excerpt from David Abram's  
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**In the Landscape of Language**

Tired of all who come with words, words but no language  
I went to the snow-covered island.  
The wild does not have words.  
The unwritten pages spread themselves out in all directions!  
I come across the marks of roe-deer's hooves in the snow.  
Language, but no words.

TOMAS TRANSTRÖMER

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The first part of this book raised this question: how did Western civilization become so estranged from nonhuman nature, so oblivious to the presence of other animals and the earth, that our current lifestyles and activities contribute daily to the destruction of whole ecosystems—whole forests, river valleys, oceans—and to the extinction of countless species? Or, more specifically, how did civilized humankind lose all sense of reciprocity and relationship with the animate natural world, that rapport that so influences (and limits) the activities of most indigenous, tribal peoples? How did civilization break out of, and leave behind, the animistic or participatory mode of experience known to all native, place-based cultures?

In the last chapter, however, we showed that animism was never,
in truth, left behind. The participatory proclivity of the senses was simply transferred from the depths of the surrounding life-world to the visible letters of the alphabet. Only by concentrating the synaesthetic magic of the senses upon the written letters could these letters begin to come alive and to speak. “Written words,” says Socrates, “seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent...” Indeed, today it is virtually impossible for us to look at a printed word without seeing, or rather hearing, what “it says.” For our senses are now coupled, synaesthetically, to these printed shapes as profoundly as they were once wedded to cedar trees, ravens, and the moon. As the hills and the bending grasses once spoke to our tribal ancestors, so these written letters and words now speak to us.

We have seen as well that iconic writing systems—those that employ pictographic, ideographic, and/or rebuslike characters—necessarily rely, to some extent, upon our original sensory participation with the enveloping natural field. Only with the emergence of the phonetic alphabet, and its appropriation by the ancient Greeks, did the written images lose all evident ties to the larger field of expressive beings. Each image now came to have a strictly human referent: each letter was now associated purely with a gesture or sound of the human mouth. Such images could no longer function as windows opening on to a more-than-human field of powers, but solely as mirrors reflecting the human form back upon itself. The senses that engaged or participated with this new writing found themselves locked within a discourse that had become exclusively human. Only thus, with the advent and spread of phonetic writing, did the rest of nature begin to lose its voice.

The highly anthropocentric (human-centered) mode of experience endemic to alphabetic culture spread throughout Europe in the course of two millennia, receiving a great boost from the calligraphic innovations introduced in the monastic scriptoria (the rooms where monks copied manuscripts) by the English monk Alcuin (732–804) during the reign of Charlemagne, and a major thrust from the invention of movable type by Johann Gutenberg (c. 1394–1468), in the fifteenth century. The printing press, and the dissemination of uniformly printed texts that it made possible, ushered in the Enlightenment and the profoundly detached view of “nature” that was to prevail in the modern period. In recent centuries the industrial and technological practices made possible by this new distance from the natural world have carried alphabetic awareness throughout the globe, infiltrating even those cultures that had retained iconic, ideographic writing systems.

Nevertheless, there remain, on the edges and even in the midst of this ever-expanding monoculture, small-scale local cultures or communities where the traditional oral, indigenous modes of experience still prevail—cultures that have never fully transferred their sensory participation to the written word. They have not yet closed themselves within an exclusively human field of meanings, and so still dwell within a landscape that is alive, aware, and expressive. To such peoples, that which we term “language” remains as much a property of the animate landscape as of the humans who dwell and speak within that terrain. Indeed, the linguistic discourse of such cultures is commonly bound, in specific and palpable ways, to the expressive earth.

In this chapter, then, we will glance at just a few of the very diverse ways in which the common discourse of an oral culture may open, directly, onto the evocative sounds, shapes, and gestures of the surrounding ecology.

The Language of the Birds

Whenever we of literate culture seek to engage and understand the discourse of oral cultures, we must strive to free ourselves from our habitual impulse to visualize any language as a static structure that could be diagrammed, or a set of rules that could be ordered and listed. Without a formal writing system, the language of an oral culture cannot be objectified as a separable entity by those who speak it, and this lack of objectification influences not only the way in which oral cultures experience the field of discursive meanings, but also the very character and structure of that field. In the absence of any written analogue to speech, the sensible, natural environment remains the primary visual counterpart of spoken utterance, the visi-
ble accompaniment of all spoken meaning. The land, in other words, is the sensible site or matrix wherein meaning occurs and proliferates. In the absence of writing, we find ourselves situated in the field of discourse as we are embedded in the natural landscape; indeed, the two matrices are not separable. We can no more stabilize the language and render its meanings determinate than we can freeze all motion and metamorphosis within the land.

IF WE LISTEN, FIRST, TO THE SOUNDS OF AN ORAL LANGUAGE—to the rhythms, tones, and inflections that play through the speech of an oral culture—we will likely find that these elements are attuned, in multiple and subtle ways, to the contour and scale of the local landscape, to the depth of its valleys or the open stretch of its distances, to the visual rhythms of the local topography. But the human speaking is necessarily tuned, as well, to the various nonhuman calls and cries that animate the local terrain. Such attunement is simply imperative for any culture still dependent upon foraging for its subsistence. Minute alterations in the weather, changes in the migratory patterns of prey animals, a subtle shift in the focus of a predator—sensitivity to such subtleties is a necessary element of all oral, subsistence cultures, and this sensitivity is inevitably reflected not just in the content but in the very shapes and patterns of human discourse.

Hunting, for an indigenous, oral community, entails abilities and sensitivities very different from those associated with hunting in technological civilization. Without guns or gunpowder, a native hunter must often come much closer to his wild prey if he is to take its life. Closer, that is, not just physically but emotionally, empathically entering into proximity with the other animal’s ways of sensing and experiencing. The native hunter, in effect, must apprentice himself to those animals that he would kill. Through long and careful observation, enhanced at times by ritual identification and mimicry, the hunter gradually develops an instinctive knowledge of the habits of his prey, of its fears and its pleasures, its preferred foods and favored haunts. Nothing is more integral to this practice than learning the communicative signs, gestures, and cries of the local animals. Knowledge of the sounds by which a monkey indicates to the others in its band that it has located a good source of food, or the cries by which a particular bird signals distress, or by which another attracts a mate, enables the hunter to anticipate both the large-scale and small-scale movements of various animals. A familiarity with animal calls and cries provides the hunter, as well, with an expanded set of senses, an awareness of events happening beyond his field of vision, hidden by the forest leaves or obscured by the dark of night. Moreover, the skilled human hunter often can generate and mimic such sounds himself, and it is this that enables him to enter most directly into the society of other animals.

One of the most revealing twentieth-century accounts of a relatively intact indigenous community is that recorded by F. Bruce Lamb from the spoken recollections of the Peruvian doctor Manuel Córdova-Ríos. Córdova-Ríos was captured in 1907, when he was fifteen years old, by a small tribe of Amahuaca Indians living deep in the Amazonian rain forest (between the headwaters of the Jurúa, Purús, Madre de Dios, and Inuya rivers)—probably the remnant of a larger tribe decimated by the incursion of the rubber-tapping industry into the forest. He was carefully trained by the headman of this small tribe to become his successor, and was for six years meticulously tutored in the ways of the hunt, in the medicinal and magical powers of the rain forest plants, and in the traditional preparation and use of extracts from the ayahuasca vine to attain, when necessary, a clairvoyant state of fusion with the enveloping jungle ecosystem.

Curiously, the tribe’s language, which remained largely meaningless to Córdova-Ríos for six months or more, became understandable to his ears only as his senses became attuned to the subtleties of the rain forest ecology in which the culture was embedded. He did, eventually, become headman of the tribe, yet he fled the rain forest the following year after a series of attempts on his life by a neighboring band.

Córdova-Ríos’s descriptions of the various hunts in which he participated make vividly evident the extent to which these people’s senses were directly coupled to the enveloping forest:

They reacted to the faintest signals of sound and smell, intuitively relating them to all other conditions of the environment
and then interpreting them to achieve the greatest possible capture of game. . . . Many of the best hunters seemed to know by some special extra sense just where to find the game they sought, or they had developed some special method of drawing game to them. Knowing how to imitate and to use the signals the animals made to communicate between their kind in various situations helped in locating game and drawing it within sighting range of an astute hunter.  

In the course of Córdova-Rios’s account, we read careful descriptions of hunters sequestered in the foliage of high fruit trees luring partridges toward them with mimicked bird calls signaling the discovery of an abundant food source. We read of one hunter who, upon hearing a band of monkeys moving through the dense forest canopy overhead, utters a cry that would be made by a baby monkey if it had fallen to the ground. This call stops the roving monkeys and brings them down beneath the thick foliage into the hunter’s arrow range; the hunter shoots two of them to feed his family.  

Through ancestral stories and tales of recent hunts, the hunters continually exchange knowledge among themselves regarding the nuanced meanings of particular calls made by various creatures, a knowledge gleaned from ever-renewed encounters with those animals in the wild. In many instances knowledge of the specific alarm cries of birds and other animals alert the human hunters to the presence of dangerous predators, like the jaguar, that they themselves must avoid.

