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What now? Ethics and restraint

Abstract:

I walk, notebook in hand, from foot to tentative foot, between a Romantic or Modernist frame of mind articulated in English and the language belonging to Miriwoong Country of the East Kimberley where I live. I wonder about the relations of three terms: walking, language and writing. The Miriwoong community prefers that only Miriwoong people reveal their language. This constraint sharpens discussion on the temptations of learning Language as an aid to writing on other people's Country and prods methodological re-thinking. Linguistic research offers fresh observations rather than the knowledge that I expected to gain from learning an Indigenous language. Walking and writing poetry are inflected by attempting to learn the language of Country, but not as I imagined.

Biographical note:

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Keywords

Miriwoong – linguistic restriction – whiteness writing

Introduction

This paper outlines particular reasons for care when seeking inspiration in Indigenous culture. Yet one can sketch tactics for writing from the perspective of a *Gardiya*¹ learning Language. In Australian Indigenous cultures, avoidance is positive in the right circumstance. It shows respect. Addressing my situation as a *Gardiya* writer I find ways that my poetry, composed alongside learning Miriwoong, might find this ethical tension productive.

Early in my Creative Writing PhD candidature I presented my proposal and poems, written whilst living in the Kimberley, to my university peers. I described my attempts to learn an Indigenous language. Though my writing was tangentially affected by the effort, it would be inappropriate to utilize or demonstrate this Language, even in translation. Miriwoong traditional owners prefer Miriwoong people only to transmit their language and stories. After my talk I took questions, hoping that other writers liked my poems. A senior academic leaned forward and said 'Very nice, but we'd like more of the Indigenous stuff'.

Indeed, desire for 'Indigenous stuff' had prompted my Language study. I assumed it would help me understand where I was and, somehow, make my poems more truthful to that place. This paper attempts to simultaneously deflect expectation to deliver the 'stuff' and yet offer a deeper understanding of Indigenous thought through explaining Miriwoong reasons for restricting access to Language.

Miriwoong is the language of the traditional owners of the Country around Kununurra. In 2011 about eighteen people are fluent speakers. I study at the Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre (MDWg), where the Senior Linguist is Dr. Knut J. (K.J.) Olawsky and Miriwoong traditional owner (T.O.) David Newry is the Senior Consultant. Our class is asked not to retransmit Miriwoong words or parts of language.

Over a decade ago Miriwoong elders concluded that the use of their language should focus exclusively on the native community ... language materials developed by MDWg would only be shared in a limited context ... depending on the intended usage (Olawsky, 2010: 78).

Linguistic restriction sharpens a discussion of ethics and the temptations of learning Language as an aid to writing on other people's Country. A temptation is something you would like to do but is against the rules. By looking at what is at stake for the owners of the Language and the Country, I can at least be sure I do not transgress and take a path suggested by being pointed away. Further, some stakes in this constraint can work for my writing.

Why might a community choose linguistic restriction?

... the issue is one of exercising control over the language ... where the language is the last thing which has not been taken away from a community, ... protectionism can easily emerge. ... reasons for such restrictions are directly related to a cultural perspective of language, such as the link between land and language ... (Olawsky, 2010: 78).

Compiling published and anecdotal reasons from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the fieldⁱⁱ supports Olawsky's suggestion that issues of control and links between land and language are behind linguistic restriction:

- A) Limits on community resources.
- B) Resistance.
- C) As a form of copyright.
- D) Language is planted in Country.
- E) Land is embedded in the Language.
- F) The power of words as knowledge of Country.
- G) The power of words to act on Country.
- H) The power of Country to speak directly to its people.

Reasons A, B and C concern control. They are political responses to the contemporary social situation of the Miriwoong people and the endangered status of their language. D and E describe the reciprocal links between land and language. Here I can expand on the ethics of place and Indigenous language.

The possible power of words raises a philosophical question of how closely mediated language might be to its speakers. I believe F and G are important, active reasons to Miriwoong speakers for holding Language close, but I do not have, and would not be given, access to a local understanding of oracular power. Nor can I claim to sit on a mountaintop and feel the spiritual power of others' gods. The land speaks directly to believers (H) and I can only respect that they believe it. Glennis Galbat-Newry (personal communication, November 2011) told me 'there is something out there we can't see'.

