

# The Nature Spirits Were Always Shy

## Continuing the Polylogue

Geoff Berry<sup>1</sup>

The Greeks knew the forests' dryads protected by Artemis, would avoid people, harmful to their peace as we are. Nature spirits have always shied away from humans. Now, as we learn about how much our minds are shaped by participation in coloniser society, we come to realise that we have been entrained away from a polylogue. No matter how we may yearn to converse with more-than-human intelligence, Modernisation itself, as well as the languages that accompany it, compounds the extent to which spirits of nature seek escape from the prying eyes of humans.

Yet at the same time – at any time – Pan with his harmonious pipes would love to enchant us, soothe us back into embodied being, into a sentience that is alive to its ecosystem and the many other beings we share it with. Pan speaks to communion with the spirits of place and beyond, whether his song calls us into commune with local plant and animal spirits, or with more celestial beings. Many of us hear that call and desire to follow it, to continue the conversation that was interrupted between ourselves and the nature spirits – those very beings that Dinah Norman-Marrngawi warns John Bradley are scared of the English language.<sup>2</sup>

The *PAN* journal can help redirect us in this endeavour, as we follow threads introduced by John and Dinah, explored by more trackers after more-than-human intelligence. We can also remember our inspiration in the triple thread of Philosophy, Activism and Nature. The defence of our planetary home against wanton destruction requires stories of love and nurture, as well as righteous rage. Even as our ecosystems collapse around us, we sensitive souls must unlearn much if we are to listen and deepen ourselves in some version of a modern nature philosophy (something I have coined the 'ecomythic'). The great Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner recognised how far from right relations with the natural world we have become, opining in his collection of essays that *White Man Got No Dreaming*.<sup>3</sup> This title was taken from a haiku-like poem by Muta, a traditional Murinbata man:

White man got no Dreaming, him go nother way.  
White man, him go different.  
Him got road belong himself. <sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the coloniser problem, of self-isolation and divorce from the rest of the natural world, has never been put so eloquently. In response, this piece joins the stream of stories working to help modern individuals who care about our planetary home to return to respectful conversation, with First Peoples and with the more-than-human beings with which we share the Earth.

## The Blind Spot

To begin unlocking the chains that have held us at a distance from conversation with nature spirits, consider what modern assumptions about 'the dryad' epitomise. An oak tree nymph is seen by a more literate and technologically advanced society as a metaphor for the life-force of the tree at best; dismissed as indulgent fantasy or madness at worst. This is the conundrum of modernised consciousness: our relatively short sightedness has been transmitted with the restriction placed upon our imaginative faculties.

This narrow-mindedness has resulted in what anthropologist Jeremy Narby calls our 'blind spot', pointing out that we moderns inherit a mythos – and with it a style of consciousness and a range of what we consider to be 'reason' – that follows, which is heavily influenced by the agricultural revolution, a point also made in the seminal paper on 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis' by Lynn White Jr.<sup>5</sup> Paul Shepard, in *Nature and Madness*, similarly showed how patriarchal society mutilates its constituents capacity to retain their [sense of] kinship with the natural world.<sup>6</sup> I pinpointed how the agricultural revolution taught us that non-human nature is [reasoned to be?] conglomeration of *resources* from which we can profit, rather than the *kin* we once consorted with and learnt from,<sup>7</sup> in a similar spirit to Thomas Berry's insight that the universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects.<sup>8</sup>

## If nature spirits go unheard in the forest, do they become extinct?

Perhaps, Narby wonders, we have become incapable of perceiving spirits of place, animals and plants, due to a technologically induced myopia? Perhaps we cannot perceive ancient but ever-youthful nature spirits such as dryads *not* because they are a relic of fantasy, a product of a rich but naive imagination, the result of too little reason, a lack of scientific rigour and analysis; but because we are enculturated, or trained, *not* to see them.

