

Translating Agnotology: A Letter Home¹

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Dear Will,

Too long between letters. The last one was in spring. Now I'm back at the desk and autumn is noisy. It's not easy to write when outside the window apples fall, plums beg to be bottled and the garden crackles with compost. But I've been thinking of that place now known as Australia, and our correspondence helps translate. It filters possibilities of self-deception. It's a privilege to have old friends willing to write between the continents. A remembrance of the past migrant practice of writing home and a chance to think with you as if we're together with an evening wine or an early dawn tea—a slowness that email cannot replicate.

This morning was acute. At dawn I watched swallows prepare to head south. Every year they congregate in the Chateau eaves, in a swill of last drinks before they depart. I envy their flight. Its light touches on the world. The escape from identity and place seemed a gift. Are they expats extraordinaire? Or cosmopolitan dancers in air? Do they forget where they've been, in order to be present where they are? Does history hang out in their bodies? Does it torture them with memories or guide their flight? Their obsession with the castle is weird: aren't castles the metaphor for fortress Europe? Why would birds want to shelter there? Birds don't seem distracted by metaphor. Perhaps I shouldn't be either? But really, between you and I, how did I end up living in Europe?

It's been seven years since we landed here bright and brutal from Darwin. This week the kids went back to school and remind me that they're embedded in French, with a better handle of their hosts language and timetable quirks than I, the immigrant parent, will ever have. So, now moments of quiet arise, broken by tractors and the chickens destroying the vegie patch, and seven years appears as a threshold. It's the age Jesuits say children's characters are formed. Is the expatriate character also sealed: seven years in-between a small French village and that big thing Australia?

Bruno Latour triggered the need to think through Australia. I read a talk he gave in February last year on what was eternal and transitory (Latour 2014). He did that milky play with time and space that Europeans do and addressed capitalism, something Europeans also do so insightfully. He claimed first nature: earth, materiality, land, our bodies, are now being dominated by second nature, economics and capitalism. Second nature has become so insidiously natural—it's the stable, eternal law we cling to at the expense of the unstable, abused and transient earth. What got me in the guts was Australia as central to his argument in that we've lost 'thought'. He remarked on the

‘uniquely Australian strategy of voluntary sleepwalking towards catastrophe’. In the face of the Abbott government, its ecologically suicidal policies and social science dismantling, ‘not thinking of the future, when you’re Australian, as being the most rational thing to do’. We now have our own political paradigm: the ‘uniquely’ Australian model of wilful ignorance is agnotology where ignorance is not merely the absence of knowledge, but an outcome of cultural and political struggle (Latour 2014). Basically, according to Latour, and many others, Australia is the front line experimental site to unlearn: where dismantling thought accommodates economic totalitarianism and enables a denial of the consequential ecological apocalypse.

I’m sure we agree there’s truth here: your work in land rights and green movement would gift concrete extensions to his argument. Unfortunately for me, it didn’t feel so tidy. His words remind of the constant need for the French, and perhaps by extension the Europeans, to play with the binary of Australia like it’s an intellectual toy. Tropes and stereotypes have been used on me many times where I feel the speaker doesn’t realise they play with my veins until it becomes difficult to think straight.

Three times I’ve stood before the village Chateau where a local has gestured towards it and said something like – look at how history stands here, how old we are – it must be strange for you coming from such a new country blah blah. Each time I remind them Australia is older than the adolescent mountains above our heads, and home to the oldest continuing culture. I naively believed Europe was beyond such subaltern dismissals. I thought beyond Australian borders the battle had been won. Then there is the other extreme, like when the French housewife told me I couldn’t hear ‘The Mutant Message from Down Under’ and its wisdom because my white skin makes me blind to the spiritual messages of my birthplace: apparently only outside white people get the mutant message.