A typical example of such interspecies linguistic savvy is an encounter reported by a man named Raci to the other members of a hunting expedition, including Córdova-Rios, as the various hunters lie in their hammocks at night, recounting for each other, in detail, their individual efforts of the day:

It was time to start back and I had no game. Just as I turned to come back toward camp a small ground-sleeping tinamou [a type of jungle partridge] sent out his sad call, close to where I was, and he was answered by another. You know why their evening call is so sad? They don’t like to sleep alone and at sunset each one wanders around aimlessly calling and calling until an answer comes back from somewhere, and then the two move closer and closer together, guided by the calls. And so they find a sleeping partner. I answered the call and found I was between the two birds. So I backed up between the buttresses of a big tree where the ground could be seen for a good distance in front of me, and I started calling the birds to me. You know that it is dangerous to call the tinamou without the protection of a big tree. The jaguar sometimes comes in answer to the call! The tinamou is also his favorite bird.

One bird was nearby and soon had my arrow in his body. He fluttered his wings and kicked a few turns, but was soon with me at the base of the tree. I broke his leg and put a long streak of his blood under each of my eyes to bring good luck.

Every collective hunting expedition is preceded by careful ritual preparations, during which the hunters eat only certain foods, erasing their human odors by soaking themselves in various herbal baths and immersing themselves in the smoke of burning leaves. The expeditions themselves are accompanied by reverent chants to particular forest spirits. The various practices of the tribe, according to Córdova-Rios, embody clear knowledge of the limits beyond which a species of animal must not be hunted; overhunting of a single type of animal or bird is known to bring poor luck upon the hunter or even upon the whole village. Córdova-Rios, for instance, is taught that if he kills the leader of a band of wild pigs (which leaves the pigs disorganized and all too easy to prey upon until a new leader takes over), he must never again kill a leader of the same band.

Meanwhile Xumu, the tribal headman, oversaw the hunting engagements of the group as a whole. Each of the men was assigned by him to an individual hunting territory, and they all reported daily to Xumu regarding the shifting locations of the various bands of monkeys and wild pigs, of the jaguar and other forest inhabitants. Kept apprised in this manner of systemic events unfolding throughout the forest (to a distance of several days journey in all directions from the village) the headman was able by his instructions to appropriately modulate the hunting activities of the small tribe, continually
modifying these activities in response to the living gestures of the forest itself.

Córdova-Ríos’s narrative provides vivid evidence of the extent to which, in the Amazon rain forest, human and nonhuman life-worlds interpenetrate and inform one another. Analogous forms of interaction may be found in every hunting and foraging culture. For subsistence hunting, once again, entails that the human tribesman enter into a profound sensorial rapport with other animals. And this participation, as Córdova-Ríos makes evident, necessarily extends into the vocal dimension, wherein animal cries and communicative calls are pondered, mimicked, and replied to by human hunters, becoming as it were part of the tribal vocabulary. Tribespeople traveling through the forest at some distance from one another, for example, often use mimicked animal cries and bird calls to communicate among themselves, as a means of calling out to each other without drawing the attention of certain animals, or of rival human bands that might be lingering in the area. It would be startling if these constantly employed calls, cries, hoots, riffs, and whistles had no influence on the everyday speech of the tribe as a whole. On the contrary, in the absence of any formal writing system that might stabilize the local language and render it impervious to the shifting sounds of the animate landscape, the spoken discourse of oral, foraging peoples remains uniquely responsive to the multiple sounds and rhythms of the nonhuman surroundings, and especially attuned to the vocal gestures and cries of the local animals.

We have learned from Saussure that a human language is structured not so much as a collection of terms, each of which possesses a determinate meaning, but as a complexly ramified web, wherein the knots, or terms, hold their specific place or meaning only by virtue of their direct and indirect relations to all other terms within the language. If such is indeed the case, then even just a few terms or phrases borrowed directly from the vocal sounds of animals would serve to subtly influence all the ratios of the language, rooting the language, as it were, in a particular ecology, a particular terrain. Once again, no indigenous, oral language can be genuinely understood in separation from the more-than-human earth that sustains it, of which the language itself is a kind of internal articulation.

Saussure himself, however, denied the possibility of such intimacy between language and the land; his resolute insistence upon the arbitrariness of the relation between spoken sounds and that which they signify led him to downplay the influence of mimicry, onomatopoeia, and sound symbolism within the life of any language. Nevertheless, more recent research on the echoic and gestural significance of spoken sounds has demonstrated that a subtle sort of onomatopoeia is constantly at work in language: certain meanings inevitably gravitate toward certain sounds, and vice versa.8 (Every poet is aware of this primordial depth in language, whereby particular sensations are invoked by the sounds themselves, and whereby the shape, rhythm, and texture of particular phrases conjure the expressive character of particular phenomena.)

The intertwining of human speech with the calls and cries of the local earth is evident even when we turn away from the tropics toward an oral culture of the far north, like that of the Koyukon Indians of northwestern Alaska. The Koyukon inhabit a vast expanse of wild country extending well north of the Arctic Circle, with camps and villages set along the Yukon and Koyukuk rivers. Their language belongs to the Athapaskan family of languages spoken by native peoples scattered throughout much of northwestern North America and in pockets as far south as Arizona. The ancestors of the Koyukon people may have inhabited Alaska as early as ten thousand years ago,9 although archaeologists have been unable to date the Athapaskan emergence into North America with any precision. The Koyukon, first encountered by Europeans in the mid-nineteenth century, have in the twentieth century slowly abandoned their traditional pattern of scattered seminomadism, moving into a few settlements built near trading posts or Catholic missions. Yet they still travel widely, using their villages more as home bases from which to journey on foraging expeditions for fish, land animals (for clothing as well as food), berries, and other wild provisions.

According to anthropologist and ethnobiologist Richard Nelson, who has lived and worked closely with the Koyukon people, language to them is as much the province of other animals as it is the domain of humankind. The Koyukon assume that nonhuman animals
communicate among themselves, and [that] they understand human behavior and language. They are constantly aware of what people say and do. . . . But animals do not use human language among themselves. They communicate with sounds which are considered their own form of language.  

In Koyukon belief, the other animals and the plants once shared a common language with human beings. This was in the Distant Time (Kh’adonts’idnee), a time during which all living beings “shared one society and went through dreamlike transmutations from animals or plants to humans, and sometimes back again.”  

We will postpone the next chapter the question of whether the stories told of the Distant Time by the Koyukon people depict an originary time “long ago” in the past—as they are often interpreted according to the linear-historical view of time first imported into the Koyukon territory by Catholic missionaries—or whether the Distant Time is more coherently understood as a unique dimension or modality of time, one that is more integral to the living present than it is to the historical past. In any case, and despite the apparent differentiation of animal and human languages since, or outside of, the Distant Time, the various discourses of humans and animals still overlap and interpenetrate in the everyday experience of Koyukon persons.

Caribou, for instance, are said to “sing through” human beings when in their vicinity, granting the tribespeople songs that certain persons remember upon waking from sleep. When those persons sing these songs later, their success in finding and hunting caribou is ensured. Tribal elders, meanwhile, listen closely to the rippling cries and wails of the loon as a source of inspiration in composing their own songs and chants. When a revered Koyukon elder lay near death, Nelson watched an old woman visiting from another village as she approached the near shore of a lake and began to sing Koyukon “spring songs” to a pair of loons that had been lingering there.

Shortly the loons swam toward her until they rested in the water some fifty yards away, and there they answered her, filling the air with eerie and wonderful voices. When I spoke with her later, she said that loons will often answer spring songs this way. For several days people talked of how beautiful the songs had been that morning.

The lilting cries of the common loon are linguistically meaningful to the Koyukon. According to one man, “Sometimes people will hunt the loon, but me, I don’t like to kill it. I like to listen to it all I can and pick up the words it knows.” The speech of the rare yellow-billed loon is still more powerful than that of the common loon to the Koyukon: “. . . it says the same words, but its voice is just a little different.”

The assumption that nature is all aware, and that the sounds made by animals are at least as meaningful as those made by humans, leads the Koyukon to listen attentively to subtle nuances and variations in the calls of local birds. The Koyukon names for birds are often highly onomatopoeic, so that in speaking their names one is also echoing their cries. The Arctic tern (k’idagaas’), the northern phalarope (tiyee), the rusty blackbird (ts’uhutlts’eegga), the blackpoll warbler (k’oot’anah), the slate-colored junco (k’it’olt’ahga)—all have such names. Written transcription, however, cannot convey the remarkable aptness of these names, which when spoken in Koyukon have a lilting, often whistelike quality. The interpenetration of human and nonhuman utterances is particularly vivid in the case of numerous bird songs that seem to enunciate whole phrases or statements in Koyukon.