Narby's analysis came from his anthropological work with Peruvian ayahuasqueruos. What they saw and tried to describe to him were the 'cosmic serpents' revealed in visionary trance states to initiates; jungle spirits, which divulged useful information to people who had been made receptive by ceremony and medicine. These spirits are experienced as real – not fantasy, nor even mere metaphor. The ayahuasqueruos provide, as evidence for their conviction, the efficacy that is bound up in and revealed by the information imparted through plant intelligence. Narby notes that the chances of the Peruvians figuring out the exact combination of plant medicines to concoct their remedies is close enough to zero to rule mere coincidence out of the equation.

Pre-Hellenics experienced the dryads as real, just as the great majority of human peoples across the course of our cultural history have claimed consort with spirits of place, plants, animals and the great beyond of the 'otherworld'. As Joshua Schrei eloquently points out in his podcast *The Emerald, Animism is Normative Consciousness* – it is we moderns who inherit a new tunnel vision.<sup>9</sup> Narby's Peruvian informants might be a helpful start to 'decolonising' our dismissive perspective as literate moderns, which brings us back to the startling meditation of John Bradley's Yanyuwa mentor, Dinah Norman-Marrngawi.<sup>10</sup> The nature spirits of her Country in north eastern Arnhem Land avoid the English language, hiding from those who use it, according to her. This is not only because the modern English language, distant from its originary homelands, reduces the subtle entities we might call 'nature spirits' to a shade of their former glory.

It is also because colonising languages carry with them the technologies that cut swathes through the non-human places they overrun. Staring into Narby's 'blind spot', our mirror and our inability, we may see nature spirits reduced to the metaphors or fantasies of a modernised anthropocentrism – but we also see the reality of colonisation and its environmental devastation.

What part does this 'blind spot' play in the appalling destruction of our global environment, and how do we overcome it, if we decide that it is real and problematic? We may feel called to follow Shepard, to establish 'lines of connectedness or relationship' and develop 'treaties of affiliation' with our ancestral kin.<sup>11</sup> However, one thing can be accepted at the outset: if the nature spirits were always shy, they have good reason to be far more circumspect in their dealings with humanity now than they ever did in previous millennia. As technologies have developed, colonisation has expanded, and more natural places have been doomed by increasing human populations. There are no tree spirits left where a forest has been mown down for urban sprawl; no river spirits where a watercourse has been diverted into cement drains; no buffalo spirits where the herds have been decimated or worse, made extinct. In this sense, English can be bundled up with Spanish, Mandarin and other languages that carry with them the logic of imperialism, colonisation and the environmental devastation that comes with the mindset of power over nature. Any chance for consort between us and intelligent entities is made equally unlikely. There is no nature spirit of the Tasmanian Tiger with which we can converse.

It's not difficult to find a modern individual who accepts the idea that a nature spirit is a valid metaphor; the dryad as a personification of nature, life, energy, or chi. It's a little harder to get them to accept that it may be a real entity; that plants talk to those who can hear them; that independent beings teach native healers the medicinal powers available in their immediate habitat; their home. Here is one major difference between a language of colonisation and one that is native to a place and attentive to its spirit. If we want to do justice to Dinah's original dilemma, John Bradley's initial meditation upon it, and the confronting polylogue that follows in its wake, like a ripple of Great Mind upon the shores of our own necessarily limited individual psyches, here is where we land: in an animistic world of living entities within which we turn out to be not nearly so smart as we may have assumed.

## **Spirits of Place**

Spirits of place, as an Aboriginal Australian might call them (in one of their own languages, attuned to local, physical topographies), exist as an intelligence that is in some manner other-than-human, but that can communicate with an adequately perceptive human psyche. This reminds us immediately of the plasticity of consciousness that is redolent of the Dreaming, a term that may be maligned by some for its Anglophonic limits, but which still carries a richness of possibility, another dimension of time that is both ancient and everpresent at once. Stanner recognised this multidimensional quality and suggested we consider the Dreaming as an 'everywhen', as well as a primeval time when all 'people', including humans and the other animals and plants, even places, could speak to and understand each other.