Admittedly, when I started working with the Pompiers I exploited stereotypes.² The burly mountain men told me Australia had magnificent fires that roared like war and their adolescent desires had been to travel there to test their muscles against nature and feel freedom from history. Apparently my Australian caveman origins gift me Amazonian capacity so I was immediately accepted into the inner sanctum of the local emergency team when many other expats were not welcome. Now three years later, heavy hoses too easily defeat me. They laugh that I’ve gotten soft living here. I have another foot in the academic world but at a conference on environmental collapse, a German scientist raised his eyebrows at me during his talk on collapse, then gestured to me in the audience as if my presence on earth was finite. I felt destined to be one of few witnesses who got out before Australia became hot ashes floating on a warm Pacific surface. Now with Abbott all over the news, in the humour and horror sections, it’s been a barrage of white noise: both from me and from those I talk to. How did this happen? Is he for real? How did Australia, the land of wisdom, nature and freedom, end up at such a suicidal juncture? Anglo influence? Lucky stupidity? Agnotology? Isn’t it time for revolution? Some French friends dream once again of revolution, yet here in the home of polarised political opinions Australia’s political nightmare can frighten people of all persuasions.

But there's something else at play. Something that makes me cry. Something I've struggled with from the moment we landed on these laboured fields. It's a loss of agency and voice about what matters. We left work in indigenous health. We left active friends, like yourself, who labour at the coalface of native title and its contradictions. It was humid and sticky when we stepped off the Darwin tarmac and away from hot engagement with what mattered. Did I ever tell you that on the plane, literally, between Darwin and Geneva, Howard announced the intervention? The cut from home couldn't have been more military.

I arrived in France to meet a Europe Dreaming. Coiffured dealers that collect art until their walls sing like archives but couldn't countenance that indigenous hip-hop exists. I met an intense French romance with Australian primitivism. A man, who'd never been there told me that in his past life he was an indigenous elder so his deep spirituality was 'beyond this world'. So when Latour turned his sharp eye down south and pointed his precise finger at Australia as an example of agnotology, he joined the deluge of voices that play with the binaries of Australia, sometimes for the purposes of politics, of distancing and appropriating without understanding. Living with these persistent stereotypes, Latour's statements, even if I agree with him, step into a long history of European popular representations of 'Australia' as the repository of both spiritual redemption and uncivilised political horror. Australia is an exceptional space. It is the exceptionally ecologically fragile space of nomadic possibilities beset by hyper capitalism and a non-reflective populace that is both too old and too young to be taken seriously. Australia is easily severable from History, seems to exist only in the space of imagination and so becomes a trope to avoid facing, or to outsource, European contradictions at home.

In seven years of running Australia festivals, doing a PhD connecting indigenous jurisprudence with European philosophy, binaries of home run thick through encounters: from the local farmers spitting about industrial farming, pesticides and climate change to the cinema specialists that cling to Herzog's *Green Ant Dreaming* as an example of the *différend*, or Indigenous untranslatability and erasure. Firstly, there's the persistent conflation of the noble savage and spiritual salvation embedded in the imaginary of Australia and its first nature as represented by indigenous culture and ecology. This ancient spiritual is non-textual, pre-history, frozen and pure. Secondly, there is the tragic collapse in the encounter between capitalism and wild nature manifest most profoundly in Mad Max and backed up by Jared Diamond. But does Europe conflate science with their own cultural battles against the pragmatic, logic and hyper hungry Anglos: colonisers they can't believe Australians haven't yet beheaded? Is Mad Max Fury Road a dystopia that only belongs down there?

Both European imaginings tap into an agnotology that forgets that 'the subaltern' are living, transmitting, contemporary cultures and ecologies, and they express wilful ignorance of their own historical complicity with the forces of blunt capitalism and colonialism. For example shall we talk about Algeria and the rise of the right wing at the last EU elections? Shall we talk about the ecocides in Spain and the economic brutalisation of that country along with Portugal, and Ireland. I mean really, should we

talk about Greece, the wayward European child, of Greece where second nature domination hides in the spine of troika debts? Shall we talk about the military interventions in the Mediterranean against refugees on boats? We can talk about them but they sound eerily familiar. Tropes might have to dissolve when agnotology appears closer to home.

So for seven years tropes of adoration, horror and erasure of home come at me like Groundhog Day. Positioned as a translator between my two homes, I constantly find French resistance to Australia's dynamism, complexity and heterogeneity but equally an intense mourning and attachment to symbolic Australia: for what we 'were and could have been.' This displaces European mourning about their own politics and disappearance of futures: their own social contract-bound fears of tribal disintegration, nationalism and politics of exclusion. Perhaps Europeans can't afford to play with either side of that chronology themselves: the bloody past and the fracturing future. But this mourning of Australia also reflects a refusal of the difficulties of the global contemporary that admits all of us, everywhere, find it difficult to 'think' wherever we are.