A) Linguistic restriction and community resources.

Most remaining Miriwoong fluent speakers are elderly. They have large responsibilities to family and community in addition to language preservation. Recording and translating are laborious. Preparing teaching resources such as readers and multimedia databases are time-consuming, complex tasks. Funding must be found for the linguist and Miriwoong consultants. 'Appropriate use here implies ... that the Indigenous community receives priority in language learning and language transfer' (Olawsky, 2010: 78).

B) Resistance.

Maintaining a separate 'Blackfella' domain functions as resistance to white intervention and supervision of Aboriginal daily life. Analysing this response to colonialism in the mixed grouping of the town of Doomadgi in Northern Queensland triggers details of how possession of one's own language is a point of honor within and between Aboriginal groups (Trigger, 1992: 108-9).

C) Ownership and linguistic restriction as a form of copyright.

It is precisely for almost moribund languages, over which remaining speakers may feel grief, that resentment of outsiders learning the language may occur, especially if

money is made from tours, signs or publications (Simpson, 2006). Aboriginal consciousness of the economic value of their cultural heritage is growing. MDWg charges for translating, providing names to government services, cultural awareness workshops and Miriwoong language classes. Indigenous people are also well aware of the career capital that non-Indigenous academics, researchers and bureaucrats in the Indigenous industry make from studying and consulting them. David Newry (personal communication, 2009) commented at a cultural-awareness workshop, 'You give white people something, they take it'.

Miriwoong people believe that their language is inseparable from Miriwoong people (Newry & Olawsky, 2009: 5). Controlling who speaks Miriwoong ensures that Miriwoong people speak for themselves. They maintain an active web presence.ⁱⁱⁱ As well as monitoring who learns Miriwoong, the community asks that only Miriwoong people teach Miriwoong. At MDWg, lessons for *Gardiya* are an aspect of the language revitalisation process.

The community is committed to making their language public in a controlled manner and in ways determined by the traditional authorities. This does not automatically exclude outsiders from learning the language (Olawsky, 2010: 78).

Through studying Miriwoong I hoped to peek around a door on a view of Country as its traditional owners know it. Yet I find that I have been shown the edges of the room. I can only describe the door and examine the lock mechanism. Language locks to land through the planting of Language in Country and the embedding of Country in Language.

D) Language is planted in Country.

Miriwoong people believe that Language cannot be exported because it is inseparable from the land (Newry & Olawsky, 2009: 5). I extrapolate from published work on the Jawoyn language, people and country about 400 kilometres southeast of Kununurra. Analysing land claim transcripts, Rumsey (1993) found that:

... links between language and land ... are direct links between particular languages and particular tracts of country ... because it is the region in which that language was directly installed or 'planted' in the landscape by Nabilil 'Crocodile', a Dreamtime creator figure who moved up the Katherine River, establishing sites and leaving names for them (199-200).

Stories from other areas tell how dreamtime creatures spontaneously shifted from one language to another as they crossed into different areas of Country. In a story Rumsey gives from Strehlow, the chirping of river-grass crickets deafens dreamtime native cats as they cross the Palmer River. After speaking only Luritja, the cats start to speak a mixture of Luritja and Aranda that is still characteristic of the people of that area. This story demonstrates how the implanting of the language in the area is related to the features of the country itself: its river, river grass and river-grass crickets (Rumsey, 1993: 200-4).

'In this formulation, language and country are directly linked, the mediated link is between language and people' (Rumsey, 1993: 200). Language is given to people in the context of Country.

But the languages were already placed in those regions before people came on the scene. The links between peoples and languages are secondary links, established through the grounding of both in the landscape. (Rumsey, 1993: 204)

These links underpin Aboriginal languages Australia-wide (Dixon, 2002: 3). Doohan and McIntyre (2002) find similarly in court proceedings concerning the Miriwoong:

The role of ... languages in defining the community connected to the land of the claim area is twofold. First, the languages are said (by the witnesses for the applicants and in historical accounts) to have been deposited in the landscape of the region by Dreamtime figures. Secondly, the language, like the land, becomes possessed by the Aboriginal people connected with the land (187).