We may recognise a familial similarity with tales of a 'fall' out of grace, which renders nearly impossible our previous interspecies communication and accordant sense of kinship. This great calamity, whether it be exile from the Garden of Paradise or the 'hardening' of the world as the originary phase of the Dreaming ends, renders all species incapable of shared discourse. But this possibility is never completely lost and Stanner's term 'everywhen' helps convey a modicum of the complexity packed into the

concept of Dreaming time and the attendant possibility of interspecies discourse, which shimmers both from a great distance and as an everpresent realm of potential.

As such, the gap between modernised consciousness and communication between human and other kinds of intelligence is not *only* historical: the Dreaming is also always happening (Derrida would say, always already). Our inability to perceive it is a matter of bad habit and inherited ignorance, socialised patterns of assumption that are for the most part imprinted upon our nascent minds before we learn critical thinking and find ways back to our inherent talent for animistic consort. However, our bad habits are also the result of a history, which is indivisible from the development of technological power over nature. In this context, the process of modernity has cemented a schism whereby our kin in the animal, plant and elemental realms became distanced from us. Patrick Curry, discussing Val Plumwood's philosophical animism and materialist spirituality, also notes the "thrall to the apartheid of matter and spirit or its secular version, mind" that has accompanied our deeply entrained disenchantment.<sup>12</sup>

Along this course, over the last 10,000 years, we see subject/object divisions harden in English, a process that is magnified by the invention of writing (as David Abrams pointed out in *The Spell of the Sensuous*<sup>13</sup>). We also see, in our poetic and philosophical traditions, attempts to regain this 'paradise lost', or at least to continue the conversation that was interrupted between ourselves and the nature spirits. Human conversations with non-human interlocutors bump up against the surface of coloniser cultures so commonly as to need no list. However, the nature spirit itself is not so often based upon an experience of a particular place, or represented as a real entity. The modernised conversation with spirits is marked by a poverty of experience, which renders it a fantasy easily derided by rationalism. German sociologist Max Weber would recognise that we watch Dinah Norman-Marrngawi's spirits – and the very Dreaming we might otherwise have come to understand a little better, had our history on this land been more receptive and generous – from within our 'iron cage of reason'.

So, in order to satisfy the remit of the *PAN* journal, we must consider Philosophy, Activism and Nature, as a praxis, which asks: what can we *do* about addressing spirits of place right now, especially if we do so in English, the language of the colonising (and thereby inherently damaging) force? Let's follow Curry's nod towards Plumwood, lifting off from "being open to experiences of nature as powerful, agentic and creative, making space in our culture for an animating sensibility and vocabulary".<sup>14</sup> Seeing as this is clearly a Philosophical exploration into the mysteries of Nature, there is only one term left to engage with.

## Deep Listening and Activism

What we have to do, if we wish to undertake this experiment, is to take all of this into account, unflinchingly. Ecological activism has become an imperative, for all but the most fatalistic of nature lovers: we must defend what is left of the natural environment from the ravages of extractive industries, carbon-polluting fossil fuel industries, and any other profiteering exploits that destroy habitat in exchange for profit. How we do that is less predictable: local ecosystems are complex and need to be protected in sensitive ways, necessitating a motivated public awake to the wisdom of science and local knowledge holders alike. As this is an essay in Deep Listening to the possibility of nature spirits and their communiques, rather than another necessary ecopolitical plea for civil disobedience, it is those fragile techniques and hidden technologies, which call upon such a conversation, that we must explore.

First up, while our activism must be virulent, as wave after wave of ecological crises crash upon the shores of our world, our listening to the Earth must, as always, be patient. As the nature spirits are shy, they don't respond well to shouting of any kind.