Something happens when you inhabit two places, but are estranged from both. You can be tempted to move, as I watch my kids sometimes do, into a bastardised version of the cosmopolitan imagination. It's a promiscuous defence mechanism, a form of resignation, an abandonment of connection in order to be real and present with conflicting identities. This hasn't sat well with me, for it can easily morph into a consumption practice where homes and identities can be cherry picked as if life is a boutique hipster store. It can become a flight into economics as natural. It forgets that earth, place, soil, electric wires, trees, kitchens, food, worms, nuclear power stations, mountains and rivers alter and create thought, language and identity. If I excavate beyond national identities and tropes my blood still runs with the tributaries of the Yarra and Murray rivers. My flesh now moves with the solid geology of the Jura mountains that hold my family. But, cosmopolitanism in its deeper sense does allow thinking beyond Australia and Europe into wider processes.

You and I have talked about this many times over wine—the struggle between ecology and economics is not uniquely Australian, and was initially imported from northern shores. Agnotology that forgets the world and instead hinges onto transcendentalism, has Greek ancestors gone uber imperial. Wilful ignorance feeds thanaticism, what McKenzie Wark, another expatriate Australian, calls the gleeful and fanatical run towards death (Wark, 2014). A global necropolitical sleepwalking where capital now wags the dog that is earth. So is Latour asking a deeper question about whether agnotology also encompasses the process of wilful ignorance that materiality, first nature, constitutes thought and language? I'm sure he'd agree that matter matters to thought, that our bodies are birthed and owned by earth and science is an interpretive text and, while important, isn't a replacement for intimate engagement with the kind of re-emergent languages the world thirsts for?

Personally, I've found that the gift of being Australian—its legacy of violence and abundance—is the knowledge, even if subconscious, that we wouldn't exist without this

originary source of ‘thought’. Material thought, perhaps what the indigenous academic Irene Watson calls Raw Law, has a universal element merely because we’re stuck on the earths critical zone in all its moods and different temperaments (Watson 1998). The non-indigenous have raw law just as much as anyone; it’s just that many have ‘forgotten’ it and forced others to forget, wilfully or not. We’ve forgotten to nurture and protect a form of sovereignty that precedes Westphalia and Rome. When my French friends, who long for outback Australia, also turn their bodies to this place here, not in a blood and soil way, but with intimacy that needs no state translator, then the conversation between home and here busts binaries and thoughtless tropes into different political possibilities that resist the naturalisation of capitalism.

The persistent use of Australia as a mechanism of difference (i.e. an Anglo problem) furthers a suspension of self-reflexive critique within Europe, distances Australia from what is conceived as authentic politics and deflects a genuine encounter with sovereignty that doesn’t perpetuate the *bios* and *zoe* separation. It ignores earth and land and the world as being in relation with us and not purely scientific. This disables possible political interjections, not only Australian, but also from the wider ‘material’ subaltern that confront European understandings of materiality, the natureculture separation and the global spread of corporate governance. Australia is hardly alone in using agnotology. In the climate change scenarios Europe will survive the first nature, but the second nature will collapse, bringing about the return of warrior survivalist tribalism. Europe is sleepwalking towards social disintegration. The death of its beloved social contract scares many. Wherever the extension of the utopia/dystopia gaze lands, it will find contradictions of our age—and reasons for fear. While capitalism is a series of affects, so can be material intimacy and kinship. It’s not so strange.

Basically, what I’m trying to say is that the turning towards first nature involves uncovering a mode of thought and possibilities of language as present in Europe as Australia. Adoration of Australia’s first nature by my French friends exposes a repression. Put simply—land is law and law is land. Can we recover together what those words mean in different geographies and cultures? The rise of new materialisms across both the Anglo and Continental world, dances with science to bring forward the vital élan of Bergson, the conatus of Spinoza, and has deep friends in Australia such as the ecological humanities movement. The constructions and distancing and making exceptional of Australia I’ve met here taps into a desire within Europeans for an uncovering of language that enables political imaginaries that connect continents beyond hyper capitalism—something that might be eternal and transitory, but also asks difficult questions about mourning, complicity, interconnection and materiality. As the oldest but most ecologically fragile natureculture community, Australia doesn’t have to be a dumping ground for European fears and desires, but seen from a deeper perspective, is a site of political opportunities, of an exchange of intercontinental wilful remembering.