Many bird calls are interpreted as Koyukon words. . . . What is striking about these words is how perfectly they mirror the call’s pattern, so that someone [outside the tribe] who knows birdsongs can readily identify the species when the words are spoken in Koyukon. Not only the rhythm comes through, but also some of the tone, the “feel” that goes with it.

As we ponder such correspondences, we come to realize that the sounds and rhythms of the Koyukon language have been deeply nourished by these nonhuman voices.

Hence the whirring, flutelike phrases of the hermit thrush, which sound in the forest thickets at twilight, speak the Koyukon words
sook’eys deeyo—"it is a fine evening." The thrushes also sometimes speak the phrase nahutt-eeyh—literally, "a sign of the spirit is perceived." The thrush first uttered these words in the Distant Time, when it sensed a ghost nearby, and even today the call may be heard as a warning.17

In fact, many of the phrases spoken by birds are understood by reference to events that happened in the Distant Time, events that contemporary Koyukon persons know of through the innumerable Distant Time stories that are told and retold from one generation to another.

Once, during the Distant Time, a starving man struggled in deep spring snow, trying to reach a camp called "Ts’eeettee Tlot." He was carrying a headband decorated with elongated, ivory-colored dentalium shells that reached the north country through trade from distant places on the coast. It was a hard spring. The man became weaker and weaker, until finally he collapsed in the snow and died. At that moment he was transformed into a white-crowned sparrow, and then he flew on toward his destination. When he reached the camp he sang: Dzo do’e sik’tis’eeettee tlot. "Here is Tse’eeettee Tlot, but it is too late." Anyone who listens to a white-crowned sparrow today can still hear these melancholy words. And anyone who looks closely will see the white stripes on its head, remnants of the dentalium shell band he carried to his death long ago.18

Another bird commonly seen in the boreal forest is the Bohemian waxwing as it hurries in small flocks from one tree to another, uttering high, wispy trills. The Koyukon call the waxwing diltsooga—"he squeaks."

According to a Distant Time story, the waxwing had a very jealous wife who once dragged him around by the hair, giving him the crest that now adorns his crown and making him cry out until his voice became nothing but a squeak.19

Meanwhile, the lesser yellowlegs, a shorebird, sometimes flies straight up, then utters a piercing call as it descends: "Siyeets, siyeets, siyeets," which means "My breath, my breath, my breath" in Koyukon. Sometimes a person will shout back to it—"Siyeets!"—hoping to receive from the bird some indication of omen of how long his or her life (her span of breath) will be.

Many birds offer such vocal prophesies to the Koyukon. Once, Nelson’s principal Koyukon instructor, along with her grandfather, heard a grey jay speak in an uncommonly human voice:

Rain was falling, and the bird sat on a branch overhead, looking soggy and disheveled. Suddenly it spoke in clear words, "My brother . . . my brother, what is going to happen?" The old man, a shaman, was startled by the voice and worried by its message. Afterward the rain poured down for nine days, flooding bears from their dens and creating general havoc. And then people knew what the bird had meant.20

However, the preeminent prophet or seer among birds is the great horned owl, which is called by the Koyukon migoozdagha (small ears) or nodneeya (tells you things). The horned owl dwells in the north country year-round, rarely seen but often heard, and is sometimes hunted for food. According to the Koyukon, when the nodneeya speaks to human persons, it utters only what is certain:

When it is about to speak prophetically, the bird first makes a muffled squawking sound—then it hoots in tones and patterns that can be interpreted. The most terrifying words it can say are "Soon you will cry" ("Adakk’ut daa’totsihsa"), meaning that someone close to you will die. It may even seal the forecast tightly with a name, and not long afterward its omen will be fulfilled.21

Once, some years ago, people heard a horned owl clearly intone the Koyukon words "Black bears will cry." For the next two seasons, the wild berry crops failed and many bears found it hard to survive.22

The owl’s augury is not always foreboding. Sometimes it seems to call repeatedly in Koyukon, "You will eat the belly of something," foretelling good luck in one’s hunting. It can also predict imminent storms. According to one Koyukon elder: "When the owl makes a kind of grunting sound, like this, Mmmm . . . Mmmm, it means
stormy weather is coming. Owl's call, that's the only weather report
we used to have!"23

Meanwhile, the robins, when they sing their lilting phrases, are
experienced by the Koyukon as making a short speech: "Dodo Sitlinh
k'oollkoy ts'eega, tilzoot tilzoot silnee silnee"—"Down there, my
brother-in-law tells me to eat pike entrails." Yet the tribespeople,
ever attentive to shifts in the surrounding environment, have noticed
that the robin's song is itself shifting. One of them remarked to Nel-
son: "Even the birds are changing. The robins don't say their song
plainly anymore—they only say it halfway, like a kid would when its
learning."24

Another conspicuous bird in the Koyukon bioregion is the fox
sparrow, whose loud and oft-heard call, "Sitsoo sidsiy hulaghudla
gheyits," is a sorrowful lament, understood only by reference to a
vivid Distant Time story:

In the Distant Time there was a beautiful woman who lived with
her husband and grandmother. Once, when her husband was
away, the old woman pretended to search through her grand-
daughter's hair for lice but instead she thrust a bone awl into her
ear and broke it off, killing her. Then she took her scalp and put
it on her own head, disguising herself as the wife. She also put a
bone needle into her navel and twisted it to tighten the loose,
flabby skin on her belly. Finally she put on the younger woman's
clothes; and disguised this way she fooled the husband into think-
ing she was his wife.

But when she carried game from his canoe she could not move
nimbly, so she had to excuse herself by saying that work made her
feel stiff. After they went to bed, however, the husband recog-
nized who she was. He remained quiet until the next morning,
and then he killed the old woman and dragged her body into the
woods, where he also found his wife lying dead.

Then the young woman's body became a little bird that flew
into the air, singing: sitsoo sidsiy hulaghudla gheyits, "Grand-
mother poked a bone awl in my ear." Nowadays the fox sparrow
still sings this way...25

The telling of Distant Time stories is central to the Koyukon way
of life. Some of the story cycles are so long that their telling con-
sumes many evenings, even several weeks of evenings.26 By des-
cribing the emergence of the world into its evident form, and by
thus articulating the formal relations that exist between the various
entities in the enveloping cosmos (including humans and other land
animals, birds, fish, the various trees and plants, conspicuous land-
forms, bodies of water and weather patterns—all of whom, in that
time out of time, shared a common society and spoke a common
tongue), the Distant Time stories make explicit the proper etiquette
that must be maintained by the Koyukon people when dealing with
the diverse presences that surround them, the kinships that must be
celebrated and the taboos that must be respected if the human com-
unity and the land are to support and sustain one another.

Distant Time stories are told only during the late fall and the first
half of the long northern winter. Indeed, scholars of native lore
have found this to be an almost continentwide rule: throughout North
America, at least prior to 1900, native communities listened to their
most sacred stories only at night and only during the winter. For the
spoken stories themselves carry a magic, a power to influence not
only persons but the living land itself; in the dark winter night a
story well told may hasten the coming of spring. (Thus, a Koyukon
teller may conclude a story with a phrase such as "I thought that
winter had just begun, but now I have chewed off part of it."27 The
dark of winter, when some of the most powerful animals are hiber-
nating, when other animals have gone south and the land itself is
sleeping, is also the safest time to recount the stories; during the
summer, when most of the animals are out and about, the animals
and other natural powers may get upset at hearing themselves and
their Distant Time exploits referred to so directly.28

For since the other animals themselves speak, they can also hear
and understand our own talking. We must be careful what we say about
animals, especially when they are nearby. The Koyukon people
take great care to avoid speaking of certain animals directly, using
elaborate circumlocutions so as not to offend them. It is for this
reason that at night the red squirrel is never spoken of by its ordi-
nary names, but is referred to by the indirect appellation dikink
k'alyee—"the one that is on the side of a tree."29 Women, because
they have an excess of spiritual power, must avoid calling the otter
by its real name, lest they frighten it, and so refer to the animal only
indirectly as *biziya*—"shiny black." The lynx, another profoundly potent animal to the Koyukon, is called by the women *nadooya*, a vague circumscription that means "something going around." To speak carelessly or to disregard such taboos, which hold for many of the forest animals, would invite bad luck for oneself and one's family.

Such roundabout ways of speaking are particularly important during the hunt, when the slightest disrespect for the hunted animal may ensure failure, not just in the present but in future hunts as well. "Hunting black bears in their dens required many gestures of respect, beginning with the etiquette of speech." Preparing for such an encounter, the hunter cannot speak of his intentions directly, and afterward, even if successful, he must not tell what he has done. Later, in the evening perhaps, he might obliquely tell someone, "I found something in a hole." To speak any more directly would offend the powerful being that he has killed.