The practitioner cannot deploy instrumental expectations in their pleas for a message from the world; we cannot “petition the Lord with prayer,” as The Doors singer and self-styled ‘Lizard King’ Jim Morrison opined in his poetic missive for shamanic inspiration, *The Soft Parade*.<sup>15</sup> The enduring fascination with such countercultural medicine taps into what Jung would have termed an archetypal pattern of animistic consciousness.<sup>16</sup> To ride with animal allies, to be informed by plant spirits, to learn from the rock people; these are natural, even instinctive desires for many people. A certain percentage of any population clearly feel such yearnings, just as there are social segments more prone to narcissism or more sober scientific investigation. And regardless of how disrespectfully it may be deployed at your local New Age workshop, if we are to see beyond our blind spot we must practice open-mindedness, as well as retaining our critical faculties, when considering the possibilities of working with nature spirits.

Such industries and endeavours could rightly be critiqued for being hopelessly enmeshed in a colonialist and capitalist fantasy, designed and consumed to fluff along the egos of mystically-minded cosmonauts unseasoned in the arts of self-analysis or critical thinking. Yet such questers after the mysteries are also symptomatic of a craving that exists not only at the margins of modern consciousness; it is archetypal, as Jung would have seen it, spontaneously arising from a deep appetite for such experiences, beneath what Charles Tart called the ‘consensus trance’ of everyday reality.<sup>17</sup>

One way of exercising open-minded curiosity without drumming away critical reflexivity is by beginning with Deep Listening, a practice that has been suggested across a variety of cultural contexts, including by 60s electronic avant-garde artists such as Pauline Oliveros<sup>18</sup>. Pandemic conditions of isolation in 2020 make the concept of Deep Listening relevant to urban environments in a new way, which is worthy of further exploration in terms of ecopsychology and which could extend the way we think about more-than-human intelligence. The “heightened state of awareness” Oliveros recommends includes “the sounds of daily life, of nature, or one’s own thoughts as well as musical sounds.” As commentator Cherry Adam says, “your body is singing to you every day, as well as nature. Even the electrical cords of your kitchen appliances sing their own anthem. Even your feet can become ears if you try. I invite you to deeply listen to your self-isolation. What is it trying to tell you?” Such suggestions are rich with potential and pivot a practice of Deep Listening to the everyday life of anyone willing to take a breath and try them.

But for the purposes of responding to Dinah’s dilemma, we must explore the Deep Listening practice of Miriam Rose Ungunmerr, whose enactment of *dadirri*, as she outlines it, is widely accessible to the public, something especially helpful for non-Aboriginal Australians living on this ancient land.<sup>19</sup> I’m lucky to live in a place where I can practice this type of meditation in sand dunes, or under trees, or by a babbling brook. However, even in an urban setting, sitting with a pot plant and its own mysteriously unstoppable urge to live and breathe can form the beginning of an adequate practice, too. Even if you are not in a Covid-19 pandemic-induced lockdown, the confines of urban environments can make life seem like a cage.<sup>20</sup> Maybe, with a bit of practice, if we can quieten the voices of our human personality for long enough, we might be able to hear the Earth spirits still, as they sing the song of the Earth, for those who will listen.

Assuming we’ve settled into a quiet space for our Deep Listening, we can do worse than opening up the doors of perception by sensing and expressing thankfulness for life. It’s no guarantee of success, however: we can feel and emote our thankfulness to the ocean (for example), but it will still rip us out and drown us, if we are in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Earth’s laws are impersonal; it doesn’t matter if you are a

'good person' in terms of what you think, or [what you] imagine is wanted on behalf of Earth spirit. When we disobey physical laws, we pay the price, as our species is currently finding out in a dangerously warming climate.

But what speaks to us if the nature spirits have retreated so far that they can no longer be contacted? They should be heeding us even less now, since their very existence on this planet is threatened by ours. And if we are ignorant of the language Indigenous to our place – the language that was used to converse with nature spirits for tens of millennia before our people arrived – we may be reduced to addressing these shy beings in English. But while this is a language with 'no Dreaming', as Stanner opined, we still have two options open to us, no matter what language we speak. We can heed a higher calling, which draws us along to reconnect with place and our more-than-human kin, no matter what oppressive system we are enmeshed in; and we can listen and learn to interpret the Dreaming language of the spirit of life that animates us and our kin on Earth.