This 'possession' is heard when local people start to sing as they come onto tracts of Country. Palmer (personal communication 2011), a Kununurra-based linguist, tells me that when you walk or drive with people they will point out features in Language and also start singing as they come onto pieces of Country. She adds a comment from an old lady (recently passed away) that they don't know Language anymore because they do not walk on Country now. They drive and then pull up. When she was a little girl they walked and she learned along the way.

E) Relation of language to land is embedded in the language.

Walking and talking teaches language immersively. The sound of crickets in the river grass provokes speech in the language planted in the Palmer River area.

Other ways that Country determines the structure of Language can be explained via a closely related language spoken by a neighboring group of people, the Kija from the area around Warmun. Kofod (2003) analyses Kija nominals, directionals and complex co-verbs used to describe the land. Specific names apply to types of rock and soil found in Kija country. Indicating direction refers to upstream and downstream: to say 'up' or 'down'. Nouns and directions tie Kija to the topography where Kija people have lived so long that their language reflects it. This principle holds for Miriwoong.

The complexes of verbs with their co-verbs are particularly dense in these related Kimberley languages. Categorizing, simple verbs pair with other, more specific co-verbs. Miriwoong has about twenty of these categorizing verbs. For example: 'Go down' combines with verbs such as to fall, applied to things that go down: 'moving' qualifies motion verbs such as go, walk, run, slide; 'to burn' is used with co-verbs specifying fire. The verb will be inflected through the use of prefixes and suffixes according to tense: *past/present/future*, *realis/irrealis*; *will/might*, transitivity; and the people involved as subject and object: *you, he, she, we, plural you (you two, you'se), they*. *We* is also modified according to number and inclusivity/exclusivity. The two main points to grasp for non-linguists, in understanding the bonds of land to language, are that the categorizing verbs announce conceptual structures in

Miriwoong thought and that all of the information that might take a sentence in English is piled into the verb in the suffixes and prefixes.

In Miriwoong, 'to be/stay' is a categorizing verb used with co-verbs that include 'stand', 'sit' and 'sleep'. As our Kija example, *durib-garri*, meaning 'to be a long range stretching out', combines the verb to be, *garri*, with the specific coverb *durib*. Note how a verb names a landscape feature. In class I say: 'It is a very active way of thinking. I feel as though English is full of objects lying around'. 'Yes,' KJ replies. 'English is shaped by objects.'

Miriwoong makes thinking relational. 'To be connected to' applies to action and things in relation another (Olawsky, 2011). If you say 'standing on a rock', the verb 'be/stay' will pair with a co-verb, 'connected'. Gibson (2011) speculates on the Eora language whilst reading the Dawes notebooks:

Many entries in the notebooks suggest an awareness of some forceful influence that builds when one concentrates on the relations prevailing between interdependent elements or entities.

Country is active in speaking out. To 'say/articulate/demonstrate' is used with verbs that include speak, stutter and yell. Natural sounds are in this articulate category. So Country interpellates people.

H) Linguistic restriction and the power of words.

Speakers may believe that the words themselves embody the spirit of their referents. Such a question of the source of knowledge and power of words raises issues of why I ask and who is a suitable recipient for knowledge. So, I have not.

'A literate person cannot fully recover a sense of what the word is to purely oral people' (Ong qtd in Freeman, 2010). *Gardiya* friends caution me to keep my word to Aboriginal people. Power inherent in the word is a likely further proof of the tie of Language to Country. Rumsey (1993: 202; Trigger (1992) qtd in Rumsey 1993: 217-19) suggests that 'other Aboriginal Languages would not be effective in ritual matters: indeed use of another language might bring forth hostility from totemic forces'.

White writing – an influence of place and/or effect of learning Language.

