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Languaging the Local in the Global: Across the Pacific and Beneath Southern Skies

Elizabeth M. Grierson

*Where the sea is concerned I am an amateur. For years I have gathered a sea-wisdom
which does me little good since I set sail only on land.*

Pablo Neruda

The Starting Point

The starting point for this sailing to *Te Papa* is not a star but a *way* – a way of navigating a place, a perspective, opening to some sort of process of revealing and perhaps a way of knowing, or at least of finding a language to talk about what this might be.

We are focusing on what it means to be “here” – an evidential as well as a poetic space, and not an indifferent place (as Jacques Derrida has said). Here is already inflected with layers upon layers upon layers.

So my interest is: How do we language identity in these layered spaces of “here”? Where do these identities begin and end, and what sorts of borders are we crossing?

This text poses such questions as it narrates stories from a range of arrival and departure points. These narratives act not as representations but as processes that foreground a Southern crossing without borders. Sea crossings were by wind, ocean currents and stars of the south. The Southern Cross Constellation, which gave direction to processes of ocean crossings, locates our familiarity with “being South” as one of our common anchors for southern dwellings.

Navigations

As the colonial subject was identified through the “otherness” of history and its incessant teleologies, so a particular type of “subject” was made into a category. The Southern Cross Constellation was also recruited for the purposes of conquest and categorisation, and fixed in the lexicon of national symbology. The five brightest stars of Crux, the Southern Cross, appear on the flags of Australia, Brazil, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Samoa, and the Australian States and Territories of Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory, the Northern Territory and more.

The constellation of Matariki rises in the Southern skies, as *Grugidj* the White Cockatoo screeches across the red-brown ground of a dry Australian land, and art as a process of revealing intervenes to language the Southern subject anew. There are always stories to tell. In the gum trees of an old land, the cockatoos and kookaburras cluster and watch.

I set out today to undertake a creative excavation of sorts, to consider questions of language and identity beneath Southern Skies by looking at artistic practices in the context of globalisation and what this might mean for our present times. It was true, I was immersed in such practices, alerted to consider the paradoxes of creativity and innovation in the global knowledge economy. I was working daily to create the conditions of practice in the art academy whereby creativity is possible while still meeting the performative measures of accountability. I wanted to see the way “art” in its broadest sense intervenes in those dominant processes of globalisation to language the local and the regional. But before I could get there I had to deal with something more pressing and closer to hand.

Grugidj the White Cockatoo was waiting and watching.

I found myself there, across the Tasman, and a question was persisting: When new to a place, searching for a familiar face, what echoes through the silences? I was walking into RMIT University as an employee for the first time in a city, Melbourne, that Richard Florida claims is one of the most creative in the world. Creative or not I had no bank account, no tax file number, no fixed abode, and no language that could give honour to this land.

It was fifteen days into February, very hot and as I recall I was neither tourist nor visitor, host nor stranger, a diasporic persona, in deferral, known only for the title yet lacking a known history. A task was prescribed: to open an art exhibition by a visiting Korean Professor at the RMIT Bowen Street gallery. A welcoming. What language would I speak? This was not my land; I had been there a mere twenty-four hours. How could I speak on behalf of this land and its people?

In time there would be the language of *Grugidj* the White Cockatoo totem, Elder Aunty Bunta’s naming for a celebratory gathering of Koori artists at that same space, the School of Art gallery, with art by Aunty and Uncle, Jarrod and Turbo telling stories of south-east Australia; and the National Gallery of Victoria purchasing twelve works for their collection, and Uncle Herb playing the gum leaves. But that was not now. That language was not yet spoken, that story not yet known. I would return for that right.

Now I stood as a global cosmopolitan, adrift in this moment of time and space. I heard a voice echoing from somewhere: *Haere mai, haere mai, haere mai, welcome, welcome, thrice welcome*. This greeting from a land far-off, yet I was not there: the echo I heard in the silences. At this moment I knew there could be no naming, no claiming, no fixed language that could articulate the place of no place in which I found myself, this place without passage, this *aporia*. As I greeted our Korean visitor I sensed that we were both strangers to this place. Understanding was immanent; poetry called.

What language do we speak?

What was being revealed in this story of our translocation? Wittgenstein said that language is the limit of our being, yet I felt I had no legitimate language to speak that day. What language do we speak when we are strangers in the passages of time? The artist may speak languages of navigation, as a global cosmopolitan navigating from idea to idea, mark to mark. Perhaps art leaves the traces, revealing proximity and distance, as it smudges the surfaces of reciprocity and necessity. Thresholds may be identified as the waves wash foreign shores. Poetics and pragmatics align.