## Dreaming Languages

In following this path, we may find that this higher, or deeper, calling, operates according to another type of language, which harks across to that 'otherworld', the commonly held Dreaming story about all the Earth peoples being able to converse. This is the language of dream, of prelinguistic symbol, which still speaks to us when our rational gatekeeper, the waking mind, or voice of reason, is asleep. This language is as old as consciousness and, while it can be wrestled into structures like 'English' or 'Yanyuwa', shaped by culture and ancestry, it is not limited to them. Our personal dreams, as we experience them at night, operate in images, in a sense of *knowing*, as a symbolic messaging arising out of a world of intuitive depth perception. We can also sense this language operating beneath everyday consciousness in dream-like or meditative states. In philosophical and historical terms, it might be called a gnosis.

Naturally, we must exercise caution when listening to our inner 'knowing', as it happily fulfils our wishes, gratifies our sense of self, rabbits on ahead of us, and/or fills us with what we think we want to be. So, if we are to respond creatively to Dinah Norman-Marrngawi's point – the problematic nature of the English language when it comes to conversing with nature spirits, whether we are in Australia, Europe or Asia – we must begin by practicing discernment in terms of wish fulfilment and escapist fantasy (as Freud suggested). A result that might give us pause for thought, for example, would be a Deep Listening practice that leaves us feeling empowered as individuals but leaves no hint of the grief we must experience for what humanity has done to our planetary home. This might feel exhilarating on a personal level. If after repeated experiments we are not also stricken by grief at some point, we are likely avoiding the reality of The Sixth Great Extinction. There remain countless reasons to celebrate life on a dying Earth, we are self-aware primates embodying the consciousness of the universe but we must surely also acknowledge that if the Earth were to speak to us today, we would hear it cry, as Thich Nhat Hanh suggests.<sup>21</sup>

With such salutary qualifications in place, our listening must also be *localised*. The ecocentric message is always more complex than the simplified one, just as our personal dreams are more ambiguous and mysterious than our waking ideas about them might be. If we want to be better ecological citizens of the planet, the lightning fast shift towards globalised communications, which makes any particular place an abstract stage upon which human action takes place, must be modified. We've got to learn the laws of the place where we sit, the way that particular ecosystem fits together, just as we have to learn to inhabit our own personal bodymind, in its specific example of incarnation.<sup>22</sup> Tyson Yunkaporta reminds us that an Aboriginal Australian Dreaming

provides a map, or lore, for a place, which is rich with precise and meaningful information. This makes such a system, or mythos in its most full, real and alive definition, distinct from what he sees as the New Age 'floating' through cosmic realisation without a roadmap.<sup>23</sup> A commitment to Deep Listening as a bodymind returns us to conversation with spirits of place, whether we are prepared for it or not. In this polylogue we begin to rebalance the modern disposition towards a displaced abstract, to find a more-than-human intelligence in the interdependent here and now, as well as in the endless depths of the soul and the flashing lights of the spirit.

Regardless of what language we inherit or learn, we're still breathing, self-aware primates with the opportunity to experience the self as an expansive, limitless imagination, incarnate in (or as) a body. As we give thanks and request aid, alliance, or guidance from our local nature spirits, they may well seek escape from our human noise. In our silence, as we practice Deep Listening, they may just overcome their timidity for long enough to recognise a kindred spirit and grant us a visit in the prelinguistic language of the everywhen.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Geoff Berry is an agent of ecocentric mythopoeia and Australian Representative for the International Ecopsychology Society. See [www.naturecalling.org](http://www.naturecalling.org) for more.

<sup>2</sup> PAN: *Philosophy, Activism, Nature* no.13 (2017) pp.68–72. 'Can my Country hear English? Reflections on the relationship of language to country.' John Bradley.

<sup>3</sup> Australian anthropologist WEH Stanner had his collection of essays published under the title *White Man Got No Dreaming* (1979) ANU Press. Download available at <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/114726>

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Stanner in the opening to *White Man Got No Dreaming*.

