

# **Language Acts: How Words Make Things Happen**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

This work addresses the performative nature of language: the connection between language and performance; in essence, it will address how words make things happen. The connection between language and performance is explored in two very distinct ways via extended essays. The first essay looks at the connection between language performance and ecosystems through the lens of endangered languages and their relationship to ecosystem health and the world's current wave of species extinction, and argues that language may have a biological role in the natural world. The second essay explores the idea of "language acts" through the academic methods of performance studies and research-creation. In this essay, a biographical play and dramatization of writer Emily Brontë contends that Brontë was a proto-modernist artist. This work also serves as an exercise, a language act, in making connections and in making meaning, through the lens of the GLS experience.

**Keywords:** Biocultural Diversity; Endangered Languages; Species; Research-Creation; Performance Studies; Biography

## **Dedication**

To my husband, David, and my daughter, Miranda, whose support has been unwavering since I started my academic journey in 2006 with an undergraduate degree. They always believed I could do it, even when I didn't think I could. They have done more than their share of housework, laundry, meal preparation and dog walking so I could have this experience. Thank you, and, at least for now, the lecture hall is closed.

Last, but not least, to my constant canine companion, Belle, who sat loyally, patiently, reassuringly and, I like to think, encouragingly through every word...

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## Introduction: Linking Experience to Action; Verbal to Non-Verbal

*“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”*

*“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean different things.”*

*“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”<sup>1</sup>*

—*Through the Looking Glass, Lewis Carroll*

I have always been fascinated by language. As far back as I can remember, I was intrigued by its many shapes and forms, by alphabets and sounds so different from my own. I enjoyed spending time trying to decipher these unfamiliar “codes”—who knew what surprises they would reveal if you could just master their meaning?

Language acts make connections; language acts to make connections. Through words we are linked to the verbal and the nonverbal: to others, to culture, to history and knowledge, to environment, to action, to experiences. I began learning English at the age of four, and discovered early that different languages are not mirror images of each other: that different languages have different ways of viewing realities. I learned that language was not simply a tool for the classification of things, but that it enabled a particular way of being and of moving amidst these things.

To be clear, this is not about language limiting how we think, but about language directing what we habitually think about. As an example, an article from the *New York Times*<sup>2</sup> asked me to consider what voice qualities I would expect in a cartoon with kitchen cutlery—would the fork have a male or female voice? How about the spoon? My mother tongue is

1 Carroll, Lewis. "Humpty Dumpty." *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871). The Project Gutenberg. 02 April 2014. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12/12-h/12-h.htm#link2HCH0006>>.

2 Deutscher, Guy. "Does Your Language Shape How You Think?" *The New York Times*. <[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)>. 26 August 2010.



Spanish, so, clearly, the fork needs a male voice; the spoon a female one. Interestingly, I can't clearly articulate why any other variation in the above example would seem "wrong." What is clear, however, is the role of language in creating our realities. This role carries with it an element of power: when you understand the words all is revealed and possibilities abound; when you don't, everything is mystery, and possibilities remain hidden. Simply put, when you understand, you know what to do and how to do; when you don't, you don't.

The role of language in affecting our realities is, I believe, what fascinated me as a child and fascinates me still. This work will address the performative nature of language: the connection between language and performance. It will explore the relationship between words and action, creation, and social and environmental realities; in essence, it will address how words make things happen. This work will also serve as an exercise, a language act, in making connections and in making meaning, through the lens of the GLS experience.

My own GLS experience has been one of making connections. In each seminar I discovered connections to seminars before; and, links to my past GLS seminars will be found informing this degree completion project—from Genesis to Lucretius to Machiavelli to Rousseau to modernist poets, these works are like a series of breadcrumbs leading me to my own work. Making these connections has been a little like treasure hunting—sometimes you go looking and find something; sometimes something finds you—a thoroughly enjoyable process, and one that has provided great value in my personal and professional life, and one that I will surely miss. However, when I found myself with the opportunity to take the last two required seminars concurrently, I hardly expected to make any connections at all. The seminars I took were so disparate; I expected to have two very full, but very different and very separate experiences. When I enrolled in LS 812 Contested Relationships between Humans, Ecosystems and Other-than-Human Animals and LS 819 Literary Biographical Drama, I could hardly guess that my understanding of the nature of language and of the borders of what is natural and what is cultural would be tested and peaked. I could hardly guess that these two seminars would come to show me, once again, about the interconnectedness of things, and to form my project for degree

completion under the unifying theme of language and performance: how words make things happen.

The connection between language and performance will be explored in the work that follows in two very distinct ways via extended essays. The first essay, “The Animal that therefore I Speak:<sup>3</sup> A Liberal Studies Perspective on the Unspoken Extinction Crisis,” explores the connection between language performance and ecosystems through the lens of endangered languages and their relationship to ecosystem health and the world’s current wave of species extinction. The essay will examine the argument made by some in the new and emerging interdisciplinary field of biocultural diversity, which looks at biocultural landscapes via converging interests in linguistics, ecology, social sciences and the humanities,<sup>4</sup> that language may have a biological role in the natural world and is not solely an extension of humanness or a means to mediate human affairs, but also mediates affairs between humans and their environment.

While species extinction and language death are both naturally occurring phenomena, these extinction crises appear to be happening in tandem and at accelerated, alarming rates. Of interest, is that the world’s hotspots for rich biodiversity are also the hotspots for rich linguistic diversity; and, species extinction is particularly strong in regions of rich biodiversity that also happen to be regions of rich linguistic diversity, which is facing a similar extinction crisis.<sup>5</sup> As most see life on earth as the pyramid (on which we sit on top) or a web (which connects us all), the accelerated rate of species loss is certainly cause for concern.

Philosopher Johann Herder contends “the invention or acquisition of language” is what “separates man from beast.”<sup>6</sup> A view of language that holds human beings as its sole inventors or creators seems a limited one; and implies that we use language, but that

<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Jacques Derrida’s *The Animal that therefore I Am*.

<sup>4</sup> Maffi, Luisa. “Biocultural Diversity and Sustainability.” *The Sage Handbook of Environment and Society*. London: Sage Publications, 2007. 269.

<sup>5</sup> Gorenflo, L. J., et al. “Co-occurrence of Linguistic and Biological Diversity in Biodiversity Hotspots and High Biodiversity Wilderness Areas.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*. 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Oliver, Kelly. *Animal Lessons*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 88.

language does not use *us*. It implies that we alone create words, and that we alone impose them; it does not allow for the possibility that language acts hold their own power to affect, or that environments impose words on the human beings with which they share space. This asks the following questions: What is the connection between a diversity of human languages and robust biodiversity? What roles might language play in ecosystem health?

The second essay, “Emily Brontë: No Coward Soul is Mine,<sup>7</sup> A play about Mystery, Harmless Pleasure and Duty,” takes a very different approach to the performance aspects of language. This essay explores the idea of “language acts” through the academic methods of performance studies and research-creation: “a creation process situated within the research activity and produces critically informed work [of art].”<sup>8</sup> In this work, a biographical play and dramatization, a research-creation scholarly drama, of writer Emily Brontë contends that Brontë was a proto-modernist artist.

This theatre piece does not capture Brontë’s life in its entirety, rather, it is centred around one particular moment in time. Brontë’s most known work, the novel *Wuthering Heights*, was published in December 1847 to mixed reviews: the novel, and its tortured hero Heathcliff, are uncompromising until their final words.<sup>9</sup> Of note, *Jane Eyre*, authored by Emily’s sister Charlotte, was published to great success just months prior *Wuthering Heights*; Emily dies in December 1848, just one year after the publication of her (in)famous book. It seems likely that in this year Emily and Charlotte would have had a conversation about the response to *Wuthering Heights* and whether it was “advisable to create things like Heathcliff.”<sup>10</sup> It is this conversation, this moment in time that the play captures. While this moment in time is a probability rather than a certainty, the dialogue that informs it is grounded in auto/biographical and historical sources.

Through the language acts of theatre, the central research question explores the possibility that Emily was a proto-modernist writer. In the context of this work, it also allows

<sup>7</sup> From Emily Brontë’s poem “No Coward Soul in Mine.”

<sup>8</sup> Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council website. Definition of Terms. “Research-Creation.” 08-25-2014.

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous Review. *The Atlas*. 1848. Clipped by Emily Brontë. Brontë Parsonage Museum. [www.bronte.org.uk](http://www.bronte.org.uk).

<sup>10</sup> Brontë, Charlotte. Editor’s Preface to *Wuthering Heights*.

for the further exploration of the connection between words and the experiences or conditions that give rise to them. It asks the questions: Do language acts affect the realities they strive to describe? What is the relationship of performance to creating knowledge?

This exploration will be examined through a two-fold perspective: the language acts performed by me in the process of research-creation and the language acts performed by Emily Brontë in writing her novel and the subsequent language acts of her sister Charlotte. The extended essay will be informed by further research and literature review of the work of Emily Brontë and of the field of performance studies, particularly through the work of theorists who are interested in the relationship between “language acts,” between the written word and the physical experience from which it emerges.

Complex systems of language can be seen as a unique human capacity. As such, words have bearing on the performance of human beings: how they interact with each other and their environment and how they gain knowledge. If language is the vehicle by which we share experience, then it can be said that language creates knowledge. Or, can it be argued that language *is* knowledge? That words *are* performance? That words are *entities*? That language is *integral* to ecosystems?

Ultimately, the significance of this work lies in my initial GLS seminar—the beginning of a web of connections. The strand of language surfaced early, in “Genesis,” the first text we read. Like the Tower of Babel, nothing unites us, “and let[s] us make a name for ourselves,” or divides us, “scatters” us quite so literally as language.<sup>11</sup> Language acts, words, create movement, links and action: “to undercut pinnings of there,” to re-orient and to enable what follows next.<sup>12</sup> This work will serve to add to the body of knowledge on the performative nature of language, to multiply the limits when it comes to the “borders” of words and, through words, alter the existing order of this knowledge, “if ever so slightly...”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *The Bible*, New Revised Standard Version. “Genesis - Tower of Babel.” 11:4.

<sup>12</sup> Puchner, Martin. “Manifesto = Theatre.” *Theatre Journal*. 2002. 450.

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal that therefore I Am*. Trans. David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. 29; Eliot, T.S. “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” *Perspecta*. Vol. 19 (1982). 37.

**Chapter 1.**  
**The Animal that therefore I Speak:**  
**A Liberal Studies Perspective on the Unspoken**  
**Extinction Crisis**

## 1.1. Introduction: Endangered Species

*Centuries of centuries and only in the present do things happen.*

—*The Garden of the Forking Paths, Jorge Luis Borges*<sup>14</sup>

The terms “endangered languages” and “language families” are powerful biological metaphors: they communicate an understanding rooted in the natural world by making an appeal to the biological realm of endangered species (Maffi, Linguistic, Cultural, and Biological Diversity 604). Paleanthropologist and conservationist, Richard Leakey, tells us in *The Sixth Extinction: Patterns of Life and the Future of Humankind* that “death is a fact of life, and extinction is a fact of evolution” (Leaky 39). Since what paleontologists refer to as the Cambrian explosion, literally an earthly “explosion” of biological diversity that occurred some 530 million years ago, it is thought that about thirty billion species have, at some point, called Earth home (Leaky 16, 39). Recent estimates place the number of species that live on Earth around thirty million; this tells us that of all the species that ever lived on our planet, 99.9 percent are extinct (Leaky 39). In *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin argues that “the appearance of new forms and the disappearance of old forms, both natural and artificial, are bound together” (Darwin 201). Leaky suggests that these appearances and disappearances of life on Earth can be viewed as a dramatization, “producing a constantly shifting, Alice-in-Wonderland effect,” with “repeated intermissions, after each of which the cast on stage changes: some characters, previously important, disappear entirely or assume minor roles; others, in the wings, now move to stage front in major roles; new characters sometimes appear, too...” (Leaky 46).

It is important to note that although in *On the Origin of Species* Darwin does not speak to the evolution of any specific species, including man, he concludes the work with the (in)famous statement: “In the distant future I see open fields for far more important researches...Light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history” (Darwin 306). Darwin’s work does, however, speak to commonalities among biological beings: “all living things have much in common, in their chemical composition, their germinal vesicles, their cellular structure, and their laws of growth and reproduction,” and offers the following example of commonality: “[t]he framework of bones being the same in the hand of man,

<sup>14</sup> As cited in Elizabeth Kolbert’s *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*.

wing of bat, fin of the porpoise, and leg of the horse” (Darwin 301-3). Darwin argues that “an interminable number of intermediate forms must have existed, linking together all the species in each group,” and that “probably all the organic beings which have ever lived on this earth have descended from some one primordial form” (Darwin 290; 303). This would include the various species of *Homo* that at one point were in existence and are now extinct, such as *Homo erectus*, *Homo habilis* and *Homo heidelbergensis* to name a few, with only *Homo sapiens* surviving half a billion years of evolution. It is interesting to contemplate a world with more than one species of the family *Homo*. Would other species of *Homo* become victims of the one “weedy” species, too? Would Earth have been better off? Leaky cites biologist and theorist, Edward Wilson, that *Homo sapiens* is “an environmental abnormality...It is possible that intelligence in the wrong kind of species was foreordained to be a fatal combination for the biosphere...Perhaps a law of evolution is that intelligence usually extinguishes itself” (Leaky 233).

As temporal beings, humans know that death is a fact of life; but, the above also places species extinction, a more comprehensive “death,” as a fact of life on this planet. However, while species and ecosystem extinction are both naturally occurring phenomena and certainly not anomalies in the history of our ever-evolving planet, the rate at which this extinction is occurring is. In *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, Elizabeth Kolbert works to “trace an extinction event” similar in magnitude to the previous five mass extinctions, or “profound loss of biodiversity,” experienced on Earth as supported by the fossil record (Kolbert 6, 265). The extinction event that wiped out the dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous period is perhaps the most well know, and is the most recent in the Earth’s history (Kolbert 6; Leaky 40). The extinction event Kolbert is trying to trace is part of the Holocene, or “wholly recent”, epoch, whose beginning is bound to the end of the last ice age, and is the epoch humans inhabit today; and, it is considered the sixth wave of mass extinction of plants and animals on planet Earth, and known as the “Sixth Extinction” (Kolbert 107).

