means we also enter into a more active aspect of ecocentric consciousness. This is the self in relationship with the earth, its elements and other lives; this is experiencing what I call the ecomythic, wherein more-than-human stories, images and sensations transport us beyond the limits we inherit with modern socialized consciousness and rebuild relationships with our kin on earth and beyond. My Country may not hear English, but it knows I love and respect it, and I am enriched by its intelligence on a daily basis.

Notes

1. Geoff Berry is an agent of ecocentric mythopoeia. He is also the Australian representative to the International Ecopsychology Society, and an editor for PAN. He writes at www.naturecalling.org
2. Bradley, John J. 2017 'Can My Country Hear English? Reflections on the Relationship of Language to Country.' *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature* no. 13, pp. 68–72.
3. Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr outlines this practice at <http://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/about-dadirri>
4. Kane, Sean 1994, *Wisdom of the Mythtellers*, Broadview Press.
5. Abram, David 1997, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Vintage Books.
6. Abram, David 2011, *Becoming Animal*, Vintage Books.
7. Learn more about Martin Prechtel at <https://www.floweringmountain.com/>
8. Shaw, Martin 2011, *A Branch From the Lightning Tree*, White Cloud Press.
9. Mathews, Freya 2004, 'Letting the World Do the Doing', *Australian Humanities Review*, Issue 33. <http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2004/08/01/letting-the-world-do-the-doing/>
10. For a small taste of Deborah Bird Rose's invaluable contribution to this kind of conversation, see <http://deborahbirdrose.com/>
11. Bradley, John J. 2008, 'When a Stone Tool Is a Dingo: Country and Relatedness in Australian Aboriginal Notions of Landscape', [Handbook of Landscape Archaeology](#).
12. See and hear at <https://severins.bandcamp.com>