<sup>5</sup> On both the consistent claims of Indigenous practitioners of natural medicine (or 'shamans') that independent spirit beings teach them the ways of the Earth ('certain plants are intelligent beings capable of communication' 18; 'nature talks' 24); and on the 'blind spot' that makes it difficult for Westerners to accept this possibility (12-18), see Jeremy Narby (1999) *The Cosmic Serpent; DNA and the Origins of Knowledge* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher / Putnam). Sean Kane also pointed out that we receive myth from this side of the agricultural divide in *The Wisdom of the Mythtellers* (1994) Broadview Press. Lynn White Jr, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis', *Science* 10 Mar 1967: Vol. 155, Issue 3767, pp. 1203-1207.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Shepard (1998) *Nature and Madness*, University of Georgia Press.

<sup>7</sup>

[https://www.academia.edu/1194823/Under\\_the\\_Dominion\\_of\\_Light\\_an\\_ecocritical\\_mythography](https://www.academia.edu/1194823/Under_the_Dominion_of_Light_an_ecocritical_mythography)

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Berry (1999) *The Great Work: Our way into the future*, Bell Tower.

<sup>9</sup> <https://open.spotify.com/episode/6wutqbPB6KBb4cn8dnqLE3>

- 
- <sup>10</sup> See also Val Plumwood's contribution to decolonising relationships with nature in *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature* Issue 2, 2002: 7-30.
- <sup>11</sup> Paul Shepard (1996) *The Only World We've Got*, Sierra Club Books, p178.
- <sup>12</sup> Patrick Curry, Some Remarks on Val Plumwood. *Green Letters* 12 (Spring 2010) 8-14.
- <sup>13</sup> David Abram (1996) *The Spell of the Sensuous; Perception and Language in a more-than-human World*, Random House.
- <sup>14</sup> Val Plumwood quoted in Curry, p4.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Soft Parade*, The Doors (1969) Elektra Records. Lyrics by Jim Morrison.
- <sup>16</sup> Jung first uses the term in a 1919 essay titled "Instinct and the Unconscious". At this early stage he is simply trying to fill out his thesis that each individual inherits a broad and deep set of patterns from a collective storehouse. He will later be strongly affected by the brief time he spent in 1925 with the Taos Pueblo in New Mexico with elder Ochwiay Biano, aka Mountain Lake. This encounter had a sustained influence on Jung's theories and understanding of the psyche thereafter. Dakota Sioux intellectual and political leader, Vine Deloria Jr, composed a rich and non-reductive comparison of the two traditions in his *C.G. Jung and the Sioux Traditions; Dreams, Visions, Nature and the Primitive* (2009) Spring Journal, Inc.
- <sup>17</sup> Charles Tart (1986) *Waking Up*. New Science Library. Tart reasoned that we are induced, through everyday processes of socialisation, into a trance-like state that convinces us that we operate within a 'consensus' reality.
- <sup>18</sup> <https://cherryadam.com/2020/04/08/pauline-oliveros-a-deep-listening-to-self-isolation/>
- <sup>19</sup> The word, concept and spiritual practice that is *dadirri* is from the Ngan'gikurunggurr and Ngen'giwumirri languages of the Aboriginal peoples of the Daly River region (Northern Territory, Australia). <https://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/about-dadirri>
- <sup>20</sup> As discussed in my ecomythic documentary, *City Living, Nature Calling*. [http://www.naturecalling.org/?page\\_id=132](http://www.naturecalling.org/?page_id=132)
- <sup>21</sup> See <https://plumvillage.org/articles/can-you-hear-mother-Earth/>
- <sup>22</sup> I use the term 'bodymind' as a shorthand for dissolving the seeming distinction between mind and body common to modern and Western frameworks of thinking. In this I am heavily influenced by my Zen practice, studies in Indigenous epistemologies, and the somatic turn in Western philosophical discourse since early twentieth century phenomenological speculation.
- <sup>23</sup> Tyson Yunkaporta, interviewed by Josh Schrei, The Emerald podcast, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/5rFo2hLvWHVuwTAtrKIpWM>