Although it is established that species extinction is a natural phenomenon of life on this planet, it is important to note that “mass” extinction is different from the “normal” extinction process. Under “normal” circumstances, species extinction is a rather rare occurrence and happens at a regular, or “background,” rate based on the fossil record of one species

every four years (Kolbert 16; Leaky 241). Calculating background rates is a complex task, and estimates can differ; but, what is key is “that every effort to estimate rates has produced a *large* number:” anywhere from 17,000 to 100,000 species lost yearly, resulting in a current rate of extinction that is “some thousand to ten-thousand higher than background,” and which is in line with rates for the past five mass extinctions as shown by the fossil record (Leaky 241-4). Simply put, mass extinctions are different because they incur “substantial biodiversity losses” that happen quickly and are “global in extent” (Kolbert 16). The numbers are in, and the experts agree: Earth is in the midst of a “catastrophic reality,” a Sixth Extinction, “the sixth such event to have occurred in the past half billion years;” humankind is “witnessing one of the rarest events in life’s history,” and is possibly responsible for it (Leaky 245; Kolbert 8).

While past mass extinctions may have been caused by events like shifts in global temperature patterns, sea level changes or asteroid strikes, the current mass extinction seems to be the result of human activities, the work of “one weedy species;” in particular, those activities that destroy habitats, introduce exotic species, support irresponsible hunting and cause dramatic changes to our biosphere (Leaky 232-4, 241; Kolbert 266). Some informally refer to the Holocene epoch as the “Anthropocene,” precisely because of the significance of human impact on the earth’s shrinking biodiversity; others refer to it as the “Catastrophozoic” era, for the same reason: “one weedy species” (Kolbert 107).<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, these informal characterizations place the impact of human activities in the same company as global shifts in climate patterns, changing sea levels, asteroid strikes and volcanic eruptions as harbingers of events of mass species extinction.

Human activities and their products are what philosopher Erazim Kohák considers *artifacts* and which, in his view, are a natural part of the condition of being human (Kohák xii). Kolbert, suggests that human language is, in itself, a problematic human activity or artifact, and, possibly, like its human host, what Leaky terms an “agent of extinction:” (Leaky 249)

As soon as humans started using signs and symbols to represent the natural world, they pushed beyond the limits of that world...British paleontologist Michael Benton has written: “In many ways human

<sup>15</sup> “Anthropocene” is a term created by Nobel Prize holder, Dutch chemist Paul Crutzen; “Catastrophozoic” was suggested by conservation biologist, Michael Soulé.



language is like the genetic code. Information is stored and transmitted, with modifications, down the generations. Communication holds societies together and allows humans to escape evolution.” (Kolbert 266)

Kolbert is quick to point out, however, that communication does not allow other species to escape humans. Kolbert suggests that if humans were “simply heedless or selfish or violent” the concept of “conservation” would not be necessary (Kolbert 266). She goes on to ask readers to visualize the dangers posed by *Homo sapiens* to other species: “picture a poacher in Africa carrying an AK-47 or a logger in the Amazon gripping an ax, or, better still, you can picture yourself, holding a book on your lap” (Kolbert 266).

A similar sentiment is expressed by philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* as he considers “the immense space that there must have been between the pure state of nature and the need for languages” when the only language needed by human beings was “the cry of nature...elicited only by a kind of instinct in pressing circumstances;” but, when “closer communication was established among them, they sought more numerous signs and a more extensive language” (Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings* 49). Rousseau goes on to acknowledge language as inherent to the human societal condition as “general ideas can be introduced into the mind only with the aid of words, and the understanding grasps them only through sentences” (Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings* 50).

For Kohák the problem arises not from the artifacts themselves, but that “we have lost sight of the sense, the purpose of our production and our products” (Kohák xii). This disconnect can be problematic in terms of species extinction, as most see life on earth as the pyramid (on which we sit on top) or a web (which connects us all) and, as such, the accelerated rate of species and ecosystem loss is certainly cause for alarm. This alarm is echoed by ecologist and proto-environmental philosopher Val Plumwood: “In the present context of ecological destruction...we desperately need ways to increase our sensitivity to and communicativity with the others of the earth” (Plumwood 61). So, how many blocks *can* you remove from the pyramid before it collapses? How many strands *can* you sever before the web loses its integrity?

Along with the current wave of mass species extinction, there also appears to be a lesser known mass extinction crisis afoot: the mass extinction of the world's human languages. The literature tells us the hotspots for mass species extinction appear to also be the hotspots for mass linguistic extinction; hotspots of rich biodiversity (pyramid blocks and web strands) are also hotspots of rich linguistic diversity. Linguistics experts concur that languages are in the midst of an extinction event similar to that of plants and animals. In *The Index of Linguistic Diversity*, the first quantitative measure of patterns of the world's variety of languages, principal investigator David Harmon tells us that interest in and concern over "the future of the world's languages has been building for the better part of two decades," with the main finding of the *Index* being "that linguistic diversity is being lost at a significant rate" (Harmon 97, 110). The status of global linguistic diversity is measured by making comparisons against a benchmark of linguistic distribution showing the status in 1970, the earliest year that data could make this type of analysis possible (Harmon 98). In the ensuing 35 years, the overall global loss of linguistic diversity hovers at a rate of about 20%, including indigenous varieties that make up approximately 80-85% of the world's languages; in other words, there has been a "rapid disappearance of one-fifth of the linguistic diversity that existed in the world in 1970," with the trend indicating a continuing concentration towards fewer languages (Harmon 110). While biologists estimate the current species extinction rate at 1,000 times or greater than previously recorded, linguists estimate that approximately 50-90% of the world's 7000 languages will be lost by the end of the century (Gorenflo et al. 1). It is important to note that in the context of "the entirety of the world's languages – not just their number, but also the linguistic and cultural diversity they represent – is being severely diminished," too (Harmon 98). From a linguistic perspective, this significant loss in linguistic diversity can be seen as equivalent to an ecological disaster, a sixth extinction.

While this dramatic decline in the world's languages and the loss of linguistic diversity may be bad news for linguists from a professional perspective, if the primary concern is ecosystem health, why does this matter? Are there ecological consequences when speakers go silent? It is under these broad umbrella questions that my research explores the link between human language, particularly endemic, indigenous endangered languages, and ecosystem health and biodiversity. By exploring these biocultural landscapes I hope to draw some conclusions on the ecological function or biological role

of human language and support my contention that human language plays a significant biological role in the natural world and is not simply an extension of humanness or human culture. Furthermore, I hope to draw some conclusions on the following: Is linguistic diversity a product of our humanity or a product of the natural world? Are a diversity of human languages integral to ecosystem and species health? Additionally, while species extinction and language death are both naturally occurring phenomena, the co-occurrence of these events in terms of geographic locations and magnitude raise interesting propositions: Is language, like its human host, responsible for significant ecological impact? An “agent of extinction?”

Parallels between languages and species were drawn by Charles Darwin in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), and later echoed by linguist August Schleicher (1863) (Maffi, Linguistic, Cultural, and Biological Diversity 600). It is only recently, however, that the necessary interdisciplinary research necessary to explore this link has been conducted; and, it appears that the link between human language and ecosystem health and complex biodiversity is functional or causal (Gorenflo et al. 1). As a starting point, the research suggests this functionality or causality may be the result of the ecology of human interactions as dictated by the environment itself, in terms of competition for, sharing of and responsive use biological resources (Gorenflo et al. 4).

As with any species that is endangered or rapidly on its way heading to endangerment and extinction, the question then becomes: do you save it? Or, at least, attempt to? The case is no different when it comes to endangered languages. An interesting contemporary notion is that everything endangered should be saved. Ecologist and philosopher, Neil Evernden, speculates this is because humans have become aliens in their own world, much like Alice in Wonderland; and, as such, “we lack the knowledge of how and for whom to care” (Evernden 111). It is important to note, that in ecological literature, the act of “saving” a species, or trying to, can fall into two categories: conservation or preservation. Although both these words are often used interchangeably, they each embody a very different course of action. What these words have in common, however, is that on paper, in words, the pursuit of either seems a noble and rather straightforward task. By examining the distinctions between these two categories of “saving” it becomes apparent that, in fact, the opposite may be true.

Conservation dictates maintaining a functionality, a co-evolution, with modern times. Leaky defines the act, and challenge, of conservation as: “reconciling the conflicting needs of a growing human population, which requires ever more land, and the protection of wildlife” (Leaky 5). In *A Sand County Almanac*, conservationist Aldo Leopold describes the challenge as a “conservation esthetic” rooted in the fact that humans involved in acts of conservation, whether the professional or the recreationist, are all at their core “hunters” in their own way: motivated by the idea of “trophy,” whether it be a bird’s nest, a photograph or a breath of fresh air:

Because the wild things he hunts for have eluded his grasp, and he hopes by some necromancy of laws, appropriations, regional plans, reorganization of departments, or other form of mass-wishing to make them stay put...In short, the very scarcity of wild places, reacting with the mores of advertising and promotion, tends to defeat any deliberate effort to prevent their growing still more scarce. (Leopold 167-72)

Preservation efforts, on the other hand, rely on the idea of permanence, of keeping things the same: that “[a] thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” (Leopold 224-5). The essence of preservation is well captured in the concept of “preservation potential” inherent to all species: “the odds that an individual of that species will become fossilized” (Kolbert 88). There are very few things that come to mind more permanent than a fossil—once fossilized there is no opportunity for change. This can, in the end, become the death of things, as it does not allow for adaptation to new challenges and increased chances for continuation and survival. In terms of endangered languages, preservation seems the current favoured act. With recent estimates of one language dying off every 14 days, linguists race against time in an effort to capture, on paper, the words and meanings of these dying tongues (Rymer 60, 70).

While both conservation and preservation ideals each hold their own appeal and, on paper at least, appear straightforward in their mission, neither offers a concrete model of what to do in the face of real-life events. For instance, what should be done when wildlife destroys crops that border a wilderness area, or when fire roars through a forest and endangers the homesteads of those seeking trophies of “fresh air” and “getting away from it all?”

Closer to home, British Columbia's largest river, the Fraser, can be seen as an example of the challenges of conservation efforts. In 1998, the main stem of the Fraser River was designated as a Canadian Heritage River due to "its exceptional natural, cultural and recreational values" (The Fraser Basin Council in collaboration with the BC Ministry of Environment 72). Recognized for its "biological diversity and natural beauty," the Fraser River is also a "living, working river...home to 2.73 million people or 67% of British Columbia's population," and is "vulnerable to the impacts of human population growth, habitat loss and degradation, pollution and invasive species" (The Fraser Basin Council in collaboration with the BC Ministry of Environment 72). In 2010, a monitoring report was released by the Fraser Basin Council in collaboration with the BC Ministry of Environment stating that in general "the cultural and recreational heritage values of the Fraser River have remained intact" with the "significant exception" of the "cultural and recreational values related to fishing," noting that "Aboriginal, commercial and recreational fisheries have all been adversely impacted by declines in salmon stocks" (73). The report goes on to state that "the future of the river calls for collaboration among all orders of government (federal, provincial, local and First Nations), the private sector, non-profit organizations and the general public" (74). It seems a tall order of collaboration is needed to ensure the future of the Fraser River; a collaboration that will rest on a prioritization of interests of the parties involved, including the river itself. A conservationist approach may favour human interests as it tries to maintain a functionality in modern times; a preservationist approach may favour the interest of the river at the cost of the interests of its human inhabitants.

Ultimately, it can be argued the challenge of either approach is the "the nature of diversity of life, and the place of *Homo sapiens* within it" as ecological beings and a part of the "constant change that is an inevitable aspect of Earth history," and whether this implies that "what we are witnessing...is the process of change that is part of nature and that is futile—harmful, even—to try to prevent it," a case of nature "taking its course" (Leaky 5). What is documented by the natural history of species extinction and the destructive power of forces of nature, such as earthquake, fire or disease, is that nature, in the process of "taking its course," does not adhere to unquestioned conservation or preservation.

Language, being integral to the human condition, becomes indispensable to a discussion on human rights as they relate to language loss, both for the individual and for the

collective: such as the right to live by and practice according to linguistic and cultural choice and equity of access to information, services and support (Maffi, Linguistic, Cultural, and Biological Diversity 612). While the question of whether or not it is appropriate to save an endangered language is an important one, especially in light of the preceding discussion, it will not be addressed in this paper. Likewise, the importance of human rights as they relate to the issues of language loss is certainly acknowledged, but this topic will also not be addressed in this paper.

What will be addressed in this paper are the notions of a single, common language and of a diversity of languages in the context of ecosystem health and biodiversity. The paper begins by looking at the idea of one language and a text of beginnings, “Genesis.” After all, wouldn’t it be better if we all had one common, language? If we could better understand each other from a linguistic perspective, wouldn’t that make everything better, easier? Wouldn’t we be better able to work through and respond to issues of global concerns such as war, hunger, disease, poverty and, pertinent to this work, environmental crises? Wouldn’t the world be better off—safer, fairer, greener?

### **On Diversity: One Language = One World**

*Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.*

—Genesis 11:1-9, “The Tower of Babel”

It seems appropriate to begin with Genesis, and the biblical idea that our historical roots may have sprung from one language, from a time when humanity all used the same words and understood each other. There are many specifics that the story of the Tower of Babel does not tell us; but it is very clear on this: “Now the whole Earth had one language and the same words” (Genesis 11:1). In the story, those who migrated to the land of Shinar wanted to stay together, to build a city that would prevent them from being “scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Strawn 2). God, however, perceives the “beginning of something apparently threatening,” and comes down to “confuse their language” and “scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth” (Strawn 2). The most common interpretation of this passage is that God’s actions are meant to be punitive; to punish the humans for their pride, arrogance, hubris – their sinfulness in building a tower/city that attempts to reach heaven, storm it or even pierce it (Strawn 3). Furthermore, a punitive interpretation makes contextual sense—this is the God of the Old Testament, a vengeful God, an eye-for-an-eye God. In *On the Nature of Things*, Lucretius tells us that human states such as “slavery, pauperhood, and wealth...and all else which come and go whilst nature stands the same” are nothing but “accidents, in one way, of mankind—in other, of some *region* of the world” (Lucretius Carus 13-4). Babel seems to fit the description of another of these “accidents.”

It is important to note that *The Bible*, Lucretius and other similar texts attempt to explain and rationalize what people see and experience, as it is highly more likely that various species of *Homo* initiated and developed language(s) within their widely scattered and diverse regions of the globe. What the story of the Tower of Babel does is set the scene to argue against a common language and argue for a diversity of tongues. It provides a biblical rationale for resisting the appeal of one language—even if it seems that with a common language it would be easy to “cooperate to achieve something monumental” (Pagel 40-1).