As the anthropologist Richard Nelson spends more time with the Koyukon, the efficacy of such spoken etiquette begins to influence even his own solitary experience. At home on the Alaskan coast, preparing for a trip back to Koyukon country, he decides to catch a halibut to bring his native friends. Never even considering that he might not be successful, he mentions to a friend that he will take the whole fish to their village so that they can see what it looks like. But

[as the words came out, I knew Koyukon people would never talk as if catching a fish was a foregone conclusion. That day I spent hours in places where I'd done well all summer, and caught nothing except one quillback and a lingcod so small I didn't have the heart to keep it. When I arrived at the [Koyukon] village and told Sarah Stevens, she shook her head like a mother gently scolding her child. "The most you should say is that you'll *try* to catch a fish, or better yet, don't say anything at all. Otherwise it sounds like you're bragging, and the animals always stay away from people who talk like that."]

Of course, it is not only when speaking of other animals that one must be mindful, but also when alluding to the forest trees, to the rivers, even to the winds and the weather. Nelson, stung by the winter cold, reminds himself of the Koyukon elders' advice "about accepting the weather as it comes and avoiding remarks that might offend it. This is especially true of cold, which has great power and is easily provoked to numbing fits of temper."

All things can hear and understand our speaking, for all things are capable of speech. Even the crackling sounds made by the new ice on the lakes are a kind of earthly utterance, laden with meaning:

In falltime you'll hear the lakes make loud, cracking noises after they freeze. It means they're asking for snow to cover them up, to protect them from the cold... Such deference in the face of natural elements—the clear sense that the animate terrain is not just speaking to us but also *listening* to us—bears out Merleau-Ponty's thesis of perceptual reciprocity; to listen to the forest is also, primordially, to feel oneself listened to by the forest, just as to gaze at the surrounding forest is to feel oneself exposed and visible, to feel oneself watched by the forest.

Much as humans communicate not only with audible utterances but with visible movements and gestures, so the land also speaks to the Koyukon through visible gestures and signs. The way a raven flies in the wind, swerving or gliding upside down, may indicate success or failure in the hunt; the movements of other animals may indicate the presence of danger, or the approach of a storm, or that the spring thaw will come early this year. The assumption, common to alphabetic culture, that "reading omens" is a superstitious and utterly irrational activity, prevents us from recognizing the practical importance, for foraging peoples, of such careful attention to the behavior of the natural surroundings. This watching and interpreting of the world's gestures, as if every movement bears a meaning, accords with a worldview that simply has no notion of pure meaninglessness. No event for the Koyukon is ever wholly accident or chance, but neither is any event entirely predetermined. Rather like the trickster, Raven, who first gave it its current form, the sensuous world is a spontaneous, playful, and dangerous mystery in which we participate, an animate and articulate field of powers ever responsive to human actions and spoken words.
The Storied Earth

We have begun exploring some evidence for the thesis that language, in indigenous oral cultures, is experienced not as the exclusive property of humankind, but as a property of the sensuous life-world. We’ve been pondering, that is, some of the ways in which the human discourse within indigenous, oral communities responds directly to the felt expressiveness of other species, of the elements, of the intelligent, animate earth. I have drawn some obvious examples from an equatorial culture embedded in the Amazonian jungle and from a society of the subarctic taiga, or boreal forest. Let’s now shift our attention away from forests, whether equatorial or subarctic, toward the arid, desert ecology of the American southwest—in particular, toward the terrain inhabited by the Western Apache of Arizona.37

The Apache languages are, like Koyukon, part of the vast Athapaskan family of languages, but the Apachean peoples split off from the northern Athapaskans around one thousand years ago, and eventually established themselves in the American Southwest. In turning from Koyukon culture to Apache culture, we move from an indigenous community that, by virtue of its semiarctic location, has until recently been well insulated from the full impact of European civilization, to a native society that, at least since being confined to the Fort Apache Indian Reservation in 1872, has been surrounded and circumscribed by an ever-expanding population of European settlers. Yet the Apache, despite multiple generations of confrontation, confinement, and forced assimilation, have retained many of their distinct lifeways and linguistic practices. Keith Basso is a linguistic anthropologist who has worked with the Western Apache from 1959 until the present, living intermittently at Cibecue (from the Apache phrase deeschii’bikoh—“valley with elongated red bluffs”), a village of about eleven hundred people that has been inhabited by the Apache for centuries.

As he became conversant in the Apache language, and attuned to the rhythms of life in the village, Basso began to notice the remarkable frequency with which place-names typically arise in Western Apache discourse.38 The Apache seem to take great pleasure simply in uttering the native names of various locations within the Cibecue valley. For instance, while stringing a fence with two Apache cowboys, Basso noticed one of them talking quietly to himself. When he listened more closely, Basso discovered that the man was reciting a long series of place-names—“punctuated only by spurts of tobacco juice”—that went on for almost ten minutes. Later, when Basso asked him what he’d been doing, the man replied that he often “talked names” to himself. “I like to,” he told the anthropologist. “I ride that way in my mind.” Another Apache told Basso that his people like to pronounce place-names “because those names are good to say.”39

The evident pleasure derived from saying these names is clearly linked to the precision with which Apache place-names depict the actual places that they name. Basso himself mapped 104 square kilometers in and around Cibecue, and within this area recorded the Apache names of 296 locations. He found that all but a few of these place-names take the form of complete sentences, each name invoking its place through a succinct yet precise visual description. Here are a few such names: “big cottonwood trees stand spreading here and there”; “coarse textured rocks lie above in a compact cluster”; “water flows down on top of a regular succession of flat rocks.”40 Upon pronouncing, or hearing, such a name, Apache persons straightaway feel themselves in the presence of that place; hence, when reciting a series of place-names, the Apache experience themselves “traveling in their minds.” It would seem that the spoken place-names, by their precision, effect a direct sensorial bond between Apache persons and particular places, and we may suspect that the benefit drawn from speaking these names aloud derives not so much from the names themselves but from the nourishing power of the actual locations to which the names draw those who speak them. Place-names, that is, seem to take their particular power and magic from the actual places that they designate.

The experiential importance of geographic place for the Western Apache, and the consequent influence of particular locations in the surrounding landscape upon their everyday language, is especially evident with regard to the ethics and etiquette of contempo-
rary Apache society. For, in a manner entirely alien to alphabetic civilization, the land itself is the ever-vigilant guardian of right behavior within traditional Apache culture. According to Mrs. Annie Peaches, a seventy-seven-year-old Apache woman:

The land is always stalking people. The land makes people live right. The land looks after us. The land looks after people. 41

The moral efficacy of the landscape—this power of the land to ensure mindful and respectful behavior in the community—is mediated by a whole class of stories that are regularly recounted within the village. These narratives tell of persons who underwent misfortune as a consequence of violating Apache standards for right behavior; they tell of individuals who, as a result of acting impulsively or in open defiance of Apache custom, suffered humiliation, illness, or death. Unlike the long cosmological myths told only by medicine persons, and unlike the sagas of the contemporary world told primarily for entertainment, these tales—called agodzɑahí (literally, “that which has happened”)—are typically very brief; they can usually be told in less than five minutes. More significantly, agodzɑahí tales always begin and end with a statement that indicates, with a place-name, exactly where the events in the story actually occurred. Here is an example of such a story:

It happened at “whiteness spreads out descending to water.”

Long ago, a boy went out to hunt deer. He rode on horseback. Pretty soon he saw one [a deer], standing on the side of a canyon. Then he went closer and shot it. He killed it. Then the deer rolled all the way down to the bottom of the canyon.

Then the boy went down there. It was a buck, fat and muscular. There he butchered it. The meat was heavy, so he had to carry it up in pieces. He had a hard time reaching the top of the canyon with each piece.

Now it was getting dark. One hindquarter was still lying at the bottom of the canyon. “I have enough meat already,” he thought. So he left the hindquarter where it was lying. He left it there.

Then he packed his horse and started to ride home. Then the boy got dizzy and nearly fell off his horse. Then his nose twitched uncontrollably, like Deer’s nose does. Then pain shot up behind his eyes. Then he became scared.

Now he went back to the canyon. It was dark when he got there. He walked down to where the hindquarter was lying—but it was gone! Then he returned to his horse. He rode fast to where he was living with his relatives.

The boy was sick for a long time. The people prayed for him on four separate occasions. He got better slowly.

Some time after that, when the boy had grown to manhood, he always had bad luck in hunting. No deer would present themselves to him. He said to his children: “Look at me now. I failed to be careful when I was a boy and now I have a hard time getting meat for you to eat.”

It happened at “whiteness spreads out descending to water.” 42

This tale of “that which has happened” illustrates the misfortunes that might befall a hunter who neglects the respect that must be continually maintained with his animal prey, or, more broadly, the strife that attends those who fail to observe the proper etiquette in their interactions with the natural world. Yet many agodzɑahí tales deal solely with the right relations that must be sustained between individual persons and the larger tribal community:

It happened at “men stand above here and there.”