While Jarrod and Turbo were exploring the languages and locations of south-east Australia, South African artist Jeremy Wafer, with the support of The South Project and RMIT University, was walking a line in the Central Australian desert lands. At the Tropic of Capricorn he was locating a borderless border, marking a threshold where the line appears only on those faded maps that bear no resemblance to our material footsteps. Yet he excavated a position, locating it by the stars and his GPS devices, walking it step by step and documenting it frame by frame. Stone by red stone he noted minute variations on the ground as he mapped his journey from the Tropic of Capricorn to Melbourne, desert to city, to the RMIT School of Art gallery where, through his visual cartography and photography, we would celebrate the threshold together. There, via the languaging of art, we saw how a visible line was crossed by his interruption to its invisibility.

A threshold is crossed via the work of the artist, the *work* of art. Derrida asks, “Is it possible... the interruption... resembles the mark of a borderly edge, the mark of a threshold not to be trespassed?”¹

How can an interruption reveal a threshold? Yet we may recall a threshold being marked with those voices calling *Haere mai*. Language as *taonga*, art, was working to interrupt the *aporia* of my being in a time of no place, when I arrived in Australia, language-less, that February day.

At stake here in our arrivals and departures is what Derrida calls “welcoming foreigners in order not only to integrate them, but to recognize and accept their alterity”.²

Thus accepting the otherness of the other, in both the self and other, we may find an attitude that could take us all beyond the law of the border. Acknowledging thresholds wherever they may be, perhaps we could find some enduring locations. Opening the question of the foreigner is crucial: as an act of hospitality can only be poetic.

Globalising frameworks

Where is our language in a world of globalising frameworks corralling us as economic entities? We know the conditions of our times, we who have been there. We know what it means to be instrumentalised for economic purposes, when, far from “here”, knowledge enframes as a form of global capital; we know the neoliberalised market conditions that add layers upon layers of demand and disenfranchisement, liability and loss. This is the context where the local calls out for identification, for naming of the particular, for

recapturing and affirming the signs and edges of our identities, our differences, our histories.

This is *not* about the search for an original Southern meaning of which I speak; nor does it claim a fixed Southern construction. Rather it is searching for a way to talk about being South in a *globus* that is whole; and it is about directing attention to art and language as identifying forces, opening the conditions of loss, and intervening to affirm our present conditions of being-in-time, for all its disjunctures.

There is no room for complacency in the demands of globalisation with its networks and flows of knowledge production. Navigating globalisation evokes processes in transit: through space, time, economies and epistemologies. I speak not only of conceptual and physical migrations and networks, but also of our hybridised cultural practices and stories. In the telling, what might be told?

Globalisation has been called the final frontier, the space producing economic exiles, the increasing numbers of people rendered homeless, jobless, voiceless, powerless in the global flows of conglomerate power bases. Cautioning us to recognise historical and present antagonisms, Manuel Castells reminds us that new bi-polar oppositions appear in the globalised societies of which we are a part. “The informational society, in its global manifestation, is also the world of... Islamic/Christian theocratic ambitions, and of Hutu/Tutsi reciprocal genocide”.³ Closer to home for those in the Asia-Pacific geopolitical region, there is social terrorism in East Timor, and more recently Bali, as well as increasingly complex social and legal issues in the streaming bow-wave of refugees from Indonesia entering Australian territory; not to mention Indigenous losses and reconciliations in a land once assumed to be *terra nullius* – all these continue to evidence the level of local antagonisms in the wake of vast social, political, economic shifts at a global level.

Somewhere in the in-between space: the language of the fishbone

From the South, the power-brokers are watching as stories are told. The stars of Matariki rise, pre-dawn, in the last few days of May every year. Her Tiny Eyes, *Mata Riki*, and the Eyes of God, *Mata Ariki*, give light to the Southern skies as they lead the travelers home. With the Māori New Year in June, the seasonal celebrations and sharing of stories begin.

As a child growing up in New Zealand in the 1940s and ‘50s, I did not know of affairs of state and *terra nullius*, knew not of Matariki but read the myths of Māui at home in my *Maoriland Fairy Tales*,⁴ written and illustrated through the universalising eyes of Empire. As the maps of knowledge are cast, “here” is not an indifferent place, but I knew not of such thoughts in those halcyon barefoot days.

It was *te reo Māori* that echoed my silences that day in February 2005 when I found myself homeless: a familiar chant, yet my Anglo-Saxon origins contained not a trace of *te reo*. Mine was the language of my English father, and a child’s world is quickly normalised. Historians made appeal to grand narratives of Enlightenment epistemology and classical ontology. Their Pacific was a whole “other” entity, albeit a void, awaiting

enlightened naming devices. Through recognition and disavowal, binary oppositional categories defined the world in terms of presence-void, white-black, north-south, known-unknown, civilised-barbarian, land-sea. In each case, the Pacific was the secondary or negative term, ineluctably beneath or beyond.