Like most things, the story of the Tower of Babel does not stand in isolation; it is part of something bigger than itself, and forms only a part of the bigger story of Genesis. In this bigger context is where there is likely to be found an explanation of what the problem of, or with, Babel is. What the humans are attempting seems more motivated by fear of being separated or by the desire to stay together (Strawn 3). God’s concern is that “this is only

the beginning of what they will do” and that with one language and Babel “nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.” But, what does this mean, exactly?

What the story of the Tower of Babel doesn't tell us the bigger story of Genesis does, right in the beginning, in Chapter 1, where we see God's will for humans to spread out and have “dominion” over all its flora and fauna:

fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth...I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. (Genesis 1:28-29, 33)

God's will that humans have “dominion” over the earth carries with it implications of power and control; but it can also be seen as implying stewardship. The sentiment of stewardship is expressed once again later in Genesis with the story of Noah and his ark, where God commands Noah to harbour pairs of animals in order “to keep their kind alive on the face of all the earth” in the face of the coming great flood (Genesis 7:2-3). After the flood, God once again restates his wish for humans to populate the earth and have dominion over it and all its creatures by telling Noah and his descendants to “fill the earth” and that “every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered” (Strawn 4; Genesis 9:1-2).

Looking at the story of the Tower of Babel in its greater literary context, the problem with the “accident” of Babel starts to emerge: clearly, God intended a diaspora of peoples. In building Babel, humans were just as clearly in defiance of this intention, as the purpose of the city/tower was to stay together and avoid being “scattered abroad.” Perhaps God's response was an act of course correction: a plan of corrective action to ensure a scattering abroad, a dispersion, by “confusing their language” to ensure they would no longer be able to communicate with each other and stay scattered. Although this seems like punishment, what if it was not really a punishment at all? What if creating a multitude of languages, a spreading out of peoples was, in fact, a blessing rather than a curse? When God states “this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them,” perhaps the implied threat is that staying put and having a common language engenders a specific, limited way of existing in the world that is relative only to



its immediate environment or conditions. In this context, it can be argued that a single language becomes a tool for a tunnel vision, of sorts, through its power to direct attention; a tool to collectively direct human attention and focus on efforts solely aimed at human progress, and in the process dismissing attention to the responsibility of stewardship towards the world and its other-than-human inhabitants. This includes dismissing humans as ecological beings that are dependent on the earth that was “delivered into their hands.” In this way, the story of the Tower of Babel can be interpreted as a story about re-situating humans as ecological beings, with a role to play in the patterns and sustenance of the world’s diverse ecological environments on which their own survival depends, a role that can only be supported by a diversity of languages that are unique and relative to the environments and conditions they serve to support. Whether you see the world as a pyramid or a web, these are both structures that require the support of all blocks and all strands to maintain structural integrity and balance. As ecological beings, humans are also blocks and strands, and therefore necessary to the integrity and balance of the complete structure. Perhaps the story of the Tower of Babel is not about a curse but a blessing; not about a punishment but a salvation.

Had humans succeeded in remaining at Babel, then the spreading throughout the earth would not have occurred; but, more importantly in the context of this work, the diversity of languages necessary for humans as ecological beings to exist with and steward the many varied conditions and creatures of the earth would not have evolved. As each corner of the earth has its own specific environment, it would follow that each corner would house its own specific words for communing with that environment, resulting in a diversity of languages being a condition of the coexistence of a diversity of environments. The idea that nature and language have a correlative relationship is also expressed by Lucretius in *On the Nature of Things*: “But nature ’twas urged men to utter various sounds of tongue” (Lucretius Carus 182). It seems the singular language of Babel was a one-way street, and only spoke to human progress; it did not speak to the two-way relationship between language and environment or to coexistence with the world that its speakers were entrusted with. Perhaps “only the beginning of what we will do” is a precursor, a warning, to the environmental damage humans are capable of in the name of progress and with the tool of one language. Perhaps the intent was not punishment, but to prevent a human precipitated “accident,” and in the process protect the world they inhabit and are

dependent on, and protect humans too. While this interpretation addresses possible problems with and even dangers of a single language, the lure of having a single language is still rather appealing. The idea of being able to communicate with others and share common understanding is powerful—surely having a common understanding through a single language would help us, and the world be better, and in the interest of making a better world help us achieve “something monumental,” wouldn’t it?

Rousseau would concur with this view, and states in his notes on the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*: “Nor would anything disappear from the happiness of the human race, if when the disaster and confusion of so many human languages has been cast out” (Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings* 105). In many ways, this view holds true, as it can be said that periods of great Western progress are also periods of dominant languages: Greek, Latin, French and, of course, English. Evolutionary biologist Mark Pagel argues that “in today’s world it is the countries with the least linguistic diversity that have achieved the most prosperity” (Pagel 40-1). It seems our contemporary, globalized world is continuing on this course with English leading the way as the language of global affairs, spoken by internationals as a “bridge” language as demonstrated by the “spontaneous evolution” of Globish, a simplified form of English that has only approximately 1000 words and basic linguistic structures (Pagel 39-40). Along with English, our globalized world’s linguistic landscape contains a handful of other dominant languages as well, such as Mandarin Chinese and Spanish (Baugh 3-4). This implies that human progress requires conformity rather than diversity; but, it does not address what is lost when there is a shift to a dominant language. Lucretius contemplates this loss when he describes the deficiencies of Latin as compared to ancient Greek:

I know how hard it is in Latian verse  
To tell the dark discoveries of the Greeks,  
Chiefly because our pauper-speech must find  
Strange terms to fit the strangeness of the thing... (Lucretius Carus 3)

An example of this type of loss can be considered in light of the current threatened state of the earth’s environment. And, although human progress seems to imply conformity, the ecological state our planet and the dramatic species loss due to the impact of this progress seems to imply otherwise. It implies the path of human progress driven by conformity is

one-way, and littered with ecological damage. It implies that our drive to conformity is once again trying to build the tower of Babel with its one language.

It can be argued the drive to conformity is fueled by an overriding Principle of Convergence, and the notion that serving the interest of one party in the long run will also serve overarching interests (Plumwood 125). In the context of this work, it can be argued that eras of human progress driven by a dominant language served to further human interests and, in the long run, were seen to further the interests of the world as a whole, presumably including the natural world. Plumwood contends that as ecological beings, humans are dependent on the natural world and would, of course, have converging interests with nature, but not necessarily in equal measure (Plumwood 125). She states that inherent to the concept of convergence is a “fatal looseness” in that it “always prioritizes the interests of one of the parties” (Plumwood 125). In the context of this discussion, it can be argued having one language, or a dominant language, only represents the interests of one party, the human contingent, and leaves the other party, the natural world, without a voice; it provides no distinct words for providing opposition to pursuing a singularly human interest at the expense of nature and has no language of accountability for ecological impact specific to diverse environments (Plumwood 125).

The truth that humans are ecological beings dependent on the natural world certainly evokes images of connectedness, but also speaks to a literal tie or bond. In *The Natural Contract*, philosopher Michel Serres argues for the need to negotiate a natural contract, similar to the social contract, between planet Earth and its human inhabitants, where nature would be allowed to have a voice; a contract that would establish a relationship of interconnectedness based on symbiosis and reciprocity where Earth is a legal subject. In his view, “[e]ach of the partners in symbiosis thus owes, by rights, life to the other, on the pain of death” (Serres 39). Serres offers the following analogy and definition:

The terms contract, obligation, and alliance, for example, speak to us etymologically of ligatures, ties, bonds...bonds *comprehend*, since they join or grasp or seize several things, beasts, or men together...[a] contract, therefore, doesn't necessarily presuppose language: a set of cords can be enough. (Serres 105-7)

Serres then asks: “What language do the things of the world speak, that we might come to an understanding with them, contractually?” (Serres 39). He argues that the social contract was itself “unspoken and unwritten,” in a literal sense; and, that nature, indeed, has a voice and a language: “the Earth speaks to us in terms of forces, bonds, and interactions, and that’s enough to make a contract” (Serres 39).

As stated earlier, although an important consideration, this paper will not address social issues of human rights as they relate to language loss or movement to a dominant language. However, in considering the idea of one language and the notion that a common language would create a better world through shared linguistic understanding, it is impossible to ignore the assumption that the world would simply be better if we all understood each other—more peaceful, with less violence, confrontation—with increased ability to solve issues of global concern, like ecological crises. It only takes a moment of considering monolingual areas such as Northern Ireland, Yugoslavia, Vietnam and Korea, just to name a few, to see how misguided that concept can be. It can be argued that having a common language does not create shared understanding, and may, in fact, create more opportunities for confrontation simply because shared words allow for the expression of dissent. According to indigenous legend, the goddess Iatiku of the Acoma tribe of New Mexico created a diversity of languages so people would argue less; while Pagel speculates that “if languages evolved to prevent us communicating, that might explain why there are so many (Gill 5; Pagel 38). Although the concept of a single language is an appealing one, it is clearly not a panacea and hardly presents a path to utopia. Conformity may drive human progress, but it seems diversity is what fundamentally sustains us.

### **Structural Issues: The Problem of the Pyramid**

*Our ethical and spiritual failures are closely linked to our perceptual and prudential failures...an illusory sense of our independence from nature.*

—*Environmental Culture, Val Plumwood (238)*

Pyramids and webs are structural systems; and, structures depend on independent but interconnected parts to maintain their integrity. It may be helpful to consider these structures like a train or ship or plane, or any other structure that has a complexity of parts

to ensure its integrity. Imagine the multitude of and variations in screws, rivets and other mechanisms of connectivity to ensure the stability of a train, ship or plane. Now imagine how many of those mechanisms anyone would be willing to travel without—perhaps a missing rivet or two, but how about hundreds, or thousands? Even if the exterior or the structure seemed fine, would anyone get on a plane that was missing *any* connecting pieces?

The web structure can be seen as the most favourable in terms of viewing life on Earth, as it places humans on equal footing with the rest of the world's species in a paradigm that reinforces a mutual interconnectedness, dependence and responsibility. The web is not a hierarchal structure; it clearly “values and fully acknowledges the non-human sphere and our dependency on it” (Plumwood 3). In the web it is easy to see how each screw, each rivet is important to every other screw and rivet it connects to and the structure as a whole. With the pyramid, however, the mutual interconnectedness, dependence and responsibility is not so obvious. The pyramid is hierarchal, with humans at the pinnacle, and starts to resemble the Tower of Babel. It resembles a power structure based on domination by who sits on top. This structure appears like the Great Chain of Being, rooted in Aristotelean perceptions of forms and perfection, judging humans as “the pinnacle of the world of nature” (Leaky 78-9).

While the pyramid may be the least favourable way to look at life on Earth, it may be a more accurate one in the context of how human beings came to and continue to thrive on it. Leaky writes that “there is no question that *Homo sapiens* is the single most dominant species on Earth today,” arriving on the scene “at a point in earth history that boasted virtually the richest diversity of life forms that ever existed. We may be the highest expression of life's arrow of evolution” (Leaky 76, 231). Leaky goes on to argue that as sentient beings, humans are “able to understand the shape, extent, and value of Earth's biodiversity...we have a responsibility, as well as a self-interest, to value it” (Leaky 76). However, despite human capacity for thought, adaptation, and creativity, the problem of the pyramid lies in humans not being able to “think like a mountain” (Leopold 132).

Kolbert reflects that “humans can be destructive and shortsighted; they can also be forward-thinking and altruistic” (Kolbert 261). The problem of the pyramid can be seen as

a condition of the former: the idea that if humans are at the pinnacle of the pyramid, what does it matter if a few blocks go missing on the lower levels? Those at the top would just be on a larger base, wouldn't they? Yes, a larger base, perhaps, but certainly one they would be ill-equipped to manage and, in the end, cannot sustain them. In his essay "Thinking Like a Mountain," Leopold tells the story of a time when it was "never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf...fewer wolves meant more deer...no wolves would mean hunters' paradise" (Leopold 130). It followed that in state after state wolves were eradicated, only to signal and unforeseen destruction:

every edible bush and seedling browsed, first to anaemic desuetude, and then to death...every edible tree defoliated...as if someone had given God a new pruning shears, and forbidden Him all other exercise. In the end the starved bones of the hoped-for deer herd, dead of its own too-much. (Leopold 130-2)

The problem of the pyramid persists even if the motivation is more altruistic. Kohák writes of a time when culling of wild horses in the Grand Canyon "aroused public indignation, including mine," and the "immense relief" when the practice was stopped (Kohák 98). With few natural enemies, the herds of wild horses soon multiplied unchecked, eventually devastating the ecosystem of the canyon, leaving behind eroding slopes and burros to die painful deaths year after year (Kohák 98).

It may be that humans are the "pinnacle of evolution" and at the top of the pyramid as the most dominant species on Earth, but it is also easy to see humans mirrored in the stories above, reflected in the fates of the dominant species of deer and burros (Leaky 83). Being the block at the top of the pyramid is not the problem, forgetting that the top block is dependent on, responsible for and interconnected with the blocks below it is. The problem lies in forgetting that the non-human creatures and ecosystems with whom we share the Earth hold their own "secret opinion" about the order of things, and that the "job of trimming the herd to fit the range" may or may not fall to human beings (Leopold 129, 132). The problem lies in being at the top of the pyramid but not thinking like a mountain.