Long ago, a man killed a cow off the reservation. The cow belonged to a Whiteman. The man was arrested by a policeman living at Cibecue at “men stand above here and there.” The policeman was an Apache. The policeman took the man to the head Army officer at Fort Apache. There, at Fort Apache, the head Army officer questioned him. “What do you want?” he said. The policeman said, “I need cartridges and food.” The policeman said nothing about the man who had killed the Whiteman’s cow. That night some people spoke to the policeman. “It is best to report on him,” they said to him. The next day the policeman
returned to the head Army officer. "Now what do you want?" he said. The policeman said, "Yesterday I was going to say 'HELLO' and 'GOODBYE' [to you] but I forgot to do it." Again he said nothing about the man he arrested. Someone was working with words on his mind. The policeman returned with the man to Cibecue. He released him at "men stand above here and there."

It happened at "men stand above here and there."43

This particular story demonstrates the confusion that befalls an Apache person who acts too much like a white man. In the early years of the reservation, disease and malnutrition took the lives of many tribespeople. And so it is perfectly understandable to the Apache people that one of them would have killed a white man's cow for food. It was not acceptable, however, that another Apache would arrest him with the intent of taking him to jail. In other words, it is wrong to join with outsiders against members of one's own community, or to flaunt one's disrespect for the tribe by taking on the attitudes and mannerisms of white men or women. Hence, the policeman in the story found himself unable to turn in the man that he had arrested, although he twice attempted to do so. Unable to speak his purpose, he was humiliated and made to look foolish before the head officer. Finally, he released the man at the same place where he had arrested him.

Now let us see how the actual place where these events unfolded contributes to the operative potency of the 'agodzaahi' tales. The telling of any such tale today is always prompted by a misdeed committed by someone in the community; the 'agodzaahi' story, precisely told, acts as a remedial response to that misdeed.44 Thus, when an Apache person offends the community by a certain action, one of his or her elders will wait for an appropriate moment—perhaps at a community gathering—and will then "shoot" the person by recounting an appropriate 'agodzaahi' story. Although the offender is not identified or named aloud, he or she will know, if the "arrow" (the tale) has been well chosen and well aimed, that he is the target; he will feel the story penetrate deep beneath his skin and sap his strength, making him feel ill and weak.45 Then the story will begin to work on him from within, making him want to change his ways, to "replace himself," to live right. And so his behavior will change. Yet the story will stay with him. For he will continually encounter the place in the land where it all happened. Perhaps, if that location is near his home, he will see it everyday. The place, it is said, will keep "stalking" him.46

Basso himself relates an example of such a story "going to work" on a person. In June 1977 he was present at a birthday party in Cibecue that was also attended by a young woman who two weeks earlier had gone to a girls' puberty ceremonial with her hair rolled up in a set of oversized pink plastic curlers. Although such ornamentation was no doubt considered fashionable at the off-reservation boarding school where the young woman lived, it was a clear affront to Apache custom to appear thus adorned at a traditional ceremony. Two weeks later, Basso recalls, in the midst of casual conversation at the birthday party, the young woman's maternal grandmother suddenly narrated a version of the above 'agodzaahi' tale regarding the Apache policeman who had behaved overmuch like a white man. Shortly after hearing the story, the young woman stood up and silently walked away from the party. When Basso, uncertain of what had happened, asked her grandmother if the woman was ill, the grandmother replied simply, "No. I shot her with an arrow."47

Two summers later Basso again met the young woman and, while helping her home with some groceries, asked if she remembered that party and why she had left so suddenly. The woman then told him that she had thrown the curlers away after hearing the story about the policeman. When Basso pointed out, as they passed it, the place where the story's events occurred ("men stand above here and there"), the woman "said nothing for several moments. Then she smiled and spoke softly in her own language: 'I know that place. It stalks me every day.'"448

In this uniquely oral form of community censure, a toponymic place becomes the guarantor of correct behavior, the visible presence that reminds one of past foibles and that ensures one's subsequent attentiveness. The telling of 'agodzaahi' tales establishes an almost familial bond between the persons at whom the stories are aimed and particular sites or features of the natural landscape. According to an Apache elder,
[i]t doesn’t matter if you get old—that place will keep on stalking you like the one who shot you with the story. Maybe that person will die. Even so, that place will keep on stalking you. It’s like that person is still alive.49

Hence, Apache persons often associate places with particular ancestors. Indeed, the earthly places seem to speak to certain persons in the voices of those grandparents who first “shot” them with stories, or even to speak in the voices of those long-dead ancestors whose follies and exploits are related in the ‘agodzaahi tales.50 The ancestral wisdom of the community resides, as it were, in the stories, but the stories—and even the ancestors themselves—reside in the land.

We used to survive only off the land. Now its no longer that way. Now we live only with money, so we need jobs. But the land still looks after us. We know the names of the places where everything happened. So we stay away from badness.51

Yet to move away from the land is ultimately to lose contact with the actual sites invoked by the place-names, and so to lose touch with the spoken stories that reside in those places.

One time I went to L.A., training for mechanic. It was no good, sure no good. I start drinking, hang around bars all the time. I start getting into trouble with my wife, fight sometimes with her. It was bad. I forget about this country here around Cibecue. I forget all the names and stories. I don’t hear them in my mind anymore. I forget how to live right, forget how to be strong.52

Basso, the anthropologist, presents a largely functional explanation for the native association of moral teachings with geographical sites. “Mountains and arroyos,” he writes, “step in symbolically for grandmothers and uncles.”53 Persons must be continually attentive to maintaining right behavior, especially with regard to those situations in which they were once careless and impulsive, and yet the grandmothers and uncles who originally corrected such behavior necessarily grow old and perish. Since earthly sites readily outlast one’s human elders, and indeed maintain their basic character across many generations, such places are perfectly suited to “step in” as ever-present symbolic reminders of the moral lessons learned in the past.54

Yet Basso’s suggestion that the sites in the land serve a “symbolic” function (that they have come to “symbolize” moral teachings) implies an unwarranted degree of arbitrariness to the association between moral lessons and the natural landscape, by implying that the association is more conceptual or pragmatic than it is organic and unavoidable. The suggestion masks the extent to which the places themselves may be felt to be the active instigators of those painful lessons, the ultimate authors of those events and hence those stories. Note, here, Basso’s own stress on the primacy of place in Western Apache storytelling:

Nothing is considered more basic to the effective telling of a Western Apache “story” or “narrative”... than identifying the geographical locations at which events in the story unfold. For unless Apache listeners are able to picture a physical setting for narrated events (unless, as one of my consultants said, “your mind can travel to the place and really see it”), the events themselves will be difficult to imagine. This is because events in the narrative will seem to “happen nowhere” (dohwaa’agodzaa da), and such an idea, Apaches assert, is both preposterous and disquieting. Placeless events are an impossibility, everything that happens must happen somewhere. The location of an event is an integral aspect of the event itself, and therefore identifying the event’s location is essential to properly depicting—and effectively picturing—the event’s occurrence.55

Basso makes evident here the central importance of place in the Western Apache experience of phenomena. Yet he provides no indication of why the Apache should put so much more stress on geographical location than we do. Surely for non-native persons, as well, “all things that happen must happen somewhere.” Yet most of us do not insist on identifying the precise location of every event we hear about. Why, then, do the Apache, and native cultures in general, give so much importance to places?

The answer should by now be obvious. To members of a non-
writing culture, places are never just passive settings. Remember that in oral cultures the human eyes and ears have not yet shifted their synaesthetic participation from the animate surroundings to the written word. Particular mountains, canyons, streams, boulder-strewn fields, or groves of trees have not yet lost the expressive potency and dynamism with which they spontaneously present themselves to the senses. A particular place in the land is never, for an oral culture, just a passive or inert setting for the human events that occur there. It is an active participant in those occurrences. Indeed, by virtue of its underlying and enveloping presence, the place may even be felt to be the source, the primary power that expresses itself through the various events that unfold there.

It is precisely for this reason that stories are not told without identifying the earthly sites where the events in those stories occur. For the Western Apache, as for other traditionally oral peoples, human events and encounters simply cannot be isolated from the places that engender them. Thus, anthropologist Harry Hoijer, speaking of another Athapaskan group—the Diné, or Navajo—notes:

Even the most minute occurrences are described by Navajos in close conjunction with their physical settings, suggesting that unless narrated events are spatially anchored their significance is somehow reduced and cannot be properly assessed.\(^5\)

Yet here again the professional anthropologist subtly misses the primary reason for this conjunction. By suggesting that narrated events must be “spatially anchored” he allows us to assume a purely external relation between events and their geographical settings; he implies that the events could be conceived as floating free of any locale before dropping anchor and binding themselves to the land. If, however, the place is itself an active element in the genesis of the event, then the metaphor of a root is far more precise than that of an anchor; to an oral culture, experienced events remain rooted in the particular soils, the particular ecologies, the particular places that give rise to them.

FROM THE DISTANT TIME STORIES OF THE KOYUKON PEOPLE, AND from the ‘agodzaahi tales of the Western Apache, we begin to discern that storytelling is a primary form of human speaking, a mode of discourse that continually wed[s] the human community to the land. Among the Koyukon, the Distant Time stories serve, among other things, to preserve a link between human speech and the spoken utterances of other species, while for the Western Apache the ‘agodzaahi narratives express a deep association between moral behavior and the land and, when heard, are able to effect a lasting kinship between persons and particular places.