The establishment of South was deemed necessary for substantiation of presence and progress, its habitat displaced, disavowed and reimagined. Values implicit within civilising ideologies of Empire framed the Pacific through visual, literary and scientific accounts of naval heroes navigating, mapping and naming the void, with *Kupe* violated via omission or stereotypical portrayal. What any of this might signify at the time was unreachable for a small New Zealand child, with a mother of Scottish lineage and a London-born father who wore a McDonald tartan kilt even though Aotearoa New Zealand was 12,000 miles away from his Scottish mother's home.⁵

Across my father's chest a tattooed eagle was inscribed – highly visible and hardly ever acknowledged. The Great War was the authorising agent for such body adornment, which war, when mentioned, was uttered through the language of valour to make it wholly justifiable. My father, Hugh McDonald Botting, wore the Naval hat of *HMS Impregnable*, his training vessel. Fourteen battleships sank in the Battle of Jutland, 31 May 1916, and with them 6000 young men like Hugh, clinging in the frozen seas of Scapa Flow and North Sea. Hugh was stationed on the *HMS Malaya* that fateful day. He was a mere 16 years old; in the face of death, he crossed the threshold from child to man.

And later, in search of another world, he crossed a new threshold to the Southern Seas on the *SS Ionic*, arriving in 1920 in a foreign land, Aotearoa New Zealand. Scrapped in Japan in 1936, the *Ionic* left a legacy from her last voyage, her brass bell now hanging beside a faded photograph in the Auckland War Memorial Museum, a public sign of a grand history of imperial vessels; yet for me it was a potent symbol of my father's journey to my conception.

Final departures

In proximity and distance we meet at unnamed thresholds where we are all strangers to place. I set out to ask how we language identity in these layered spaces of here and there as a way of inhabiting place. Where do these identities begin and end, and what sorts of borders are we crossing when we talk?

There are other thresholds, other than those named here. Do they matter for this story? These are the stories in the silences – the stories of loss, departures too deep to speak: *ae taukiri e*.

There is a problem as soon as an edge-line is threatened; emotion stirs in a deep well of shadows and the darkest of nights. There is no language left in me to speak these silences, no way to name Campbell's departure to the ancestral homeland, Hawaiki when he fell into a deep crevasse while climbing the East Ridge of *Aoraki Mt Cook*, in New Zealand's Southern Alps, and then the departure of his brother Hugh through brain cancer: *Often cruel but true – the turning / the inside cell takes man before his time*.⁶ And we who are

left can only look on in bewilderment, imploring: *Now, this now where are you Hugh?*⁷ and return to the question of being “here” beneath the Southern stars, the starting point for this journey.

I began with a question of how we language identity in the layered spaces of “here” and find I am ending with the same question, but perhaps from a new place. From a range of arrival and departure points I have found there are many ways of navigating across borders, there are many languages – local and personal, theoretical and poetical – to bring to light these layered places. Uncovering alternative meanings, Pablo Neruda enters the conversation:

*I see wave working on wave, the whiteness weakening
the ocean overflowing from its bottomless cup...
I come and go on the sea and its countries.
I know
the language of the fishbone...*

I was preparing this text at the time of Matariki, and somehow the watching eyes have brought forth Neruda and Grugidj, Wafer and Hugh, Jutland and Capricorn, Aotearoa and Australia, and with them the spirits of all who inhabit my silences – the voices of my father and my departed sons. A poetic voice was calling in the words of Pablo Neruda:

*Poetry arrived
in search of me. I don't know, I don't know where
it came from, from winter or a river.
I don't know how or when,
no, they were not voices, they were not
words, nor silence,
but from a street I was summoned,
from the branches of night...*

There is no sea deeper than grief. Yet, perhaps, through telling my stories I have found a Southern voice through which the echoes of otherness may reveal something more, something beyond the already known.

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¹ Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans, Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993): 17.

² *Ibid*, 18.

³ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Volume 1* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997): 3-4.

⁴ Edith Howes, *Maoriland Fairy Tales* (London: Ward, Lock & Co. Ltd, 1950).

⁵ Hugh McDonald Botting was born Middlesex in 1899, of Scottish and English parents; enlisted in the Royal Navy in 1915; served in the Battle of Jutland (31 May 1916); recipient of tattoo while in the Royal Navy at the age of 16 years; married Olive St Clair Tilley at Wanganui, New Zealand in 1930. They had five children: John McDonald, David Allan, Robyn Olive, Muriel Ann, Elizabeth Mary. Hugh died in Auckland in 1961.

⁶ Nicholas Gresson, "Where is Hugh?", in *Walking with Time* (Melbourne: Arcadia imprint of Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013):10.

⁷ *Ibid*.