### **A Brief History: Darwin and Definitions**

*For language is like the rest—it is not enough to speak of it.*

—*The Animal that therefore I Am, Jacques Derrida (32)*

The above quote from philosopher Jacques Derrida that opens this section is part of an inquiry into the porosity of borders between things, and the idea that there are different structures (or *animals* rather than *the animal*) that constitute the animal world; and, his concept of limitrophy seems apt in the context of Darwin's work of classifying species and languages. Derrida's limitrophy is concerned with "what sprouts at the limit, around the limit...also what feeds the limit, generates it, raises it and complicates it," it is not about "effacing the limit" but about "multiplying its figures"(Derrida 29). It could be argued that an exercise in limitrophy describes Darwin's ideas and processes on classification of species. In *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin draws distinct parallels between language and species, and thus, feeding and complicating, while expanding, the limits between the two:

Thus, the view which I hold, the natural system is genealogical in its arrangement...but the degrees of modification which the different groups have undergone, have to be expressed by ranking them under different so-called genera, sub-families, families, sections, orders and classes...It may be worthwhile to illustrate this view of classification, by taking the case of languages. (Darwin 265)

Here Darwin suggests "taking the case of languages" to demonstrate the classification of biological species, and to show lineage and modifications to various groups along that lineage to arrive at species and sub-species. In essence, he contends that the arrangement of the natural world is a genealogical one, and it is equally applicable to the natural order of languages:

The various degrees of difference in the languages from the same stock, would have to be expressed by groups subordinate to groups; but the proper or even only possible arrangement would still be genealogical; and this would be strictly natural, as it would connect together all languages, extinct and modern...and would give the filiation and origin of each tongue. (Darwin 265)

Darwin's analogy between language and species was elaborated on a few years later by linguist August Schleicher in his work *Darwinism Tested by the Science of Language*. Originally encouraged to read *On the Origin of Species* by an interest in gardening and botany, Schleicher was struck by Darwin's work when applied to the "science of language" (Schleicher 13-4). Schleicher begins by drawing attention to the fact that "one single plant is capable of spreading, as soon as it finds room and favourable opportunities;" and, that

“what Darwin lays down of the animal creation in general, can equally be said of the organisms of speech” (Schleicher 14-5). Schleicher is clear on his intention of “appealing to the naturalist” from the onset, whom he felt should “take more notice of language,” beyond those of the physiology of human sounds, “than they had hitherto done” (Schleicher 16-7). Schleicher argues that languages are equally susceptible to the conditions and phenomena of life, including the struggle for it, thus making them “organisms of nature,” not structures created or directed by man: they rise, develop according to laws of gradual variation, grow old and die; and, he concurred with Darwin’s parallels of genus, species and subspecies to language family, language dialects and subdialects or patois (Schleicher 20-32). Schleicher also applies the Darwinian concept of species evolution from a more primitive entity to the evolution of language, and introduces the concept of speech *cells*, or “primitive idioms” that exist at the root of simpler adaptations of all languages of more complex organization: “the *cells* of speech, not yet containing any particular organs for the functions (the grammatical relations), are no more separated yet than respiration and digestion are in the one-celled organisms or in the ovary of the higher living beings” (Schleicher 50-4). The terms languages and species are interchangeable in Darwin’s system of classification and in Schleicher’s work. In both contexts, there are indiscernible, limitrophic borders between the origins, creation and modifications of the lineage of language families and that of animal families, so that speaking of one could be seen as speaking of the other.

Comparisons or parallels between living organisms and organisms of speech were quickly dismissed as “misconceived ideas,” until recent interest once again forced a consideration of the porosity of the borders, or limits, between language and the environment (Maffi, Linguistic, Cultural, and Biological Diversity 600). By the mid-1990’s, the work of ethnoecologists and ethnobiologists looking at indigenous knowledge, and the emergence of “ecolinguistics,” a branch of linguistics which looks at the relationships and interactions of language and its environment, led to interesting and alarming observations (Maffi, Linguistic, Cultural, and Biological Diversity 601). Interestingly, there seemed to be an overlap in the global distributions and densities of linguistic diversity and species diversity; alarmingly, the well-known, global accelerated loss of plants and animals known as the “extinction crisis” seemed to also be afflicting the world’s languages. Furthermore, these



extinction crises seemed to be happening in tandem, and in overlapping geographic locations (Gorenflo et al. 1).

These co-occurring extinction crises fostered converging interests in the areas of linguistics, ecology, biology and anthropology as well as in the areas of social sciences, humanities, policy and human rights in the newly emerging field of “biocultural diversity” (Maffi, *Biocultural Diversity and Sustainability* 269). As a new, emerging field of inquiry, it appears the theoretical underpinnings and methodologies of biocultural diversity are continually being refined (Maffi, *Biocultural Diversity and Sustainability* 269). However, a broad definition of biocultural diversity encompasses all varieties of diversity in an interrelated and possibly coevolved framework; the term “biocultural diversity” itself being short for “biological, cultural *and linguistic* diversity” (Maffi, *Biocultural Diversity and Sustainability* 269). In this context, the definition of biocultural diversity can purport the following:

- the diversity of life comprises biodiversity and human cultural and linguistic diversity;
- these diversities co-exist and interact in complex ways;
- mutual adaptation has developed links between these diversities that are possibly coevolutionary. (Maffi, *Biocultural Diversity and Sustainability* 269)

Clearly, the field of biocultural diversity must support an interdisciplinary approach for its findings to hold any weight or value, or to provide any expert voice in the current discourse of co-occurring species and language extinction. What is also clear is that the term, “biocultural diversity,” has inextricably linked biological metaphor (endangered languages) to biological reality (endangered species) and, at the same time, evokes a dynamic of causality and symbiosis, and brings into the forefront the porous boundaries and limits between nature and culture.

### **Co-occurrences: Species, Languages and Extinction**

*‘To make something happen to language,’ the dream of, ‘an incomprehensible guest, a newcomer,’ who makes language speak itself in another way.*

—on Jacques Derrida, *Animal Lessons*, Kelly Oliver (118)

It can be argued that the idea of porous boundaries, of multiple limits and possibilities, underpins the concept of diversity. In terms of biodiversity, it can be said that multiple limits and possibilities allow for multiple options for diversification and adaptation and ultimately for success in the “struggle for life.” Likewise, linguistic diversity offers multiple limits and possibilities for interaction between language and the environment, perhaps ways to “increase our sensitivity to and communicativity with others of the earth” (Plumwood 61). It then follows that both high biodiversity and high linguistic diversity offer the most possibilities for diversification, interaction and adaptation, and is in line with the Darwinian argument that “a large amount of inheritable and diversified variability is favourable” in terms of natural selection (Darwin 64). When the strong geographic overlap of the world’s hotspots for biological and linguistic diversity is considered, these biocultural landscapes and the possibilities they house seem to offer more than language as a means, a tool, to mediate human affairs.

Recent studies in geographic areas that contain many of the world’s remaining species of plants and animals have explored this co-occurrence; the results of this research indicate that these geographic areas are also rich in linguistic diversity, and are home to 70% of the world’s languages, that is, more than 4,800 of the world’s 7,000 languages are spoken in areas of high biodiversity (Gorenflo et al. 4). In more specific terms, just roughly 24% of the Earth’s land mass is home to 70% of the world’s languages; these regions are not only areas of high biodiversity, but are also inhabited by only one-third of the Earth’s population, where the varieties of indigenous or endemic languages spoken in any one of these regions can reach more than 970 (Gorenflo et al. 4). Furthermore, the languages spoken in the high biodiversity hotspots are used by small amounts of people: approximately 2,800 of these languages are spoken by less than 10,000 people and approximately 1,200 of these are spoken by 1,000 people or less (Gorenflo et al. 4).

Later research in the field of ecology seemed to concur with the earlier findings of the mid-1990’s, and supported a strong geographic concordance between high biological and linguistic diversity and rapidly increasing incidences of species endangerment and extinction and language loss and death (Maffi, Linguistic, Cultural, and Biological Diversity 601). In this research, the global distribution and extinction risk of both species and languages are explored and compared using internationally recognized criteria for

identifying and classifying extinction risks in species (Sutherland 276-9). By using these criteria to examine the condition of languages alongside the condition of birds and mammals, the results of the research indicated not only a parallel extinction crisis between languages and species, but also revealed that, in fact, languages were at a greater risk of endangerment and extinction (Sutherland 276-9). Furthermore, this research established biological and geographic correlations, such as area, low latitude, forest cover and altitude, as having a positive effect in creating high diversity in both species and languages (Sutherland 276-9). Further studies indicated the following additional geographic, biological and climatic factors as correlating with high diversity of both species and languages: higher rainfall, higher temperatures, coastlines and mountains all have positive effects on biodiversity and linguistic diversity, while higher latitudes, plains and drier climates seem to reduce the complexity of both diversities (Maffi, *Biocultural Diversity and Sustainability* 270). In *The Natural Alien*, Evernden states that “each organism has its world, and that enables it to persist” and that “each lives within that world to which it is made” (Evernden 103). In the context of the above data, it would appear that species and languages share worlds that allow them to persist (or not) and worlds to which they are made.

Clearly, the studies noted earlier tell us that population size is not a factor in the number of languages spoken within geographic high biodiversity areas and, therefore, cannot account for the rich linguistic diversity of these areas. And, it is no surprise, given the biogeographic conditions that allow both biological and linguistic diversity to flourish, that significant geographic overlap of biological and linguistic diversity is especially evident in the tropical regions of the world: particularly, the Amazon Basin, Central Africa and Indomalaysia/Melanesia, with New Guinea long recognized for its complex biodiversity and having 972 indigenous, endemic languages, the most of any other high biodiversity region (Gorenflo et al. 5; Maffi, *Linguistic, Cultural and Biological Diversity* 610-1).

The results of this recent research are difficult to ignore, and appear to speak to more than mere coincidence or randomness, and brings into the realm of possibility that these relationships reflect a functional, biological connection between human language and the natural world. It appears that the geographic co-occurrence of these diversities is inextricably linked to forces of the natural world, and the concordance of species and

language loss in these areas brings into question possibilities of what is natural and what is cultural—and possibilities of how these two realms interact, coexist and possibly coevolve.

### **Nature or Culture: Who's the tailor?**

*Poets translate to get into the language something that was not there before, some new possibility. In our century, they have been especially apt to be incited by a sense of communing, in an ancient author, with otherness: with a coherent sense of the world for which we and our words are unprepared.*

—*The Making of the Modernist Canon*, Hugh Kenner (49)

The 18<sup>th</sup> century poet and essayist Samuel Johnson is known to have once said, “Language is the dress of thought” (De Castella). This analogy then begs the following question: Who's the tailor? The early work of Darwin and Schleicher and the contemporary work of linguistics demonstrate that languages and species undergo a similar process of responding to external stimuli and adapting by various means or dying out. This process can easily be appreciated by the spreading of dominant languages such as English and Spanish. Clearly, like Schleicher's plant, these languages have found the right conditions and adopted the right adaptations by which to spread and grow. Conversely, languages that do not find the right conditions or adopt the right adaptations die out. An example of such a language is Manx, spoken on the Isle of Man in the United Kingdom, which now finds itself on the endangered list with perhaps fewer than 100 speakers (De Castella).

It has been noted that certain biogeographical conditions are present when both biological and linguistic diversity flourish. Further research has proposed that the flourishing of both diversities is related to the “ecology of human societies” that arose in direct response to conditions of the biological environment, perhaps helping to situate humans as “ecological beings” by creating “economic structures that reduce remoteness” from the natural world (Plumwood 238, 240; Gorenflo et al. 4). A similar sentiment is expressed by Rousseau in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, where he considers the origin of language and human society as a riddle of what came first (the chicken or the egg?): “which was the more necessary: an already formed society for the invention of languages, or an already

invented language for the establishment of society?” (Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings* 51). Whatever the answer may be, Rousseau was “convinced of the almost demonstrable impossibility that languages could have arisen and been established by merely human means” (Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings* 51). Additionally, in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Rousseau goes on to group northern and southern languages by the way their respective environments formed them in the context of expressing need or desire when in community with others. For Rousseau, northern, cold environments are hard, so the expression and sounds of these languages elicit “help me,” where in the south, where more pleasant environmental conditions can be found, the expression and sounds elicit “love me” (Rousseau, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau* 289-331).

Some studies suggest that human adaptation to more complex, biodiverse environments created the need for greater linguistic diversity in response to competition for larger numbers of resources, while others attribute greater linguistic diversity to plentiful, diverse environments where communicating with other groups in terms of sharing resources would be unnecessary (Gorenflo et al. 4). In either case it is difficult to see diversity of language as a pure extension of humanness or human culture, as there are concrete links and correlations to the natural environment where these languages exist.

Areas high in topographic barriers difficult to navigate, such as mountains, rugged terrain or bodies of water, can create isolated conditions; and, the multiple languages that arise are specific to the biodiverse geographic demands of each isolated area (Gorenflo et al. 5). Recent studies indicate that this correlation is more than just environmental influence on vocabulary, but, rather, a direct affect of geography on phonology (University of Miami). The research reveals that languages spoken at high altitudes across continents contain sounds called “ejectives” which are produced by “intensive bursts of air,” not found in English and other languages of lower elevations (University of Miami). The air used by the body to produce these sounds is nonpulmonic: “by creating a pocket of air in the pharynx then compressing it,” the speculation being that “it’s easier to produce these sounds at high altitude” because “air pressure decreases with altitude and it takes less effort to compress less dense air...this may reduce the amount of air exhaled from the lungs and decrease dehydration in high altitudes” (University of Miami). What is

interesting is that this positive correlation between altitude and ejectives can be seen across all continents, providing strong evidence for the affect of geography on phonology (University of Miami).

However, the link between language and environment is not a new topic, and has deep roots in anthropology and linguistics. Linguistic anthropologists of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were struck by the complex and elaborate methodology of indigenous languages to classify, inventory, correlate and encode within them the characteristics of its surrounding topography, environment, climate, plants and animals (Maffi, Linguistic, Cultural and Biological Diversity 600). These observations led to conclusions that language not only encodes within it “the stamp of the physical environment” in which it is spoken, but also bears “the interest of the people in such environmental features” (Sapir 228-9). These observations speak directly to the nuances lost when a language is lost; it is this loss of nuance that Lucretius repeatedly laments in *O the Nature of Things* as a result of his “pauper-speech,” Latin:

For which our pauper-speech  
Yieldeth no name in the Italian tongue,  
Although the thing itself is not o'erhard  
For explanation. (Lucretius Carus 24)

Linguistic diversity provides multiple ways of being in the world and multiple ways of understanding it, often blurring the borders of concepts considered as universal. Derrida argues that “the meaning of life comes from the meaning of words,” but this does not mean “going back to an original meaning or even a lost meaning,” rather, “it is a matter of...meanings to come, meanings that we cannot anticipate” (Oliver 123). The basic concepts of time, number or colour, take on different dimensions in different languages (Rymer 77). As an example, Tuvan, an indigenous language spoken in the small Republic of Tuva in the Russian Federation, places the past in front of you where it is in full view, and the future behind you, where it is still hidden from sight: rather than looking forward to tomorrow, Tuvan looks forward to the day before yesterday (Rymer 77). In a sense, in Tuvan, “the past is summoned in language for the sake of the future,” to “discover the future in the past” and perhaps “recover an alternate meaning” of things (Oliver 135). Further examples include the language of the Pirahã tribe of the Amazon that does not have words to denote specific numbers, only relative quantities such as “few” or “many,”

perhaps suggesting that the concept of precise numbers is the product of culture rather than any innate understanding of the world; while the concept of colour varies as having fewer or more categories of individual colours from language to language and landscape to landscape (Rymer 77).

