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## Walk to Country, Talk to Country

Short walking stories of learning with Indigenous voices, by Anne Poelina, Sandra Wooltorton, Mindy Blaise and Len Collard

“It’s good to talk to Country,” says Anne Poelina, affirming that from a very early age, in the Kimberley region of northern Australia, Indigenous people are ‘taught Country’. They learn that the land is alive, that it has agency, and that it holds memories of our shared experiences, both human and other-than-human. “It’s good for your mental state to talk to Country,” Poelina continues, “to meditate on how your mind and heart, spirit and soul are aligned with the Earth on which you walk, knowing that when you walk on this Earth, the Earth can actually feel your presence, and with that vibration there is a transmission that is bouncing off this Earth, wanting us to understand that Earth can feel our presence. That’s how we speak to Country – it’s a different mindset. English speaks a different way.”

This teaching of ‘Country’ from Poelina reminds us that walking and talking to the land is a very powerful act. Aboriginal tradition is grounded in a moral law of obligation to love and care for Country, people and places, and it is the human spirit that brings the vitality of our places into reciprocal engagement. Walking is advocated because it reveals memories and stories embedded in Country. Simultaneously, this can also expose histories of domination, the way colonising, globalising, covert ‘power over’ sits within places and lives in plain sight. When we walk to Country, we can respond anew as we become aware of these relationships. We participate by engaging, seeing and feeling places while walking, and learn to recognise places and species as relations, as kith and kin.

Len Collard is a Whadjuk Noongar man from Perth. His uncle Sealin Garlett passed on to him the teaching of boodjar. “Boodjar is really the sense of identity, of belonging to the land ... a sense that this is my Country, where I belong. And demangarmarn is my grandmother and grandfather’s land, where their spirits move now. Later on, this will be the responsibility of my children and my children’s children, because it is their home too, a place always linked to their spirit.” From Collard and his uncle we learn that boodjar is who we are, related by ancestral spirits and intergenerational responsibility. Collard speaks Noongar language, and he teaches that Noongar language explains ‘place-meanings’. “We learn our local place languages to recognise familiarity, to feel like family,” he tells us.

Sandra Wooltorton walks daily alongside bilya (river) in Wardandi Noongar boodjar, in the southwest region. “I am learning to feel and hear boodjar, and to talk to bilya,” she says. “Today there is a cool, strong breeze, and little waves with white foamy crests dance over the water. I sing out to the spirit serpent of the bilya, who we may glimpse as the shimmer who cares for the waterways. I throw some sand in the water so bilya will remember me. I use a loud voice to tell bilya that I am here, coming to walk with and care for bilya, and that I feel happy. I begin to feel and see ambience more clearly, and notice maali – black swan – paddling towards me. I feel welcome.” Wooltorton teaches us that talking to river may evoke a response, and that it takes practice to learn to walk into place. Walking the same way daily brings familiarity: a sense of family.

Walking-with Derbarl Yerrigan (the estuarial waters of the Swan River) is a practice that supports young children who are learning how to walk and talk to Country. Mindy Blaise tells us, “While walking we choose to resist having a final destination, because having an endpoint often gets in the way of noticing and attuning to Country. Instead, we walk while listening with our whole selves: we listen with our ears, eyes, nose, bodies and mouths. We are curious, and wonder while splashing in the water how bilya feels cool and slippery on our skin and smells and tastes salty on our tongues. Maali greets us by crooning and stretching her long black neck towards the shore, and four-year old Mary responds by waving and says, ‘Hi, maali.’ We notice wind moving bilya and sand and how maali and bilya are in relation. We do these walks repeatedly, attuning to how Country is speaking and how bilya, wind and maali are part of our family.”

From Blaise’s story we learn that children already recognise local places as family. Let’s encourage this. When we walk to Country and talk to Country, we interact with animacy and presence. We might notice that places – rivers, forests, parks and gardens – have agency and are alive with energy and spirit. This means that as we perceive their presence and sentience, they influence us, our community and society. Once we notice their living qualities, we might notice their communicability. This is a regenerative perspective, a very different worldview from that of the continuously colonising mainstream narrative. As

planetary citizens, due to the crises of the Anthropocene, we all have a responsibility to help create a new direction for the future in the present time. So, walk! Walk to Country; to rivers, beaches, forests, rewilded places, urban streets, cities, parks and gardens. Walk!

This is an edited version of a piece based on a longer article published in the Australian Journal of Environmental Education, free to download at [tinyurl.com/regeneration-time](http://tinyurl.com/regeneration-time)

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