Stephen Muecke’s *Ancient & Modern* got me through a few expatriate identity explosions (Muecke 2004). He asks what would make the Australian philosophical difference and posited it as being the Aboriginal legacy—which will increasingly define our culture in the future. He stepped away from Indigenous people as representatives of a frozen

ancient heritage and chose continental philosophy as the connective point with indigenous philosophy. In his stories, metaphysics and cosmology settle down to earth. As he claims, naïve access to the real world doesn't fit classical philosophy . . . but indigenous philosophical concepts are place-based, body-based and not solely word-based. The northern obsession with the deracinated word is at the expense of the world. European philosophy is weighed down by disembodied thought. Importantly, Muecke, with Bhabha, suggests a dialectics without transcendence 'where you don't resolve the contradiction or opposition in order to posit a singular higher truth' (Muecke 2004). Rather you continue the dialogue while on the look out for contingent and multiple causes. Now why didn't he tell me this when I first arrived? I needed that when tropes unexpectedly dropped out of neighbour's mouths. I decided after reading this book to cultivate naïveté: to suspend judgement in order not to forget. This is the inverse of agnotology, of ignorance, and a gift from home. I hoped naïve encounters with the world could bypass the castles of control.

So I tried cultivating naïve encounters with Europeans in order to hear what my neighbours and friends were expressing: it's meant becoming curious and suspending ownership over knowledge of home. This wilful naïveté, where my identity subtly slips into the backseat, allows gratitude towards the French anthropologist who guided me through the encounters between the Yolngu and Macassans and the passionate Danish professor who introduced me to Australian literature hardly heard of at home. I see the scholarship, advocacy, preservation, nourishing exchanges and recognition that are often too easily blindsided in Australia. As I write Abbott's use of agnotology gets hotter by the day. Abbott claimed that the most defining moment of Australia's economic development was white invasion. Australia is not sleepwalking—it's a deliberate repositioning and conscious strategy of preparing the penetrability of country for economic triumph. It's an historical trajectory with a mission to continue the destruction of another law connected to first nature. In Australia, as in many sites around the world, the politics of agnotology serves a purpose and it is not new—it is the evacuation of country. Material violence. The politics of forgetting has a long history of forgetting the world in order to own it. Equally Abbott is wilfully forgetting the rule of law, the limits to government power, and that fascism starts by declaring a mandate of fear, something the Europeans know down to their bones. I hear this tearing away of country and belonging manifest in the proposed shutdown of remote Aboriginal communities and it physically creates a quiet pain even at this distance. Wilful remembering, a gesture towards being present with what Walter Benjamin calls the tradition of the oppressed, can also be registered in the body as a mode of resisting agnotology, even if so far away.

I could be pretentious and say that I seek to be a swallow dancing through chateau eaves and desert drifts in equal measure. But to be honest, I've no idea why swallows, châteaux, deserts, bush valleys keep appearing as I write. The connective tissue that enables me to be here doesn't feel like metaphor: it feels fleshy. I confess, I've tried, in my own way, to stop sleepwalking, forgetting, willfully sticking to slim identities and social domination. Sometimes I've found myself awake. It's then I move from the desk and texts into the forest to be with alive substances that hold me present in place. I'm back in the Yarra Valley where Australia doesn't bother to haunt me. I become embedded in a Jura womb

where the European doesn't suffocate. When you cease sleepwalking—being drunk on silent ideology, desire and the need to export fear elsewhere—even for a moment, in the sobriety a different kind of mourning appears: 'it's not attached to Eros or adolescence . . . it's like childhood—the condition of fraternity ruptured by history.'

When Muecke talks about the indigenous legacy that needs to be recognised, the meaning of sovereignty returns: either over land or with land, with matter or apart from matter (as if that's possible). My work has been to excavate jurisprudences and seek connective points between sovereignties: between legal norms that emerge from material intimacy and kinship. It's been a dance across geographies and cultures to unearth, or earth, *nomos* and *physis* that run together. I found, from deserts without castles through American legal realism to the ICJ, there exists an undercurrent where legal norms are embodied and perform radical sovereign expressions where body, land, language and law are in generative conversations. Here is a binary for you: the choice is whether we are with first nature or appropriate it. Property or incorporeality? Imagining lineal fictions or telling circular stories?