Of particular importance to this work, is the concept that language bears “the interest of the people” in their particular landscape. Endemic and indigenous populations and their languages have survived for generations in concert with their respective landscapes, providing evidence of an interactive and responsive role of language in the natural world. In this sense, it can be argued that linguistic diversity is inseparably linked to biodiversity and ecosystem health; linguistic diversity creates multiple possibilities for responsive interaction between language and nature that have coevolved gradually over time and are mutually supportive. For instance, in Tuvan, *khoj özeeri* is the concept for the slaughter of livestock, more specifically the slaughter of *one* sheep: “through an incision in the sheep’s hide, the slaughterer severs a vital artery with his fingers, allowing the animal to slip away...so peacefully that one must check its eyes to see if it is dead” (Rymer 62). But, the complexity of *khoj özeeri* does not end there, it also means:

Kindness, humaneness, a ceremony by which a family can kill, skin, and butcher a sheep, salting its hide and preparing its meat and making sausage with the saved blood and cleansed entrails so neatly that the whole thing can be accomplished in two hours...in one’s good clothes without spilling a drop of blood. (Rymer 62)

Other indigenous and endemic languages also have unique ways of classifying their environments. For instance, Aka, spoken in a small, rugged area of northeast India, has a complex and very refined system of identifying what animals are to be eaten and what animals are not, and has not one, single, word for “world;” south Siberian reindeer herders have complex vocabularies to classify reindeer: “a castrated former stud in its fourth year” (Rymer 77).

The above examples demonstrate how indigenous, endemic human languages have a biological function or role that engenders positive interactions and responses specific to its environment, and imply “the fluidity of giving and receiving” (Oliver 110). These examples can also be seen as applying what Derrida has termed “hyperbolic ethics,” a

system of responding that is grounded in responsibility: constant vigilance and “motivated by concepts like the gift, hospitality, forgiveness” (Oliver 106, 135). These interactions are based in traditional economies whose management of the environment creates conditions for high biodiversity and high linguistic diversity to persist and thrive (Gorenflo et al. 6). The “traditional environmental knowledge” gained over generations of co-existence and co-evolution encoded in indigenous and endemic languages that direct “human-environment interactions and mutual adaptations” for plant, animal and water use, food cultivation, way finding and seasonal calendars appears integral to the success or failure of its ecosystem and, the success or failure of the ecosystem appears integral to the life of the languages it houses (Maffi Biocultural Diversity and Sustainability 269-73). The question is, then, when these languages die, do their respective environments and complex biodiversities die too, and vice versa?

### **Corporeal Matters: Eat or Be Eaten**

*Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind; and is even more oblivious of the shortcomings and limitations of its critical habits than those of its creative genius.*

—*Tradition and the Individual Talent, T. S. Eliot (36)*

Of course, the question that linguists grapple with in the above contexts is: why does one language survive and thrive and another dwindle and die (Rymer 70)? In simple terms, it can be argued that languages die out because their speakers abandon them; they no longer serve their speaker’s interests. In more complex terms, it may be helpful to consider the proposition put forward in *A History of the English Language* by renowned English professors Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable that languages are “subject to that constant growth and decay that characterize all forms of life,” in other words, *change*: “Old words die out, new words are added, and existing words change their meaning;” when a language stops changing, it dies (Baugh 2). An example of this type of death is Latin, a language that for the better part of 2,000 years has not changed (Baugh 2).

The research in the area of biocultural diversity explored in this paper, argues that language death is precipitated by the same conditions that result in species extinction, namely, the inability to adopt positive variations in the context of a gradual evolution in concert with the local environment. In the past, dramatic natural phenomena such as



asteroid strikes, volcanic eruptions or sharp shifts in climatic patterns were seen as examples of types of conditions that would lead to species endangerment and possible extinction. However, the current wave of accelerated species extinction seems to be driven by the artifacts of human culture, even though the literature tells us that human indigenous, endemic languages and the natural world have existed in balance for generations. In particular, artifacts of our modern economies requiring reactive rather than responsive consumption of resources in the quest for progress, for an edge in the “struggle for life.” And, it seems that progress, along with consumption practices such as clear-cutting and over-fishing, speaks in the tongues of dominant, immigrant languages that consume smaller languages, and represent altogether different “interests of the people.” In other words, these immigrant languages can be seen as exotic species, introduced into an environment where they may flourish and thrive, but become problematic to the natural habitat. An exotic language, like an exotic species, in its new environment doesn’t know how to cope, “because it does not know how to comply...it has no sense of context, no relatedness to the community of which it is a part” (Evernden 109-10). In this sense, language behaves very much like a biological organism in terms of adaptation by competing, converging, reproducing, breeding, consuming and excreting. Smaller languages that cannot adapt or make sense of a contemporary environment that is increasingly more about progress in a virtual, abstract world rather than a real, organic one are consumed by the larger, more dominant languages, abruptly disrupting the gradual coexistence and coevolution of language and environment, the “intergenerational transmission” (Gorenflo et al. 4). What is interesting to note here, is that “both words and food move through the orifices of the body, particularly the mouth,” implying further biological concordance between the process of consuming (and excreting) organic food and language (Oliver 104). The different dialects and manifestations of various dominant languages spoken around the world are testimony of the ability of these languages to consume smaller local languages and create adaptations that allow the dominant language to thrive. In essence, these dominant languages challenge (compete with) local tongues for usefulness in today’s world, take them in (consume), discard the parts that are not deemed useful (excrete), multiply (reproduce/breed) with what’s left to create patois, pidgins and creoles or vary (converge) to create specific dialects. The biological metaphor is echoed by evolutionary biologist Mark Pagel who writes “[w]hen languages split, they often experience short episodes during which they change rapidly. The same thing

happens during biological evolution, where it is known as punctuational evolution” (Pagel 39-40).

What is important to note, however, is that in high biodiversity wilderness areas, which are defined as large geographic areas that have little human impact, are also experiencing biological and linguistic loss at significant rates (Gorenflo et al. 1). Whatever the role that human expansion and its associated artifacts has played in precipitating the current extinction crisis, similar conditions in high biodiversity wilderness areas implies that human impact cannot fully explain the correlation between species extinction and language death, and that organic environmental factors must play a significant role (Gorenflo et al. 6).

While the biological metaphors “endangered languages” and “language families” are compelling ones, there are those, both historic and contemporary, that want to draw a definitive border between language and species: that language is a product of human culture and a pure extension of humanness, and not a product of nature and, certainly, not one of its organisms. While the preceding discussion demonstrates fundamental parallels between organic species and languages in their “struggle for life,” perhaps these similarities are merely metaphorical because true literal similarities would require language to have an organic body of its own outside of its human host. This starts to bring on a sense of the uncanny, “produced when something that should be passive becomes active” (Oliver 264), or perhaps when something that seems abstract (the body of language) becomes concrete (has a body that can be discerned, at least under a microscope if necessary). It would seem that at the corporeal is where the literal and metaphorical part company. For example, once a panda is extinct, it is deemed gone forever, it is finite; languages can be revived once extinct, as in the case of Hebrew which has been revived for contemporary use out of antiquity after some 2,000 years (Berreby). Furthermore, people can create new languages if necessary; in other words, languages are not a finite resource (Berreby). This argument presupposes that you cannot make parallels between languages and species without immediately inferring that languages are biological organisms in themselves. Proponents of the field of biocultural diversity contend that while “the concepts of species and languages...are unquestionably fuzzy categories with porous boundaries...they are not arbitrary and correspond to real entities (and processes) in the world” (Maffi, Linguistic, Cultural, and Biological Diversity 604). The

above argument also presupposes we know everything there is to know about something being embodied; that there is a distinct limit to what is corporeal and what is not, and that this defines the border between what is a species (of nature) and what is an abstract construct (of culture). Furthermore, while Hebrew, or any other dead language can be “revived” so to speak, this is only possible if the necessary information is available (Berreby). Without the Rosetta Stone, perhaps the means to understanding Egyptian hieroglyphs would not have been possible. In an age of genetic engineering, perhaps the same can be said of the panda: if the genetic information is available, an extinct panda can, too, be “revived.” Finally, this argument is based in assuming language as a singularly human creation, as a means to mediate human affairs. Ultimately, it ignores the possibility of an inextricable link between language and ecology raised by the strong geographic co-occurrences of high biological and linguistic diversities, and their parallel extinction crises. It ignores that there “is something about language as it is spoken and as it is heard; it is an embodied experience that exceeds grammar or style” (Oliver 115).

### **Lessons in Adaptation: Exotic English**

*...a prudent ruler cannot, and must not, honour his word when it places him at a disadvantage and when the reasons for which he made his promise no longer exist.*

—*The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli (57)

Preceding the above quote Machiavelli suggests that it is important to learn lessons “from the fox and the lion:”

Because the lion is defenceless against traps and a fox is defenceless against wolves. Therefore one must be a fox in order to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten off wolves. (Machiavelli 56-7)

Machiavelli’s story of the fox and the lion can be seen as a lesson in adaptation, a lesson in change, where the most advantageous option is adopted in order to maximize benefit and, in a literal sense, survive. Leaky writes if “[y]ou are looking through a paleontological window onto past worlds...If there is one single impression you gain from what is to be seen through this window it is encapsulated in the simple word *change*” (Leaky 4-5).

The ability to adapt, to change, is at the core of Darwin's theory of natural selection and evolution. The ability of a species to continuously change and adopt advantageous options in response to shifting local environmental conditions, such as food sources and prevailing temperatures is critical to being successful in life's continuous universal "struggle for existence" (Leaky 50-60; Darwin 39-40). Darwin argues that natural selection responds solely to the adoption of advantageous variants that which, consequently, persist, and that as each new adapted form grows in number, old forms that do not adopt advantageous traits decrease in number and become rare; "[r]arity...is the precursor to extinction" (Darwin 69). This framework of adaptation, much like Darwin's classification of species, can be applied to languages as well, and English is probably one of the most classic examples of successful change in action by adopting right, or advantageous, adaptations. Pagel contends that while all languages can be considered as "equally good vehicles of communication," it seems likely, if not inevitable, that one language will eventually replace all others, if we consider languages in evolutionary terms: "when otherwise equally good solutions to a problem compete, one of them tends to win out," and offers the examples of the "near worldwide standardization of ways of telling time, measuring weights and distance" just to name a few (Pagel 41). He further argues that if he had to speculate, English would be the language to win out, as it is "already the worldwide lingua franca" and "vastly more people learn English as a second language than any other" (Pagel 40-1).

In TESOL (Teaching English as a Second Language), English is informally known by some as "the thief language." A brief look at the history of the English language over the past 1,500 years clearly shows why, and demonstrates "the scientific principles involved in linguistic evolution" (Baugh 1). One of the most defining aspects of modern English is the "size and mixed character of its vocabulary," arguably developed over centuries of adaptation (Baugh 10). English has its roots in various origins as the result of a series of migrations and conquests in the area now recognized as Great Britain, beginning with the Celts in about the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE with the arrival of the Bronze Age (Baugh 38-9). In the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Roman Christianity introduced Latin adding significantly to English vocabulary, Scandinavian invasions soon followed to further add to the mix; however, perhaps the most profound influence on the English language came in the 11<sup>th</sup> century in the form of the Norman Conquest at the hand of the Scandinavians Normans who settled

in northern France and claimed victory at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, at which time many French words were added, as the Normans had quickly given up their own language in favour of French (Baugh 1, 98-9). This one significant event in the history of English forever changed its characteristics and, perhaps, enhanced its ability to successfully adapt.

History tells us the story of English enduring to become dominant once again in its own place of origin. While French was the language of nobility, English, with its new adaptations, remained the language of the people (Baugh 101-4). In many ways, the relationship of French and English is not dissimilar from that of ancient Greek and Latin. English is consistently “associated with practical and powerful pursuits,” with getting things done; French, while possible loved more from an aesthetic perspective, is used less (Baugh 4). English is the equivalent to Lucretius’ Latin “pauper-speech” that “constrains [him] sadly,” and only ancient Greek can serve “to tell [their] dark discoveries” (Lucretius Carus 3, 78).

In essence, the past history of English can be seen as a “struggle for existence” in which it adopted variations in the form of words from the ruling or dominant force in order to survive and continue. Rather than creating new words by combining elements already existing in the language, like German does, “English has shown a marked tendency to go outside its linguistic resources and borrow from other languages...In the course of centuries...English has built up an unusual capacity for assimilating outside elements;” and, “borrow” it has, although the extent is unlikely to be realized except by a professional student of English: (Baugh 10)

We do not feel that there is anything “foreign” about the words chipmunk, hominy, moose, raccoon, and skunk, all of which we have borrowed from the Native American. We are not conscious that the words brandy, cruller, landscape, measles, uproar, and wagon are from Dutch. And so with many other words in daily use. From Italian come balcony, canto, duet, granite, opera, piano, umbrella, volcano; from Spanish, alligator, cargo, contraband, cork, hammock, mosquito, sherry, stampede, tornado, vanilla; from Greek, directly or indirectly, acme, acrobat, anthology, barometer, catarrh, catastrophe, chronology, elastic, magic, tactics, tantalize, and a host of others; from Russian, steppe, vodka, ruble, troika, glasnost, perestroika; from Persian, caravan, dervish, divan, khaki, mogul, shawl, sherbet, and ultimately from Persian jasmine, paradise, check, chess, lemon, lilac, turban, borax, and possibly spinach. A few minutes spent in

the examination of any good etymological dictionary will show that English has borrowed from Hebrew and Arabic, Hungarian, Hindi-Urdu, Bengali, Malay, Chinese, the languages of Java, Australia, Tahiti, Polynesia, West Africa, and from one of the aboriginal languages of Brazil. (Baugh 10)

Furthermore:

English is classified as a Germanic language...it belongs to the group of languages to which German, Dutch, Flemish, Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian also belong...On the other hand, more than half of its vocabulary is derived from Latin. Some of these borrowings have been direct, a great many through French, some through the other Romance languages. As a result, English also shares a great number of words with those languages of Europe that are derived from Latin, notably French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. All of this means that English presents a somewhat familiar appearance to anyone who speaks either a Germanic or a Romance language. (Baugh 10)

In terms of successful adaptation, the familiarity of having the same linguistic roots has been an “undoubted asset” for English, as it encourages a sense of continuity; and these related words, or “cognates,” are typically learned faster and more easily retained than those that are unrelated to the native language (Baugh 10-1). Additionally, it can be argued that this familiarity enhances a language’s ability to persist by easing transitions necessary for evolving with changing conditions, and complies with Darwin’s theory of natural selection that dictates “the extinction of old forms and the production of new and improved forms are intimately connected together” (Darwin 199).