The telling of stories, like singing and praying, would seem to be an almost ceremonial act, an ancient and necessary mode of speech that tends the earthly rootedness of human language. For narrated events, as Basso reminds us, always happen somewhere. And for an oral culture, that locus is never merely incidental to those occurrences. The events belong, as it were, to the place, and to tell the story of those events is to let the place itself speak through the telling.

Yet there remains another reason for the profound association between storytelling and the more-than-human terrain. It resides in the encompassing, enveloping wholeness of a story in relation to the characters that act and move within it. A story envelops its protagonists much as we ourselves are enveloped by the terrain. In other words, we are situated in the land in much the same way that characters are situated in a story. Indeed, for the members of a deeply oral culture this relation may be experienced as something more than a mere analogy: along with the other animals, the stones, the trees, and the clouds, we ourselves are characters within a huge story that is visibly unfolding all around us, participants within the vast imagination, or Dreaming, of the world.

**Dreamtime**

With this thought we bring ourselves very close to the Dreamtime beliefs common to the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. Their
diverse cultures—Pintupi, Pitjantjatjara, Aranda, Kaititi, Warumungu, Walbiri, and a host of others—may well be the oldest human cultures of any still in existence, cultures that have evolved in some of the harshest of human environments for tens of thousands of years (the earliest Aboriginal remains discovered in Australia are between forty thousand and sixty thousand years old), only to be decimated in our own time through contact with alphabetic civilization. The astonishing endurance of the Aboriginal peoples must be attributed, at least partially, to their minimal involvement with technologies. Their relation to the sustaining landscape was direct and intimate, unencumbered by unnecessary mediations. They relied upon only the simplest of tools—primarily the boomerang, the hunting spear, and the digging stick—and thus avoided dependence upon specialized resources while maintaining the greatest possible mobility in the face of climatic changes. Meanwhile, the isolation of their continent, as well as its outwardly inhospitable character, clearly protected these peoples from onslaught by more ambitious or expansionist nations—until, that is, the British arrived on their coast in 1788.

What, then, is the Dreamtime—the Yukurrpa, or Alcherina—that plays such a prominent part in the mythology of Aboriginal Australia?

It is a kind of time out of time, a time hidden beyond or even within the evident, manifest presence of the land, a magical temporality wherein the powers of the surrounding world first took up their current orientation with regard to one another, and hence acquired the evident shapes and forms by which we now know them. It is that time before the world itself was entirely awake (a time that still exists just below the surface of wakeful awareness)—that dawn when the totem Ancestors first emerged from their slumber beneath the ground and began to sing their way across the land in search of food, shelter, and companionship.

The earth itself was still in a malleable, half-awake state, and as Kangaroo Dreaming Man (the ancestral progenitor not only of kangaroos but of all humans who are born of Kangaroo Dreaming), Frilled Lizard Man, Tortoise Woman, Little Wallaby Man, Emu Woman, and innumerable other Ancestors wandered, singing, across its surface, they shaped that surface by their actions, forming plains where they lay down, creeks or waterholes where they urinated, forests where they kicked up dust, and so on.

Gabidji, Little Wallaby, came from the West to Ooldea Soak. He came across the large western sand-ridge, close to a black desert-oak tree. He was carrying a malu-meri or buda skin waterbag, which was full. He crossed the ridge and came to Yuldi. There he put his buda at the base of a large sand dune to the south, and urinated in a depression which became the present-day Ooldea Soak (“That’s the water we drink now!” said the people in 1941.) He stayed there for a while, and then went on to another sandhill to the north; from there he looked out toward the east. That sandhill was named Bimbali. He returned to pick up his buda, and then he spilt a little water, and that became the lake. However, he was not sure whether he should go farther and finally decided to return to Ooldea. He left his buda there and it was metamorphosed as the large southern sandhill. “That’s why there is always water there.” He camped for a while, then decided to go east again...57

Eventually, having found an appropriate location, or simply exhausted from the work of world-shaping, each of the Ancestors went “back in” (becoming djang in Gunwinggu terminology), transforming himself (or herself) into some physical aspect of the land, and/or metamorphosing into the plant or animal species from which he takes his name.

[Leech Man] looked this way, that way, as he was coming. He saw a good place. He said, “I do this, because it’s a good place. I’ll settle down, I’ll stay always.” That man who was eating fish, Naberg-gaidmi, asked him, “What are you?,” and he said, “I’m turning into Leech, I’m going to stay in one place. I’m going to become a rock, a little rock, and stay here, with a flat head, a short head. I’m Leech djang, Leech Dreaming!” he said. “I’m Leech!” and he said, “Here I sit. This is my creek flowing, this is mine, where I’m staying. I’m djang, Dreaming!”59

Each Ancestor thus leaves in his wake a meandering trail of geographic sites, perceivable features in the land that are the result of
particular events and encounters in that Ancestor's journey, culminating in that place where the Ancestor went "back in," metamorphosing entirely into some aspect of the world we now experience.

These meandering trails, or Dreaming tracks, are auditory as well as visible and tactile phenomena, for the Ancestors were singing the names of things and places into the land as they wandered through it. Indeed, each ancestral track is a sort of musical score that winds across the continent, the score of a vast, epic song whose verses tell of the Ancestor's many adventures, of how the various sites along her path came into being (and hence, indirectly, of what food plants, water sources, or sheltering rocks may be found at those sites). The distance between two significant sites along the Ancestor's track can be measured, or spoken of, as a stretch of song, for the song unfolds in an unbroken chain of couplets across the land, one couplet "for each pair of the Ancestor's footfalls." The song is thus a kind of auditory route map through the country; in order to make her way through the land, an Aboriginal person has only to chant the local stanzas of the appropriate Dreaming, the appropriate Ancestor's song.

The Australian continent is crisscrossed by thousands of such meandering "songlines" or "ways through," most of them passing through multiple tribal areas. A given song may thus sing its way through twenty or more different languages before reaching the place where the Ancestor went "back in." Yet while the language changes, the basic melody of the song remains the same, so that a person of the Barking Lizard Clan will readily recognize distant stretches of the Barking Lizard songline when he hears them, even though those stanzas are being sung in a language entirely alien to his ears. . . . Knowledge of distant parts of one's song cycle—albeit in one's own language—apparently enables a person to vividly experience certain stretches of the land even before he or she has actually visited those places. Rehearsing a long part of a song cycle together while sitting around a campfire at night, Aboriginal persons apparently feel themselves journeying across the land in their collective imagination—much as the Apache man "talking names" to himself is "riding in his mind."

Every Ancestor, while chanting his or her way across the land during the Dreamtime, also deposited a trail of "spirit children" along the line of his footsteps. These "life cells" are children not yet born: they lie in a kind of potential state within the ground, waiting. While sexual intercourse between a woman and a man is thought, by traditional Aboriginal persons, to prepare the woman for conception, the actual conception is assumed to occur much later, when the already pregnant woman is out on her daily round gathering roots and edible grubs, and she happens to step upon (or even near) a song couplet. The "spirit child" lying beneath the ground at that spot slips up into her at that moment, "works its way into her womb, and impregnates the foetus with song." Wherever the woman finds herself when she feels the quickening—the first kick within her womb—she knows that a spirit child has just leapt into her body from the earth. And so she notes the precise place in the land where the quickening occurred, and reports this to the tribal elders. The elders then examine the land at that spot, discerning which Ancestor's songline was involved, and precisely which stanzas of that Ancestor's song will belong to the child.

In this manner every Aboriginal person, at birth, inherits a particular stretch of song as his private property, a stretch of song that is, as it were, his title to a stretch of land, to his conception site. This land is that part of the Dreaming from whence his life comes—it is that place on the earth where he most belongs, and his essence, his deepest self, is indistinguishable from that terrain:

_Nyunymanu:_
dingo [wild dog] dreaming place
_Paddy Anatari's country._

_Old man squints between wrinkles_
drawn into a smile in the broad, red land.
_Played a child; walked every foot in its sand._

_"You see that rock over there?"

(_The top had been rubbed smooth and_
flat soft, as if it were cut by a diamond, but_
it's been done by another rock_
cupped in hundreds of hands:_
increase site for birthing of dingo pup) 

and

Paddy Anatari strokes the rock again,

and again. He says:

"You see this rock?

This rock's me!"64

The sung verses that are the tribesman's birthright, of which he is now the primary caretaker, provide him also with a kind of passport to the other lands or territories that are crossed by the same Dreaming. He is recognized as an offspring of that Ancestor whose songline he owns a part of, a descendant of the Dreamtime Being whose sacred life and power still dwells within the shapes of those lands. If, for instance, the Ancestor who walked there was Wallaby Man, then the person is said to have a Wallaby Dreaming, to be a member of the Wallaby Clan (a wallaby is a marsupial animal resembling a small kangaroo). He has allegiances to all other Wallaby Dreaming persons, both within and outside of his own tribe. He has responsibilities to the wallabies themselves; he cannot hunt them for food, since they are his brothers and sisters. And he has a profound responsibility to the land along the Wallaby Dreaming track, or songline, a responsibility to keep the land as it should be—the way it was when it was first sung into existence.