However, the indigenous legacy asks such profound questions of where we are now that sleepwalking becomes wilful and manifests in legal ignorance. But Australia isn't alone in the struggle between owning and being with land. Property has troubled Europeans for centuries. The neat and easy Australian violence against an embodied sovereignty exposes an anesthetised sleepwalking that poisons the globe. While agnotology isn't uniquely Australian: our forgetting appears as extreme where deep cultural/natural connections are dismissed as 'lifestyle choices' and repositioned within second nature. When will Australia recognise the law of land as well as its people? Our hatred of earth and those who are in balanced legal relationships with it, as well as the desire to 'keep it back in the past' is only 200 years old: the Europeans have been doing it for such a long, long time it's become naturalised by millions of words and wars. History clothes wilful ignorance.

At home dance transmits law. It's an ignored jurisprudential transmission that balances many natures, dissolves and creates subjectivity. Apparently Europeans know this too. Hegel wondered if dance could open a law that would bypass law as we know it: beyond dyads and property, to an animated law that enlivened the world and each other. He tentatively sought law as dance (Butler 2012). Can you imagine how liberating to find that the father of European dialectics exposes a northern longing for law and politics that touches raw law? A dance where bodies become alive in a rule bound way that doesn't conform to dead law. That seeks neither abstract thought or bodily repression but instead love, presence and law as being possible through dance. I'm no swallow, but I do love a good dance, particularly one that could re-create timeless law to connect continents.

My Neighbour, Mr Baudet, comes from people who have laboured on their land for centuries. No history can tell them they weren't here in this valley, on this patch, putting their hands into dirt. Together we never talk about Australia or France, instead for the last seven years, almost weekly, Mr Baudet explains to me the vitality of stinging nettles, the movement of black rot across tomatoes and how weather has shifted from the north to south in the last twenty years. His words contain the past, present and future and come

through his experience of bending with seasons. At ninety he dances, albeit slowly and crookedly, through the village with a presence that we're losing, or have already lost, the world over. Now when I go home it's vital to grab the kids and together seek conversations out in the gums, by the river, along the gullies where I ask to be reintroduced to the country that grewed me up by those who know its law. I also hear Latour reminding me that resistance to agnotology is central to the political struggle.

While I don't want to shelter in the chateau, neither is the desert accessible right now, and underneath all my identity kickbacks lies a certain form of shame. I'm like the European and also mourn what that place now known as Australia was and could have been. And why here, in this place so far away, have I witnessed such deep respect, such passionate advocacy that we remember and provide openings for drawing the indigenous legacy upon which my life depends, to the centre. This makes me humble.

So, after seven years, thanks to this village and my bush haven birth, my body carries both time and place until forgetting is a forgotten possibility. Abstract data, theories, concepts, tropes and opinions fade into unhelpful distractions from what matters wherever I am. I hope from now I'll be careful with my opinions when defending and translating Australia. I hope deep listening, wise practice and silence will walk with me during these expatriate days. Australia may be exceptional to some, but to me its integral to the dance that draws first nature close. Also, what responsibility does Australia, and those who move between here and there, have in answering this call from the north?

In the face of the Abbott mind-set where agnotology is a ripe and fleshy machine moving across the country, I apologise for expressing such idealism, such nakedness. I don't mean to belittle the struggle and lack of language that seems to pervade any understanding of how we ended up living under such governance structures. It's not a conclusion I'd articulate unless speaking with friends that respect the difficult demands of the dance to come. But after seven years – Lest we forget to respect what matters.

Give my love to Bec and the girls and see you at Christmas where I want to hear all about your new life in Mt Isa.

Lots of love
Bronwyn

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NOTES

¹ Thank you to Stephen Muecke whose work helped me be more present in life practises and, on this essay, guided words towards closer proximity with life.

² The Pompiers are a voluntary civic service that exists in France who are the first site of intervention to any emergency from fires, to floods, assaults, car accidents and evacuating wasps from trees close to homes. I am part of the local village team of currently ten people who actively attend interventions in the local village and surrounds.

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