The success of English clearly makes a case for the benefits of adopting a framework of diversity, of multiple possibilities, in the context of evolutionary survival. English has encoded in its structure, in its DNA, so to speak, its own history of change. It has perfected the acts of consumption, excretion, competition, reproduction and convergence. It can be argued that a tendency to go outside known borders and explore their porosity along with a capacity for assimilating outside influences are the keys to a language, and a species, adopting the “right” adaptations and beating the odds of natural selection. Ultimately, its current global presence affirms English as one of the world’s dominant, immigrant, successfully “exotic” languages, and an excellent lesson in how to adapt to survive; it has learned well the lessons from the lion and the fox.

## 1.2. Conclusion: Seeds

*Mucrow: A regard for tradition, for long-standing knowledge, for what has come before, a conviction that the venerable and frail have something to teach the callow and the strong that they would be lost without.*

—Aka language, *National Geographic* (Rymer 77-8)

*Everyone has a flower inside, and inside the flower is a word. Language is a seed. (Local expressions, Seri people of Mexico)*

—Cmique litom language, *National Geographic* (Rymer 78-9)

*Language becomes an event, a happening. It does something; it makes something happen.*

—*Animal Lessons*, Kelly Oliver (118)

The aim of this work was to explore the biological role or function of human language in biocultural landscapes, and to draw some conclusions on human language as a product of nature that interacts with and responds to the geographic area and environment it inhabits; and, that this interaction is integral to ecosystem health and biodiversity. The contexts of this work are the current mass extinction crisis of the world's species, and the concurrent extinction crisis of the world's languages, while the frameworks presented assist with expanding our understanding of what seem to be settled notions of what is natural and what is cultural.

The research presented in this paper supports strong geographic co-occurrence of high biodiversity and high linguistic diversity, and that endangered languages, which are often endemic, indigenous, offer models for a healthier co-existence of nature and culture. Furthermore, certain cultural systems and practices encoded in indigenous and endemic languages seem compatible with complex biodiversity and may provide critical traditional environmental knowledge essential for responsive ecological interaction, implying a type of encoded hyperbolic ethics grounded in responsibility and “the fluidity of giving and receiving.” Additionally, the consumption of smaller languages by bigger ones has replaced traditional, responsive economies with the economies of clear-cutting and over-fishing. Finally, the way a language has coevolved with its environment directs the interactions with the environment, and is an important consideration in terms of the porous boundaries of accepted “universal” concepts. In other words, when a language uses one,

complex word to express a multiplicity of interrelated concepts and practices or when it isolates every chunk of meaning into separate words, this affects how the speakers of those languages perceive and interact with their environment, how they make responsive or reactive decisions, “how to relate to...animals and other living creatures with whom we share the earth,” perhaps “in ways that nourish rather than conquer”(Oliver 130).

What is particularly striking about indigenous, endemic languages is their “intimate relationship” with the plants and animals with which they share geographic space (Rymer 78). These languages appear to encode a real link between language and land, instead of an abstract concept of nature (Maffi, Linguistic, Cultural and Biological Diversity 612). The literature shows this literal link to be compatible with both complex biodiversity and linguistic diversity, and engenders a positive symbiotic relationship between language and the natural world that seems to allow for economic practices that “reduce remoteness” from the environment and perhaps help situate speakers as “ecological beings.”

While this paper argues for a correlative link between language and ecology, the issue of what to do about endangered languages is not a straightforward one. As with endangered species, language conservation, or preservation, present complex challenges of “how and for whom to care.” Preservation does not allow for co-evolution with environment, which this paper has argued is critical to a mutually beneficial two-way relationship between language and ecology; conservation would seem to condemn endemic languages, and their speakers, to a marginal existence, unable to adapt, to move towards a dominant language and personal success or even survival. Is a compromise the answer? Such a compromise on a global scale certainly raises complexities greater than those of adopting Latin (or English) for the practicalities of life and ancient Greek (or French) for esthetics and philosophy. And, ultimately a compromise does not tell us “how and for whom to care.”

The question remains, however, can we call language a species? Is language literally or metaphorically a block in the pyramid (of which we sit on top) or a strand in the web (that connects us all)? The discourse raised in this work certainly argues for an inextricable link between language and nature. It demonstrates how languages thrive or succumb to the same conditions that plants and animals do, and that languages demonstrate the same



behaviours of competition, consumption and breeding as biological organisms. It tells us that “language becomes an event, a happening...it does something: it makes something happen.” But, does this discourse offer a definitive definition of language as a species? It certainly raises the possibility. And, while the strong similarities and parallels between biological species and languages are raised in this work, clearly an exercise in limitrophy is needed here, to overcome the uncanny, and to expand the borders of and create new limits to what is defined as “species.”

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**Chapter 2.**

**Emily Brontë: No Coward Soul is Mine**

**A Play about Mystery Harmless Pleasure and Duty**

## 2.1. Preface: Language Acts

*We're actors. Words made flesh. We step out on stage and try to show them something enormous, unimaginable for good or ill. And if they catch a sight of themselves in us, we've done our job. We hold the mirror up. Nothing more.*

—*Equivocation, Bill Cain*

There is a tension inherent in the words “language acts.” The words imply more than one meaning, creating an ambiguity that can lead to unease as a result of this uncertainty: the words “language acts” seem an exercise in equivocation. During my time as a language services industry professional, working through the tension and often ambiguous space between words, meaning and action was just another day at the office. The term “language barriers” is common in the field of language service provision, and was a common term in many of our communications. I had not thought too much about the effect of such a term until an observant reviewer asked me what I would rather have between me and a lion—a barrier or a challenge? The answer was clear, a barrier is what you would want; a challenge just seemed like something I, or, more importantly, the lion, could eventually manage to get around. One implies a dead-end; the other possibilities.

Early in my university career I took an academic writing class where I learned that language is never neutral—language is always trying to *do* something: describe, name, inform, persuade, argue, question, hedge, manipulate, deceive, equivocate and, sometimes, perform, that is, create events and make things happen. Philosopher J. L. Austin writes, “[i]t was for too long the assumption of philosophers that the business of a ‘statement’ can only be to ‘describe’ some state of affairs, or to ‘state some fact’;” and, in his lectures that became *How To Do Things With Words*, Austin tells us that in certain circumstances words do not describe action they *are* action, they are “a performative:” “When I say, before the registrar or altar...‘I do’...I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it” (Austin 1-6). The language act, or “speech act” to use Austin’s term, of saying “I do” in the context of a marriage ceremony is certainly a powerful one: it binds you to another person legally and contractually, giving a clear example of how words, do indeed, make things happen. The Spanish play set in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century *El Sí De Las Niñas*, devotes itself to this performativity, as it shows how the *sí* uttered by girls at their arranged marriages to much older men delivers very different consequences to the *sí* that

responds to question like “Can I pour you a glass of wine?” or “Do you live in Vancouver?” (Baringa). Once spoken, the wedding *sí* “paves the path” to a different set of consequences that include the brides “renouncing their biological families for the sake of adopting and being accepted into the families of their husbands, changing deeds and often even friends, social circles and lifestyles” (Baringa). What this work also illustrates is the importance of context, of being situated in time, place and history, to be able to assess performative success, as Austin reminds us that “[w]e must consider the total situation in which the utterance is issued—the total speech act” (Austin 52).

Prefaces are powerful, performative language acts, in themselves: they act to direct attention, to set the stage for what is to follow, and to influence perceptions of what comes next. In essence, they can be seen as “paving the path” for what comes next. It can be argued that Charlotte Brontë leveraged the power of the preface when she wrote the “Editor’s Preface to the New Edition of *Wuthering Heights*,” published in 1850 after the death of the novel’s author, her sister, Emily Brontë, in 1848. It can also be argued that I am following Charlotte’s example by performing the same language act myself, in writing a preface to the work, and, in doing so, setting the stage for the play that follows.

In many ways, the preface can be seen as a manifesto; it shares a similar structure to the manifesto beginning with history and ending with a new understanding of what is to come. Most importantly, the preface and the manifesto share in being performative. In “Manifesto=Theatre,” Martin Puchner tells us that “[a]s a political genre, the manifesto has been geared toward a revolution, a cut in the historical process, an act that attempts to change suddenly the course of history,” in other words, to affect what comes next; and, through language, “undercut pinnings of there” (Puchner 450-1). Manifestos also share similarities with theatre. An example put forth by Puchner is the tradition of reciting the *Communist Manifesto*, “the manifesto of manifestos,” as a script for a play; while literary theorist Kenneth Burke considers it an example of dramatism, and philosopher Jacques Derrida relates it perhaps “the play of plays, *Hamlet*” (Puchner 453, 462). While the manifesto-like spirit of “rupture” from history and breaking with the past can be argued in the act of the preface as performed by me and by Charlotte Brontë, I would also argue that the quality of revolt from tradition is equally evident in Emily’s *Wuthering Heights*, and the novel can be considered her own manifesto.

Manifestos, theatre and prefaces all promise a confrontation between what you think you know and what you will know; between history and what comes next: a disconnect, or a dislocation of knowledge, with language facilitating the movement between the past and what is to follow. Ultimately, the performativity of manifestos, theatre and prefaces connects the written word and embodied actions of creating, acting, perceiving and reacting. In writing the “Editor’s Preface to the New Edition of *Wuthering Heights*,” Charlotte strives to explain, justify, and even defend, her younger sister’s language act, and, in the process, dislocating the reader’s knowledge and reorienting them to what comes next. In writing this preface, in many ways, I am striving to do the same.

In his essay “Performance Practice as Research: Perspectives from a Small Island,” Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies, Baz Kershaw, contends that “dislocation of knowledge by action is characteristic of performance practice as research,” and asks us to consider where any knowledge produced by any given action may be located—in the body, the mind of participants, in a retelling, in a subsequent analysis or at some convergence of all these options—“a *dis-location* of knowledge becomes critical” to the nature of performance practice as research (Kershaw 3-4). He defines performance practice as research “as the uses of practical creativity as reflexive enquiry into significant research concerns,” and offers by example the case of the Czech spider monkey held in quarantine in a glass enclosure at a zoo, where performers tried to communicate with the monkey through primate-like movement (Kershaw 4). At first visitors to the zoo didn’t appear to notice the performers, even though being brightly dressed:

they became aware of the dancers, either through the spider monkey’s activities, the reflections of the dancers in the glass or the suspended atmosphere of incredulity, they found they had placed themselves in a network of interactions...As people perceived the undisputable *relationship* between the humans and the animal through movement, and witnessed the change of role as the humans danced for the monkey, the dance began to make sense in a different way and comments changed from “oh look they are pretending to be monkeys” to “oh look they are dancing with the monkey!” In those moments, awareness and meaning shifted. (Kershaw 9-10)

While “the sciences have long understood the value of practice-based research,” research where embodied action is foundational, the humanities have preferred a “paradigm of written monographs, essays and articles” (Hunter xv-xvii). Seems a rather interesting



preference for a discipline in which much of its work encourages us to *feel*. Kershaw argues that the knowledge dislocation foundational to performance practice as research produces “*boundless specificity...creating multiple ontologies and epistemologies, ways of being and knowing,*” and “opens the possibility to positive effects,” as supported by the view of philosopher Jacques Derrida: “Any event brought about by a performative mark, any writing in the widest sense of the word, involves a *yes*” (Kershaw 4; Derrida 298). The Introduction to Victor Turner’s *The Anthropology of Performance*, speculates the anthropologist was attracted to performance theory precisely because of its limitless quality and inherent possibilities:

Turner, who specialized in the liminal...lived in a house that was all doors: every idea led to new ideas, every proposition was a network of possibilities...performance is the art that is open, unfinished, decentered, liminal...a paradigm of process. (Schechner 8)

This “boundless specificity” and “network of possibilities” assures performance practice as research as interdisciplinary, and “will always resist becoming a *single discipline*” making this type of research highly compatible with the interdisciplinary field of performance studies (Kershaw 5).

The succinct preface to Turner’s *Anthropology*, begins by asking: “What is performance? A play? Dancers dancing? A concert? What you see on TV? Circus and Carnival? A press conference...,” it concludes by stating that “[p]erformance is a mode of behavior, an approach to experience” (Schechner 4). Turner writes, “the basic stuff of social life is performance;” in his lecture *Performance Matters*, theorist Peter Dickinson concurs, and defines performance studies as viewing “all human action as performance” that has “material affects,” and offers that performance studies provides a framework by which to “account for the meaningfulness of th[ese] effects;” in other words, performance studies deciphers what performance does (Turner 81; Dickinson, *Performance Matters*). This framework takes into account not only the performance piece itself, but also the “materials, objects, labour, physical sites and its consequences” (Dickinson, *Performance Matters*). In this way, performance studies accounts for the performative value of performance by evaluating the material and its consequences—what did it do?—via a classical, Aristotelean structural framework of time, place and action; evaluating norms *and* what happens when those norms are removed or interrupted or suspended and individuals find

themselves with opportunities to go about things differently (Dickinson, Performance Matters). This has removed performance from its often perceived association with pretend, “fakery and falsehood,” and brings it into the realm of what Turner would call “making not faking,” and changes performance from a process of “mimesis” to “poiesis” (Dickinson, Performance Matters). It follows that practice based research methods have become signatures of the field of performance studies (Dickinson, Performance Matters).

Of the multiple disciplines that make up the field of performance studies, perhaps the best known, and particular to this work, is that of theatre studies; but, also critical to this work are the disciplines of anthropology and ethnography and speech and communication, which are also part of the performance studies model (Dickinson, Performance Matters). The interdisciplinary nature of mankind is mirrored in Turner’s reclassification of *Homo sapiens* as “*Homo performance*.”

If man is a sapient animal, a tool-making animal, a self-making animal, a symbol-using animal, he is, no less, a performing animal...his performances are, in a way, *reflexive*, in performing he reveals himself to himself. (Turner 81)

As a performing animal, verbalization is supported by the performative additions of speech and gesture (Dickinson, Performance Matters). This description inextricably links language to embodied action, as the meaning, intention or interpretation of gesture alone can only be perceived or understood through words, whether verbalized or silent. This is echoed by philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau as he asks us to consider that “general ideas can be introduced into the mind only with the aid of words, and the understanding grasps them only through sentences” (Rousseau 50). The inherent connection between gesture and language is articulated in the first scene of the play, where through gesture, minimal narration and silent discourse we experience “Meeting Emily.” Through the act of narration, “the sound and tone and rhythm of the voice-over,” you start to experience a type of “kinesthetic anticipation of what’s coming next,” and you start to move prior to the beginning of movement on stage (Dickinson, Textual Matters 65-6). The movement that follows is felt as much as perceived; you don’t “learn” about Emily as much as you get a sense of Emily, a “feel” for her.

