CHAPTER 14

Ecolinguistic Activism: How and Why to Rite

Angela Rawlings

What does the denial of, or longing for, a conversation with non-human beings tell us about this moment of late modernity?

Brydon, 2010: 195

In the English language, bodies and landscapes share a lexicon: contours, rugged, weathered, valley, tongue, body of water, shoulder of the road, cataract, foothill, river mouth. The same is true of Icelandic [tunga (tongue)], though Icelandic place names and geographic terms have further developed over the past millennium to embed and normalize a folkloric relationship between humans and abiotic entities. This can be seen in terms that situate supernatural humanoid forms within rock masses (fjallkona or mountain woman). In Icelandic society, many popular given names are simultaneously names assigned to biotic and abiotic entities; a short selection would include Haukur (hawk), Svanur (swan), Blær (breeze), Steinar (stones), Úlfur (wolf), and Garðar (gardens). Through such naming acts of language, humans simultaneously colonize land with anthropomorphic attributes (perhaps rendering environments subliminally familiar to humans) while also likening and linking human bodies to their surroundings. The relationship between human languages and ecosystem components belies a deep-seated, centuries-long desire to relate human body with non-human body. This association also provides a blueprint for an ecocentric understanding of who holds the power to narrate any story, and the mechanics through which a bio-story may be related.

Any life might be construed as writing itself or as being written by internal and external signals and systems acting upon it. To reimagine a narrative practice of land with a multiplicity of (non)human writers and readers, it may be necessary to consider the literary if composed by a community, an ecosystem, and/or any body composed via internal and external influences. In this proposal, writing and reading might exist beyond the skin of a page, instead embedded within that skin or flesh of whoever or whatever is deemed the writer. From the biomass of language-landscape questions arises the metaphor of conversation in landscape studies, positing itself as separate from the landscape-as-text metaphor that placed the landscape as a passive or submissive entity engaged

* A portion of this essay was published earlier in Journal of Writing in Creative Practice.
by a human in an active, dominant fashion. The conversation metaphor shifts the text’s hierarchical relationship to one more egalitarian, where all participants are active and equal in their capacities to communicate with the others. Indeed, “...the metaphor of conversation can assist in finding a variety of new directions in the complex terrain of landscape studies by bringing attention to the mutuality of human-landscape encounters. Landscape is not comprehended as a pre-determined, culturally contrived ‘text’, but as a conversational partner that is certainly more than human” (Lund & Benediktsson, 2010: 8).

It may appear that our conventional notions of conversation would make it impossible for humans to converse with an environment, since conversations hinge upon a shared language. This approach does not take into consideration the copious sensual elements of a conversation, the site where a conversation occurs, or the faculties of conversation participants. Through ecosystems and inhabitants, landscapes offer a mélange of sensual materiality via scents, sights, sounds, movements, temperature, and textures. This sensual materiality can be interpreted through the semiosphere – “a sphere just like the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, and the biosphere” (Hoffmeyer, 1996: vii) that is built of signs and their signification for all forms of communication. With the conceptual introduction of the semiosphere, the potential for hybridized subjective/objective interpretations of landscapes and their constituent parts holds significance in light of the current environmental degradation globally impacting landscapes, ecosystem components, and species of all kinds. If landscapes are reframed from a use-value position (in classical economics, this refers to the utility of consuming a good) where “[t]he subject is at a safe distance from a powerful, overwhelming nature” (Þorgeirs dóttir, 2010: 15) to an immersive position of ecocentric egalitarianism where humans, non-human entities, and ecosystems and their components are capable of communicating through multiple senses, then the potential to hold a conversation with a landscape and its non-human inhabitants could cause a transition from metaphor to reality.

When approaching a conversation with Icelandic glaciers, movement and human language are central. The documentation of a landscape through text, film, photograph, audio recording, storytelling, or memory can be used to demonstrate that a conversation with landscape and its inhabitants has taken place, since “the actual conversation can be recorded and replayed, or transcribed, [as] a representation of the conversation” (Waage, 2010: 46). The act of documentation could be argued as a form of conversation itself, where the

---

1 Following from Arne Naess’ Deep Ecology, ecocentrism has become the du-jour term for a branch of ethics that supports human interconnected interaction with environments where other species are placed in egalitarian relationships (not within a hierarchy that foregrounds humans above the inherent value of non-human entities).