If Country spoke directly to *Gardiya*, questions of how my writing might be inflected by location or efforts to learn Language would be unnecessary. I would just listen and transcribe. However, there must be more subtle channels.

When I arrived in Kununurra, I could hardly see anything here. I also strove for a modernist precision of 'edged words' (Carson qtd in Gibson, 2011) on the page:

Entropic

An ant, wild cursor
crawls across the screen.

Immigrants succumb, walk
into a blanket. Massed humid air

soars predestined. Afternoon tasks
tuck eternity into the street: post,
supermarket, coffee: main events.

Two years later my poems have shifted. I have a new vocabulary, a tool for paying attention. I hear more. Gibson (2011) ponders about 'the way the linguistically modeled world is being breathed into shape by speakers and listeners' of an oral culture. He contrasts the controlled boundaries of literate expression with the fluent running together of speech.

Gibson's (2011) speculations on how Dawes' encounter with Eora might open thought to experiment today are based on the notes and lives of people long gone. I am in a situation where drawing directly on Miriwoong or translations from it would position me as both inauthentic and directly accountable. I must look to my own responses and cultural bank. I took phrases from Benjamin (1997), quintessential refugee, noting down his sensations on hashish as a melting moment in my 'all that is solid' modernist culture where the diffusing subjective effect of being here (for white people) might find words:

One can fish in the earth when one's hidden in the grass.^{iv}

Turf levitates. Head high
layered canopies of lime
and yellow light interpret
wind. To speak

Peggy's painting:
grasslands she has brushed
with camels hair
– There were Afghans with their camels here –
in green and orange ochre:

I should have to
exhale "grass, grass, grass,
grass" a thousand times
each strand bending its head.

Ask how to say the sound of speargrass
growing in the wet. Stick around out bush
to hear it. Learn the names
of grasses.

Thunder calls out rain.
Noises swell together, heave a sigh. The sigh
prospects. Distance draws breath
pulls in from view.

What Now?

The field of white Creative Writing needs the relations of land to language (familiar to anthropological and linguistic literature) explained in order to stop chasing Indigenous content. Language-transmission constraints are not arbitrary bans but express key ties between language and land. These constraints also demonstrate Miriwoong perception of appropriation of the form or content of their language and understandings of Country as unauthorised misuse.

I expected to gain 'insight', familiarity with and feeling for the 'countryside'. Instead my sense of separation sharpens. I hear the fierce sense of belonging and the exclusive 'we' that traditional owners feel for the Country to which they belong. I learn, through the process of getting permissions, to respect boundaries and reasons set by them. I drop *Gardiyas'* belief in endless inquiry, a right to knowledge and good intentions. However, detailed research into Miriwoong linguistic restrictions has brought me to this living, breathing, active landscape on a very *Gardiya* intellectual path.

Waiting, listening, holding back, loosening up and giving time and space to what is happening right now are enabling tactics for writing about place. Knowing that pre-existing, mostly inaccessible knowledges and language belong to that place subverts the Romantic sublime response to apparently empty landscape. In studying Miriwoong, I have learned that the gulf at the western edge of epistemic effort is neither space nor my shaky subjectivity. It is ignorance, of the mind, of another eye that sees their whole landscape as full in all dimensions: spatial, temporal, narrative, family, spiritual: busy and gossipy as the organic bread shop at the top of Kings Cross on Saturday morning.

In failing to learn to speak Miriwoong, or unlock that door which opens to a deeper understanding beyond the words, I am more respectful and alert.

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Endnotes

ⁱ 'Language' refers to Australian Indigenous languages. 'Country' means country from its traditional owners' point of view: the land, stories, history, landmarks, living things, movements of air, water, and minerals beneath the soil. 'Aboriginal', 'Australian Aboriginal' and 'Indigenous' I use interchangeably, likewise non-Indigenous and *Gardiya*, a Kimberley Kriol term for white people.

ⁱⁱ See also Palmer and Newry 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Language Centre's official websites:

M *Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre*, at <http://www.mirima.org.au/> (accessed 9 Dec 2011)

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^{iv} Title and some phrases from Walter Benjamin's *Protocols*, 1997.