Similarly, language philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin, argues that “all the diverse areas of human activity involve the use of language,” but that “the nature and forms of this use are just as diverse as are the areas of human activity” (Bakhtin 60). As discussed earlier, written monographs are the preferred nature and form of language acts used in the humanities in the process of “knowing.” Ethnographer and performance theorist Dwight Conquergood defines “dominant ways of knowing in the academy,” its preferred nature and form, as one “anchored in paradigm and secured in print,” that prescribes “empirical observation and critical analysis from a distanced perspective: “knowing that,” and “knowing about” (Conquergood, *Performance Studies* 146). He argues that there are other ways of knowing, other ways of transmitting the work that literally, and metaphorically, “enlivens” or animates knowledge creation and transmission, ways “grounded in active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection: “knowing how,” and “knowing who”...a view from ground level, in the thick of things” (Conquergood 146). However, Conquergood is very clear that texts are not the problem, the problem lies with textocentrism (Conquergood, *Performance Studies* 151). Literary theorist Kenneth Burke offers the following on the challenges or inherent “blind spots and a conditioned deafness” of knowledge “secured in print:” (Conquergood, *Performance Studies* 146)

The [written] record is usually but a fragment of the expression (as the written word omits all telltale record of gesture and tonality; and not only may our “literacy” keep up from missing the omissions, it may blunt us to the appreciation of tone and gesture, so that even when we witness the full expression, we note only those aspects of it that can be written down). (Burke 185)

This perspective takes into account a comprehensive view of the speech act, and demonstrates that in terms of language, speech, and its accompanying gestures, and the written word do not present a chicken-or-egg problem. Text can only be retrospective and is completely dependent on an event or a happening; something happens, it ends, and then it is retrospectively (and possibly selectively) recorded in written form in an effort to create meaning. The written word can then be said to be connected with endings; while the spoken word lives in the now and in what comes next. Additionally, text demands a continual perpetuation of the retrospective in order to create new knowledge and meaning. This dependence, however, is not reciprocal, as oral and gestural language acts are not

dependent on the written word, they can, and do, exist independently; and they independently create knowledge and meaning, as cultures based on oral traditions serve to verify. Oral and gestural language acts seem timeless, eternal, integral, even, as if existing “from the beginning,” whereas the written word appears a construct of retrospection and the need to apply a structure, of sorts, to experience. In a sense, the written word can be seen as fossilized experience; and, while fossils tell a story, it is a rather incomplete one. Turner tells us that meaning is also retrospective, and can only be obtained by “looking back over...time,” and that it can only be gleaned by coming to the end of something: “the consummation of a process...bound up with termination...with death” (Turner 97). Here it is difficult not to consider Socrates’ disdain for the written word in favour of the spoken word, as the act of writing words was, in a sense, “killing” them by preserving them, like a fossil, and taking them out of a dialogic cycle and platform for change. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato tells us how Socrates considers text, like paintings, to “preserve a quite solemn silence,” they cannot give new or different answers to any questions they may evoke (Plato 63).

A comprehensive view of the speech act is supported by Dickinson in his assertion that “text re-embodies, and theatrically remediates, movement (and vice-versa)” (Dickinson 63, Textual Matters). By drawing equal attention to the speech and gestures that are always a part of the act of verbalization as to that of the written text, this perspective further supports the inextricable link between language and embodied action, and uniquely positions performance studies and performance practice as research projects, such as research-creation, to undertake knowledge creation from this comprehensive standpoint. Dickinson argues that this comprehensive perspective asks us to reconsider not only how academic research is conducted, but also how it is evaluated and disseminated within the context of “making and not faking,” and offers the following from Conquergood on performance practice as research:

The performance paradigm privileges particular, participatory, dynamic, intimate, precarious, embodied experience grounded in historical process, contingency, and ideology. Another way of saying it is that performance-centered research takes both as its subject matter and method the experiencing body situated in time, place, and history. The performance paradigm insists on face-to-face encounters instead of abstractions and reductions. (Conquergood, Rethinking Ethnography 187)

This focus on the “experiencing body situated in time, place and history,” have made performance as practice projects “defining features of the field,” that allows for a framework to evaluate not just the material and the bodily labour involved, but what these acts do, their performativity, and the condition ephemerality that is inherent to performance itself:

Ephemerality of performance...asks an audience to ponder reflexively the ways in which we are obliged to each other...whose attachments and interests are temporary and discretionary...but also embodied...alive to the situatedness of what it is we are experiencing. (Dickinson, Performance Matters)

The “experiencing body” along with the ephemerality of performance also asks us to consider, as does Kershaw, where any knowledge may be produced by the performance: in the actors, the audience, the interaction of the two, in the retelling of the story or in any subsequent analysis. Perhaps it is the ephemeral quality of performance that has led to an academic bias for the written word. It can be argued, however, that knowledge obtained purely from the written word is an incomplete knowledge, one that does not include “the deeply felt insights and revelatory power that come through the embodied experience...of all the sensuous specificities of performance that overflow verbal content” (Conquergood, Performance Studies 149).

Kershaw, Conquergood and Dickinson have all commented on the ephemeral quality of performance, and how performance is not only different to, but essential and equally valuable to text-based knowing. It is important to consider that the written word is the archive of lived experience, and that accessing the archive through research is in itself an embodied, performative act. Theorist Rebecca Schneider argues that the archive is a performative space that houses “the remains” of performance, and that these remains are re-enacted through the embodied, live interaction of the researcher within this performative space; highlighting that research is also a performative act of the body, not simply a disembodied act of the mind, and that the written word is intimately, if not inextricably, linked to the embodied experiences from which it emerges:

In the archive, flesh is given to be that which slips away... [w]hen we approach performance not as that which disappears (as the archive expects), but as... ‘re-participation’...we are almost immediately forced to

admit that remains do not have to be isolated to the document...”  
(Schneider 100-1)

In Bill Cain’s *Equivocation*, “Shagspeare” asks us to consider that on stage, “words become flesh and blood,” as the actors become the characters they play, and the audience, united temporarily in the act of theatre, become the characters, too, and reflexive participants in the events that unfold before them. Everyone from playwright to actor to audience actively interacting and re-enacting with and reacting to the remains from the archive, everyone in one form or other showcasing the qualities of Turner’s *Homo performance*. Everyone is *experiencing* the words, whether narrated as voice-over, written in the program, spoken on stage, enlivened by movement or re-enacted in the research space of the archive. Once the performance is over, the words “might linger as a ghostly reminders and affective remainder—the line of remembered prose, or the page of reread poetry, that might trigger a felt, kinesthetic response” in the bodies of any of the participants of the work (Dickinson 63, Textual Matters). In my own work, my interaction in the performative space of the archive re-enacted the remains of Emily Brontë’s biography, her novel *Wuthering Heights*, her poetry and the relationship with her sister Charlotte. In fact, multiple points of re-enactment occurred in the process of this research-creation project: through archival research, critical analysis of relevant text, the writing of dialogue, set direction and staging and the performance itself embodying the character of Emily and engaging an audience, all with attention to time, space and place in history. In this process, in this ephemeral space, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly where one way of knowing ends and where another begins, as the research, analysis, text and performance seem to form extensions of each other within the experiencing body. Perhaps it can also be argued that in creating her work, *Wuthering Heights*, Emily also engaged with the performative space of the archive of her own experience, as did her sister Charlotte in writing the preface to its posthumous re-publication.

While *Wuthering Heights* may not have been written by Brontë as a piece for theatre or live performance, it has certainly inspired many “enlivened” adaptations since its publication. In her “Preface” to the edition of *Wuthering Heights* cited in this work, Brontë scholar, Lucasta Miller, notes that the novel “has inspired films and plays, sequels, and poetry, an opera, a musical and a number one pop song” (Miller vii). Others, such as Pauline Nestor, claim that as the subject of performance based adaptations, *Wuthering*

*Heights* is “one of those rare texts, like *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, which has transcended its literary origin to become part of the lexicon of popular culture” (Nestor xx). Miller also points out that all of these adaptations to date “have been bent on normalizing what is...a radically transgressive book” (Miller vii). The fact that *Wuthering Heights* can be considered “a radically transgressive book” is a particularly important to the research being discussed here, as the novel and its subsequent re-enactments can be seen as exercises in what Turner has defined as “social dramas,” the “basic stuff of social life” of *Homo performans*. More specifically, Turner defines the “social drama” as distinct “social interactions of a conflictive, competitive or agonistic type,” where “units of aharmonic or disharmonic social process” emerge from conflict scenarios (Turner 33, 74). *Wuthering Heights* repeatedly demonstrates social interactions that violate the boundaries of societal acceptability, not only for its time, space and place in history, but possibly ours as well. And, in doing so, like its contemporaries *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, it encourages a reflexive response from audiences about societal norms, what happens when those norms are suspended and when circumstances present new, even unsettling, possibilities. Richard Schechner adds to Turner’s concept of the social drama with the following:

the basic human plot is the same: someone begins to move to a new place in the social order; this move is accomplished through ritual, or blocked; in either case a crisis arises because any change in status involves readjustment of the entire scheme; this readjustment is effected ceremonially—that is, by means of theater. (Schechner 120-3)

The movement and readjustment of the social drama is evident in Brontë’s novel: from the relationship of Heathcliff and Cathy and Heathcliff and his “adopted” family to the rituals and ceremony of marriage, death and burial. These social dramas are again re-enacted in my own language acts of theatre as they are represented in *Wuthering Heights*, and again in how they materialize in the private social drama between the two sisters, Emily and Charlotte, in the conversation that anchors the play. Social dramas are effective performative spaces because they demand reflexivity on the conflict between human passion and reason in the “lived experience,” which constitutes “a structural relationship between cognitive, affective, and conative components” (Turner 90). If we can consider that the “social drama is an eruption from the level surface of ongoing social life...propelled by passions, compelled by volitions, overmastering at times any rational considerations,”

then it is clear where the reflexive conflict arises, as “reason plays a major role in the settlement of disputes which take the sociodramatic form” (Turner 90).

The tensions at play in this work between text and performance lie in the conflict, the social dramas, that underlies the discourse between the two sisters and that are present in Brontë’s novel, and are re-enacted through theatre. It is precisely these tensions that are latent in the written text and brought out by performance. This creates a further conflict between the work and the audience via reflexive participation. The story, *Wuthering Heights*, “generates tensions—between dream and reality, self and other, natural and supernatural, realism and melodrama, structural formality and emotional chaos,” but, ultimately, “leaves them unresolved” (Miller viii). Much like the unrelenting landscape of the English moorlands that is integral to the setting of *Wuthering Heights*, the novel and its tormented hero, Heathcliff, are violent and uncompromising until their final words—no admissions of pride or prejudice here to set everyone at ease.

A spontaneous rereading of *Wuthering Heights* serves as the foundational language act to the exploration of performance studies through the practiced-based research exercise of research-creation of the following work of historical biographical drama. In rereading the novel, I was surprised by what I found there, and experienced my own sense of knowledge dislocation: a story completely different not only from the recollections of my youth, but also from my experience and understanding of the Victorian novel. Perhaps my recollections had been tainted by the many romantic rather than Romantic adaptations of *Wuthering Heights* (Miller vii). I became intrigued by the novel, and its departure from themes of “the condition of the people” or “novel-with-a-purpose” that seem to characterize novels of the Victorian era (Tillotson 81, 115). I became equally intrigued by its author, Emily Brontë, the younger sister of the celebrated Charlotte Brontë, author of *Jane Eyre*.

I soon learned that *Wuthering Heights* was the only novel and significant work published by Emily Brontë, aside from some lesser known poetry. That she lived only to the age of 30, by choice led a reclusive life and left very little personal diary behind to speak to who she was. That her one and only novel is not only considered a classic of English literature, but it is also one of the most frequently adapted and written about novels in the canon. That despite its critical acclaim today, it was not generally well received at its publication



in December 1847. However, if you pick up a copy of *Wuthering Heights* and expect to get swept away by the passionate love affair between Cathy and Heathcliff à la Sir Laurence Olivier or Ralph Fiennes (both of whom have played Heathcliff in movie versions) or by the ethereal images evoked by Kate Bush's lyrics, you are in for an unsettling surprise.<sup>16</sup> *Wuthering Heights* is far more Romantic than romantic: Cathy and Heathcliff's relationship is strange: "oddly unerotic" and "quasi-incestuous." (Miller vii).

The novel published under the male pseudonym Ellis Bell, shocked readers and critics alike. While the Gothic novel was not novelty to Brontë's readership, for example, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* having been published some twenty years earlier, the masses were disturbed by what they found amid the pages of Ellis Bell's novel. Brontë's time in history grounds her in Romanticism on the verge of the modern era, and her novel in many ways parts company with the classic Victorian novel; and was probably not one a young lady would have been expected to write. It seems as if *Wuthering Heights* was novelty, and somewhat out of step with its historical context, as it challenges societal norms, "assumptions about the restraining limits of civilized behavior," and flirts with "fundamental taboos" such as incest and necrophilia (Nestor xix-xxix). Was this dislocation, rupture from history the cause of the unease among early readers of *Wuthering Heights*? What was Brontë trying to accomplish? Was she, ever so slightly, altering the existing order? Readjusting the entire scheme?

It is with the questions above in mind that I undertook the research-creation proposition of writing a one act play to explore who Emily Brontë was and what her one significant work of fiction represents. Rather than trying to capture Brontë's entire life within the scope of this exercise, I attempted to capture a moment in time; a moment where the questions noted above could be explored within the context of research and knowledge creation. In October 1847, Brontë's sister, Charlotte, published *Jane Eyre* under the male pseudonym, Currer Bell, to great success; but, she was concerned about the troubling reviews evoked by the social dramas depicted in the pages of *Wuthering Heights*, and the ensuing controversy that the author of *Wuthering Heights* was, in fact, a cruder, younger Currer Bell (Bell xlvi). It seems likely that in the year between the publication of *Wuthering*

<sup>16</sup> Pop song *Wuthering Heights* by British singer Kate Bush (1978).