According to tradition, he might do this by periodically going "Walkabout," by making a ritual journey along the Dreaming track, walking in the footsteps of the clan Ancestor. As he walks, he chants the Ancestor's verses, without altering a single word, singing the land into view—and in this manner "recreates the Creation."65

Finally, just as each Dreamtime Ancestor metamorphosed him- or-herself, at the end of her journey, into some aspect or feature within the contemporary landscape, so also each Aboriginal person intends, at the end of his or her life, to sing himself back into the land. A traditional Pitjantjatjara or Pintupi man will return to his conception site—to his particular stretch of the Ancestral songline—to die, so that his vitality will be able to rejoin the dreaming earth at that place.66

The Dreamtime is not, like the Western, biblical notion of Genesis, a finished event; it is not, like the common scientific interpretation of the "Big Bang," an event that happened once and for all in the distant past. Rather, it is an ongoing process—the perpetual emerging of the world from an incipient, indeterminate state into full, waking reality, from invisibility to visibility, from the secret depths of silence into articulate song and speech. That Native Australians chose the English term "Dreaming" to translate this cosmological notion indicated their sense that the ordinary act of dreaming participates directly in the time of the clan Ancestors, and hence that that time is not entirely elsewhere, not entirely sealed off from the perceivable present.67 Rather, the Dreaming lies in the same relation to the open presence of the earth around us as our own dream life lies in relation to our conscious or waking experience. It is a kind of depth, ambiguous and metamorphic.

[See there,] That tree is a digging stick left by the giant woman who was looking for honey ants;
That rock, a dingo's nose;
There, on that mountain, is the footprint left by Tjangara on his way to Ulamburra;
Here, the rockhole of Warnampi—very dangerous—and the cave where the nyi-nyi women escaped the anger of marapula—the spider.
Wati Kutjarra—the two brothers—travelled this way.
There, you can see, one was tired from too much lovemaking—the mark of his penis dragging on the ground;
Here, the bodies of the honey ant men where they crawled from the sand—no, they are not dead—they keep coming from the ground, moving toward the water at Warumpi—it has been like this for many years:
the Dreaming does not end; it is not like the white man's way.
What happened once happens again and again.
This is the Law,
This is the power of the Song.
Through the singing we keep everything alive; through the songs . . . the spirits keep us alive.\footnote{68}

What happened once happens again and again. The Dreaming, the imaginative life of the land itself, must be continually renewed, and as an Aboriginal man walks along his Ancestor’s Dreaming track, singing the country into visibility, he virtually becomes the journeying Ancestor, and thus the storied earth is born afresh.

This identification, this bleeding of the Dreamtime into the here and now, happens not just during the solitary Walkabout, but also and especially during the collective rituals held at specific Dreaming sites, rituals wherein the Ancestors’ encounters and adventures at those locations are not just sung but also enacted by the elders. Even an “open,” greatly abbreviated version of such an enactment can display an astonishing degree of participation with the animal Ancestor (such “open” versions, or sketches, may be performed for strangers). Author Bruce Chatwin witnesses one such sketch by a late-night campfire in the outback. In response to a question from Chatwin’s fellow researcher, about the significance of a nearby hill, one of the Aboriginal men

got to his feet and began to mime (with words of pidgin thrown in) the travels of the Lizard Ancestor.

It was a song of how the lizard and his lovely young wife had walked from northern Australia to the Southern Sea, and of how a southerner had seduced the wife and sent him home with a substitute.

I don’t know what species of lizard he was supposed to be: whether he was a “jew-lizard” or a “road-runner” or one of those rumpled, angry looking lizards with ruffs around their necks. All I do know is that the man in blue made the most lifelike lizard you could ever hope to imagine.

He was male and female, seducer and seduced. He was glutton, he was cuckold, he was weary traveller. He would claw his lizard-feet sideways, then freeze and cock his head. He would lift his lower lid to cover the iris, and flick out his lizard-tongue. He puffed his neck into goiters of rage; and at last, when it was time for him to die, he writhed and wriggled, his movements growing fainter and fainter. . . .

Then his jaw locked, and that was the end.
The man in blue waved towards the hill and, with the triumphant cadence of someone who has told the best of all possible stories, shouted: “That . . . that is where he is!”\footnote{69}

The nearby hill, in other words, is that place where the Lizard Ancestor had metamorphosed back into the earth—his spirit power, or life, now inseparable from the life of the hill itself.

The enactment of such stories, songs, and ceremonies is done less for the human persons than for the land itself—upon which, of course, the humans depend. In the words of anthropologist Helen Payne:

The maintenance of a site requires both physical caring—for example the rubbing of rocks or clearing of debris—and the performance of [ritual] items aimed at caring for the spirit housed at it. Without these maintenance processes the site remains, but is said to lose the spirit held within it. It is then said to die and all those who share physical features and spiritual connections with it are then also thought to die. Thus, to endure the well-being of life, sites must be cared for and rites performed to keep alive the dreaming powers entrapped within them.\footnote{70}

Or as Bruce Chatwin writes, “an unsung land is a dead land.”\footnote{71}

On certain occasions, traditionally, the elders of a particular clan would decide that it was time to sing their song cycle in all of its intricacies from start to finish. Messages would be sent up and down the Dreaming track, summoning all of the song-owners to gather at one of the important water holes along the Dreaming. Once assembled, each clan member in turn would sing his stretch of the Ancestor’s footprints. The precise sequence of the chanted verses was essential; to sing one’s stanzas out of order was thought to rupture the coherence of the earth itself.

It is important to realize that in Aboriginal Australia (as throughout indigenous North America) there is a high degree of differentiation between women’s knowledge and men’s knowledge, women’s rituals and men’s rituals. The power and importance of women’s rites within native Australian cultures has only recently been recog-
nized by nonaboriginal researchers, perhaps because most of the early ethnologists were male, and hence had little or no access to women's sacred knowledge. It is now apparent, as well, that Aboriginal women's song knowledge is more closely guarded than that of the men. In recent years a certain amount of innovation has occurred both in the songs sung by women and those sung by men, especially in response to changes in the landscape, and in Aboriginal society, brought about by industrial civilization. Lost segments of a song cycle, for instance, may be redreamed by qualified persons. Nevertheless, the song knowledge of women (at least in central Australia) has tended to be more conservative, more resistant to change than that of the men. Another difference is this: while men's secret ceremonies seem to focus almost exclusively on renewing the vitality of the particular sites and species being celebrated, women's closed ceremonies often involve, as well, utilizing the songs to tap the magic power of those sites—drawing upon the power in the land for various practical purposes. Such purposes include the curing of illness (whether the sick person is female or male), as well as the practice of "love magic"—whereby the women elders influence, for the good of the community as a whole, the flows of desire between particular persons.

Place and Memory

In Australia, then, among the least technological of human cultures, we find the most intimate possible relation between land and human language. Language here is inseparable from song and story, and the songs and stories, in turn, are inseparable from the shapes and features of the land. The chanting of any part of a song cycle links the human singer to one of the animals or plants or powers within the landscape, to Crocodile Man or Pandanus Tree Woman or Thunderstorm Man—to whatever more-than-human being first chanted those verses as he or she wandered across the dreaming earth. But it also binds the human singer to the land itself, to the specific hills, rocks, and streambeds that are the visible correlate of those sung stanzas.

The lived affinity between language and the land is well illustrated by an anecdote that American poet Gary Snyder tells, from a visit that he made to Australia in the fall of 1981. Snyder was traveling through part of the central desert in the back of a pickup truck, accompanied by a Pintupi elder named Jimmy Tjungurrayi. As the truck rolled down the road, the old aborigine began to speak very rapidly to Snyder, telling him a Dreamtime story about some Wallaby people and their encounter with some Lizard girls at a mountain they could see from the road. As soon as that story ended, he launched into another story about another hill over here and another story over there. I couldn't keep up. I realized after about half an hour of this that these were tales meant to be told while walking, and that I was experiencing a speeded-up version of what might be leisurely told over several days of foot travel.

A similar tale is told by Chatwin. He was traveling in a Land Cruiser with several friends, including an Aboriginal man nicknamed Lumpy whom they were driving to a particular place on his songline. Lumpy, whose clan Ancestor was the Native Cat, or tjilpa (a small marsupial with a long, banded tail), had never been to this place along the Native Cat songline, yet he now wished to go there in order to see some distant relatives who were dying there. During the course of seven hours driving through the back country, bumping across shallow rivers and under gum trees, the Aboriginal man sat motionless in the front seat, squeezed between the driver, Arkady, and another passenger, except for a short burst of action when the truck crossed part of his songline. Later,

[w]e came to the confluence of two streams: that is, we met the stream we had crossed higher up on the main road. This lesser stream was the route of the Tjilpa Men, and we were joining it at right angles.

As Arkady turned the wheel to the left, Lumpy bounced into
action. Again he shoved his head through both windows. His eyes rolled wildly over the rocks, the cliffs, the palms, the water. His lips moved at the speed of a ventriloquist’s and, through them, came a rustle: the sound of wind through branches.

Arkady knew at once what was happening. Limpy had learnt his Native Cat couplets for walking pace, at four miles an hour, and we were travelling at twenty-five.

Arkady shifted into bottom gear, and we crawled along no faster than a walker. Instantly, Limpy matched his tempo to the new speed. He was smiling. His head swayed to and fro. The sound became a lovely melodious swishing; and you knew that, as far as he was concerned, he was the Native Cat. . . .

Such anecdotes make vividly evident the felt correspondence between the oral language and the landscape, an alliance so thorough that the speaker must pace his stories or songs to match the speed with which he moves through the terrain. It is as though specific loci in the land release specific stories or stanzas in those Aboriginal persons who travel by them. Or as though, at such times, it is not the native person who speaks, but rather the land that speaks through him as he journeys across it.

This correspondence between the speaking voice and the animate landscape is an intensely felt affinity, a linkage of immense import for the survival of the people. In a land as dry as the Australian outback, where rainfall is always uncertain, the ability to move in response to climatic changes is indispensable. An oral Dreaming cycle, practically considered, is a detailed set of instructions for moving through the country, a safe way through the arid landscape. Anthropologist Helen Payne has analyzed a continuous series of significant Dreaming sites along a single songline, and found that each of the sites contained either a source of water, a potential shelter, a high vantage point from which to view the surrounding terrain, or a cluster of several such characteristics. Indeed, these Dreaming sites were the only places with such assets in an otherwise arid desert.

Payne found as well that geographic sites of particular abundance were commonly crossed by more than one Dreaming—having figured in the adventures of more than one Dreamtime Ancestor—and were thus sacred to several totemic clans. The number and complexity of the rituals associated with any particular Dreaming site varied in direct proportion to the abundance of food, water, and/or shelter to be found at that place.

Each person, by borrowing or trading for the right to sing distant stretches of her own or another’s Dreaming tracks, may continually expand her knowledge of potential routes through the countryside along which she may travel in lean times. And since every Aboriginal band is comprised of individuals from different totemic clans, or Dreamings, it will usually have access to multiple songlines, multiple ways to move whenever lack of water or food necessitates such a move.

The Dreaming songs, in other words, provide an auditory mnemonic (or memory tool)—an oral means of recalling viable routes through an often harsh terrain.

Yet there is another mnemonic structure at work in the Dreaming. The two anecdotes cited above—both of them occurring in moving automobiles—indicate that the telling of specific stories or the chanting of particular songs is itself prompted by the sensible encounter with specific sites. Just as the song structure carries the memory of how to orient in the land, so the sight of particular features in the land activates the memory of specific songs and stories. The landscape itself, then, provides a visual mnemonic, a set of visual cues for remembering the Dreamtime stories.

The importance of this second mnemonic relation becomes apparent as soon as we acknowledge that the songs and stories carry much more than a set of instructions for moving through the terrain. While the topographic function of the songs is obviously of immense importance, the songs and stories also provide the codes of behavior for the community; they suggest, through multiple examples, how to act, or how not to act, in particular situations. The Dreamtime Ancestors depicted in the stories are neither more nor less moral than their human progeny in the contemporary world, yet the situations in which the Ancestors variously find themselves, and the often difficult results that follow from particular actions, offer a ready set of guidelines for proper behavior on the part of those who sing or hear those stories today. Social taboos, customs, interspecies etiquette—the right way to hunt particular animals or gather partic-
ular foods and medicines—all are contained in the Dreamtime songs and stories. And it is the land itself that is the most potent reminder of these teachings, since each feature in the landscape activates the memory of a particular story or cluster of stories.

We earlier encountered a similar correspondence among the Western Apache, for whom the auditory memory of particular teaching stories was triggered by contact with the specific sites where those stories unfolded. One of the strong claims of this book is that the synaesthetic association of visible topology with auditory recall—the intertwining of earthly place with linguistic memory—is common to almost all indigenous, oral cultures. It is, we may suspects, a spontaneous propensity of the human organism—one that is radically transformed, yet not eradicated, by alphabetic writing.

Indeed, even within European culture there is a celebrated example of this propensity, albeit in a thoroughly altered form. In her justly famous book, *The Art of Memory*, Frances Yates describes the mnemonic technique utilized by the classical orators of Greece and Rome to remember their long speeches (a technique regularly practiced by rhetoricians up until the spread of typographic texts during the late Renaissance). The orator would imagine an elaborate palace, filled with diverse halls and rooms and intricate structural details. He would then envision himself walking through this palace, and would deposit at various places within the rooms a sequence of imagined objects associated with the different parts of his planned speech. Thereafter, to recall the entire speech in its correct sequence and detail, the orator had only to envision himself once again walking the same route through the halls and rooms of the memory palace: each locus encountered on his walk would remind him of the specific phrase to be spoken or the particular topic to be addressed at that point within the discourse. Rather than striving to memorize the composed speech on its own, the orator found it much easier, and certainly much safer, to correlate the diverse parts of the speech to diverse *places* within an imaginary structure, within an envisioned topology through which he could imaginatively stroll.

Yet while the classical orators had to construct and move through such topological matrices in their private imaginations, the native peoples of Australia found themselves corporeally immersed in just such a linguistic-topological field, walking through a material landscape whose every feature was already resonant with speech and song!

In aboriginal Australia, then, we can discern two basic mnemonic relationships between the Dreamtime stories and the earthly landscape. First, the spoken or sung Dreamings provide a way of recalling viable routes through an often difficult terrain. Second, the continual encounter with various features of the surrounding landscape stirs the memory of the spoken Dreamings that pertain to those sites. While the sung stories provide an auditory mnemonic for orienting within the land, the land itself provides a visual mnemonic for recalling the Dreamtime stories. Thus, for Aboriginal peoples the Dreamtime stories and the encompassing terrain are reciprocally mnemonic, experimentally coupled in a process of mutual invocation. The land and the language—insofar as the language is primarily embodied in the ancestral Dreamings—are inseparable.

Given this radical interdependence between the spoken stories and the sensible landscape, the ethnographic practice of writing down oral stories, and subsequently disseminating them in published form, must be seen as a peculiar form of violence, wherein the stories are torn from the visible landforms and topographic features that materially embody and provoke those stories. For example, *The Speaking Land*, Ronald and Catherine Berndt’s published compendium of Aboriginal stories gathered over the course of four decades of research, is an honorable and meticulous piece of scholarship, yet it cannot help but disappoint those readers who hope to find therein a collection of stirring adventures and vital narratives. The printed stories seem curious at best, and very poorly plotted at worst; something seems missing, some key that would unlock the abstruse logic of these tales. And that key is nothing other than the living land itself, the expressive physiognomy of the local earth. What is missing is the silent topography, the sensuous hillsides and streambeds that pose the place-specific questions to which these stories all reply. The narratives respond directly to the land, as the land responds directly to the spoken or sung stories; here, cut off from that sensuous reference, transposed onto the flat and featureless terrain of the page, the ancient stories begin to lose their Dreaming power.
In this chapter we have pondered a few of the ways in which the spoken discourse of traditionally oral, tribal cultures remains bound to the expressive sounds, shapes, and gestures of an animate earth. In the absence of formal writing systems, human discourse simply cannot isolate itself from the larger field of expressive meanings in which it participates. Hence, the linguistic patterns of an oral culture remain uniquely responsive, and responsible, to the more-than-human life-world, or bioregion, in which that culture is embedded.

It should be easy, now, to understand the destitution of indigenous, oral persons who have been forcibly displaced from their traditional lands. The local earth is, for them, the very matrix of discursive meaning; to force them from their native ecology (for whatever political or economic purpose) is to render them speechless—or to render their speech meaningless—to dislodge them from the very ground of coherence. It is, quite simply, to force them out of their mind. The massive “relocation” or “transmigration” projects underway in numerous parts of the world today in the name of “progress” (for example, the forced “relocation” of oral peoples in Indonesia and Malaysia in order to make way for the commercial clearcutting of their forests) must be understood, in this light, as instances of cultural genocide.

Yet while such civilizational “progress” rumbles forward, mounting resistance is beginning to emerge within technological civilization itself, fired in part by a new respect for oral modes of sensibility and awareness. The kinds of studies drawn upon in this chapter—studies that document the intimate dependence of oral peoples and their lifeways upon the particularities of the lands that they inhabit—are today being utilized with increasing effectiveness to halt, on legal grounds, the industrial exploitation of native lands. Keith Basso’s documentation of the close relation between Western Apache teaching stories and the perceivable landscape has already been used successfully in litigation to protect Western Apache land and water rights. Meanwhile, documentation of the Aboriginal Dreaming tracks is increasingly utilized in Australian courts of law to protect vital or sacred sites from further “development.”