*Heights* and Emily's death in December of 1848, the sisters would have had a conversation about the response to the book and the controversy over who authored it, and whether it was "right or advisable to create things like Heathcliff;" and, that dramatizing the text of such a conversation would provide an engaging theatre research experience (C. Brontë liii). It is this moment, this conversation, this isolable example of social drama that contains within it a sphinx-like <sup>17</sup> quality, where other social dramas are unpacked, suspended and explored that the play attempts to capture.

In terms of research-creation, the dramatization into embodied action of the sisters' conversation about *Wuthering Heights* provides a method for the exploration of the critical questions the work addresses. While the conversation itself is a probability surmised by me rather than a certainty, much of the dialogue that informs it is grounded in auto/biographical and historical sources: selections from the Biographical Notice and Editor's Preface written by Charlotte Brontë to a new edition of *Wuthering Heights* which she published in 1850 after Emily's death, from Emily's poems, letters and diary entries (of which there are few), from facts as documented by biographers and from critical reviews of the novel. The work also includes the dramatization of scenes from Brontë's novel with a view to introduce or reintroduce the audience to the story of *Wuthering Heights*, providing another layer of opportunity for knowing, and demonstrating how "[p]erformance studies is uniquely suited for the challenge of braiding together disparate and stratified ways of knowing" (Conquergood, *Performance Studies* 152).

The play is contained in one act, with two main scenes of dialogue between the two sisters bookended by two smaller scenes that present the text in differing ways: by gesture, narration voice-over and interaction with the natural world. It is important to note here that the landscape, the wild nature of the moors, is an important character in the story of *Wuthering Heights* in itself, and is never far from the experience of the performance, serving to anchor the words and movement in location and space. The play also contains excerpts from recent adaptations of film and music to further echo and establish its

<sup>17</sup> The idea of Emily Brontë as a "Sphinx" of English Literature was originated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to her 'Chinese box' method of narration. Foreman, Peter, *'The Secret of the Sphinx': What makes Wuthering Heights Unique in English Literature*, 2004.

transcendence into the modern lexicon and root it in the here and now, illustrating points of interaction between mediums and language acts.

Much like a challenge differs from a barrier, Conquergood reminds us that “[a] boundary is more like a membrane than a wall” (Conquergood, *Performance Studies* 145). He evokes the aphorism “what the map cuts up, the story cuts across” as an analogy for official ways of knowing and other ways of knowing: “one official, objective, and abstract—‘the map;’ the other one practical, embodied, and popular—‘the story,’” and argues that the “transgressive travel...between different ways of knowing carries the most radical promise of performance studies research” (Conquergood, *Performance Studies* 145). As a novel with its own transgressive impact, *Wuthering Heights*, and its author Emily Brontë, seem the perfect foundation for an exercise in research-creation, an exercise in “cutting across.”

### **Introduction: The Sphinx**

Emily Brontë lived a short time, wrote only one major novel and some lesser known poetry and by choice led a reclusive life. In essence, she left little behind to speak to who she was. So, it would seem a difficult task, if not an impossible one, to piece together a biography of any kind of such a person. As far as Emily Brontë is concerned, however, this has not been the case. Much has been written about her by biographers, scholars and critics; her work has been mined for autobiographical insights into who she was and what type of life she led. These insights have been weaved with anecdotes and historical fact to try and understand what kind of person Emily Brontë was and what influenced her work. Seems like a lot of fuss over someone who only wrote one novel and some generally unknown poems—except her one novel was *Wuthering Heights*.

As noted in the Preface, *Wuthering Heights* is considered a classic of English literature, is one of the most written about novels in the canon and some argue that it has achieved similar status to that of *Frankenstein* or *Dracula* in transcending its roots and entering the modern lexicon. It has been adapted for multiple media: television, film, radio, stage, opera, ballet even a pop song. The novel itself is highly violent and uncompromising until the final page is turned—until the end it “threatens to undermine certainties as basic,” leaving readers to grapple with the social dramas that it unearths (Miller vii).

While we know much about *Wuthering Heights*, what do we know about Emily Brontë? We know that she was born in 1818, the fifth of six children, and spent most of her life in the Yorkshire village of Haworth where her father was the local curate. The parsonage where they lived was on the edge of town, with a graveyard for a front lawn and the expansive, rugged moors of northern England for a back yard. While Haworth was a thriving town, Emily preferred to spend her time with her immediate family and on the wild, rugged moors. She enjoyed a life of solitude, and left the parsonage only a few times and for brief periods only. She seemed to prefer the company of the natural world than that of people, and she had little patience for small talk and the niceties of societal conventions. She had an affinity for nature, particularly its wilder and untamed aspects. She was largely educated at home by her father who gave her free rein on what she chose to read; she was as familiar with *The Bible* and *The Pilgrim's Progress* as she was with Byron's poetry and Shakespeare's racier plays or the newspapers and magazines of the day. (Nestor xv-xviii).

Emily took comfort in the routines of daily life and wrote for entertainment, as did her siblings. Life was harsh on the moors; and illness, suffering and death were not unfamiliar to the Brontës, as the chronology below shows. Being an extremely private person, Emily was angry when her sister Charlotte "found" a book of her poetry and insisted she publish it (Bell xlv). Emily acquiesced only because her sister Anne came forward and confessed she had been writing poetry in secret as well, and in 1846 the three sisters, Charlotte, Emily and Anne, published a collection of their poetry at their own expense under the male pseudonyms Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell (Bell xlv-xlv). While publishing pseudonymously was not uncommon for female writers at the time, the anonymity certainly must have suited Emily's private nature.

In October 1847 Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* is published to great success. Later that year in December, Emily's novel *Wuthering Heights* is published in one volume with her sister Anne's novel *Agnes Grey*. *Wuthering Heights* is not generally well received: readers are disturbed by its content and unfamiliar style, while critics denounce its depictions of amoral passion and its disregard for societal conventions. Critics began to question the identity of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. They began to surmise that these were not three authors at all, but one masquerading as three, and that, in fact, the author

of *Wuthering Heights* was actually the author of *Jane Eyre*, albeit a less mature one, a fact considered by Charlotte to be an “[u]njust and grievous error!” (Bell xlv-xlvi).

The archive tells us that Emily was not particularly bothered by the unflattering reviews of her novel or that its authorship was being questioned; but, the archive also tells us her sister Charlotte was. Charlotte writes:

I must not be understood to make these things subject for reproach or complaint...respect for my sister’s memory forbids me. By her any such querulous manifestation would have been regarded as an unworthy, and offensive weakness. (Bell xlvi)

In the fall of 1848, Emily becomes ill soon after the death of her brother Branwell, and dies in December, one year after the publication of *Wuthering Heights*. At the time of her death, the true identity of the author of *Wuthering Heights* was still unknown.

Emily’s story, however, does not end there. In 1850 Charlotte edits a new edition of *Wuthering Heights*. In this edition Charlotte includes a “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell” and an “Editor’s Preface to the New [1850] Edition of *Wuthering Heights*.” With these texts Charlotte reveals the true identities of Ellis and Acton Bell and provides a defense, of sorts, of her sister Emily for having written such an unsettling novel. Through her words we learn that Charlotte was “genuinely troubled” by her younger sister’s “rebellious imagination,” and that she cannot seem to bear the thought of Emily being responsible for the “unredeemed figure of Heathcliff” (Miller ix). Through these language acts Charlotte expresses her concern with the troubling reviews of her sister’s novel and even anger over the controversy over who authored what. But, most importantly, Charlotte’s words are also embodied acts of creation; her text emerging from a body and mind bearing the loss in short order of her siblings: Anne, Branwell, and, of course, Emily. Without question, the performative space of the archive for Charlotte in creating these language acts was one veiled in grief, an embodied response that is part of, and integral to, the text; a response that can only be drawn out and experienced by performance.

While Charlotte never undermines her sister’s talent and provides testament to her sister’s strength “she was stronger than a man,” she does suggest that perhaps Emily was too immature, with a character, “simpler than a child” and “had she but lived, her mind would

of itself have grown like a strong tree” (Bell xviii; C. Brontë lii). Charlotte also implies that perhaps Emily was not in control of what she wrote, that she was the vessel of a mystic process “something that at times strangely wills and works for itself” (C. Brontë liii).

For the next hundred years or so, reprints of *Wuthering Heights* were Charlotte’s edited version (Lathbury). In trying to protect her sister from critical censure, Charlotte’s language acts after her sister’s death would have “an equivocal effect on Emily’s reputation” for many years to come: “It would take a long time for critics to stop regarding *Wuthering Heights* as the flawed product of a childish mind or the mystic ramblings of a moorland sibyl” (Miller ix). In fact, the inability to believe that the novel could be the work of a proper, innocent young lady led to the idea that her brother, Branwell, had written it instead (Miller ix). Of course, an original manuscript created by Emily’s hand would be extremely useful to determine the extent of Charlotte’s edits, but none exists (Lathbury). Once published, it’s quite possible that Emily, being a practical, no-nonsense type of girl, would think that *Wuthering Heights* would make excellent kindling.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Original manuscripts were commonly used as kindling once published. Lathbury, Roger, “The Avaricious and the Intransigent: A Match Made in London,” Issue 8.

**Chronology:**

1818 – July 30	Emily Jane is born at Thornton
1820	Family moves to Haworth Parsonage
1821	Mother dies
1824	Joins sisters at Cowan Bridge School for daughter of clergy (inspiration for Lowood School in <i>Jane Eyre</i> )
1825	Sisters Maria and Elizabeth die
1835	Attends Roe Head School where sister Charlotte is a teacher (returns after 3 months due to poor health – starving herself due to homesickness)
1836	Emily and sister Anne create and write about a magical world – the Gondal saga
1836-37	Begins to write poetry
1838	Takes a post as a junior teacher at a girls' school
1839	Leaves teaching post due to poor health; writes a further 21 poems
1842	Emily and Charlotte attend school in Brussels; they return within the year due to their aunt's death; Emily refuses to return. The three Brontë sisters receive a £300 inheritance.
1845	Emily and Anne take a rare trip to York – 'our first long journey by ourselves.' Charlotte finds Emily's poetry.
1846	Sisters publish <i>Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell</i> at their expense
1847 October	Charlotte publishes <i>Jane Eyre</i>
1847 December	<i>Wuthering Heights</i> is published
1848 September	Brother Branwell dies
1848 December	Emily dies
1849	Sister Anne dies
1850 December	Charlotte edits a new edition of <i>Wuthering Heights</i> and includes 'Biographical Notice' and 'Preface'

Note. From *Wuthering Heights* xi-xiii.

**2.2. Emily Brontë: No Coward Soul is Mine  
A Play about Mystery, Harmless Pleasure and Duty**



### Cast of Characters

<u>EMILY BRONTË:</u>	29 years old, novelist, poet, author of <i>Wuthering Heights</i>
<u>CHARLOTTE BRONTË:</u>	31 years old, novelist poet, author of <i>Jane Eyre</i>
<u>TABBY:</u>	Sixties, parsonage cook, offstage presence only
<u>NARRATORS:</u>	Emily and Charlotte

### Place

The Brontë Parsonage Haworth, Northern England and the surrounding Yorkshire Moors.

### Time

Spring 1848

### **Film Clips**

*Wuthering Heights*, film adaptation by Director Andrea Arnold, 2011.

Based on the novel by Emily Brontë.

Screenplay by Andrea Arnold and Olivia Hetreed.

### **Musical Numbers**

Film soundtrack THE ENEMY music and lyrics by Mumford & Sons.

Performed live by vocalist and banjo player.

**ACT I: Scene 1: Meeting Emily**

*Setting: It is dark. A dog is heard barking, growling. A fire is seen glowing (centrestage, right centre). A wooden table, chairs appear. A hearth. Simple but efficient—the parsonage kitchen. A basket of potatoes and a knife rest on the table.*

*At Rise: Poem is read by the narrator (offstage) while it is still dark. A door opens (centrestage, left). Light floods the room. We see the shapes of the parsonage kitchen emerge.*

EMILY: *(Narrator, offstage)*  
 Do I despise the timid deer,  
 Because his limbs are fleet with fear?  
 Or, would I mock the wolf's death-howl,  
 Because his form is gaunt and foul?  
 Or, hear with joy the leveret's cry,  
 Because it cannot bravely die?<sup>1</sup>

TABBY: *(Cook, offstage)*  
 Emily! Come pilloputate! Ya pitter pottering there playing with that rabid dog instead of pilling a potato! 'E'll take a bite o' ya 'e will. Take a knife and begin pilling!<sup>2</sup>

*(EMILY enters, limping, wincing slightly, clutching her left leg. She walks assuredly, calmly towards the table and the potatoes, but she continues on to the hearth and picks up an iron rod from the fire. Emily lifts her skirt to reveal a bloody gash. Without hesitation she applies the hot iron to the wound, suppressing a cry of pain. She holds the iron to the wound for a few seconds. The expression of pain on her face begins to subside. The light dims to darkness as the sound of the barking, growling dog fades to silence.)<sup>3</sup>*

CURTAIN

MUSIC AND LYRICS PLAYED

**ACT I: Scene 2: A Conversation**

*Setting:* Spring, 1848. The stage is dimly lit from above, the effect is that of dappled sunlight. Upstage centre remains dark. As the scene brightens we see we are in some sort of cave or crevice formation.

*At Rise:* The light brightens as EMILY walks confidently on stage and heads for a familiar spot (centrestage, right centre). CHARLOTTE enters gingerly, looking around, keeps close to the rock wall, hugging left. She wraps her shawl a little tighter around her. She looks uncomfortable, scared.

EMILY: Come along, Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE: But, *why*?

EMILY: I always walk on the moors. And long the ruins. And, sometimes, like today, in caves. You really should refrain from judging just because something is not quite to your liking.

CHARLOTTE: (*Starting to show mild exasperation*)

I am not judging, honestly, Emily—

EMILY: (*Calmly with a hint of mischief*)

*Why* is a judgmental word—you know it, I know it. As a successful author you know that language is never neutral, and that *why* is a very carefully chosen, deliberate word.

CHARLOTTE: I am not talking about the moors, the ruins or—

EMILY: The limestone? Is it the *drippy* limestone that bothers you?

*(EMILY looks around at the walls of the cave and makes dripping gestures with her hands)*

CHARLOTTE: Or caves, or limestone—

EMILY: Oh, it must be the critters that bother you—like this one?

*(As she speaks, EMILY picks up a beetle and appears to bring it toward CHARLOTTE)*

*(CHARLOTTE gasps, recoils in terror; EMILY laughs)*

CHARLOTTE: Ellen was right; you do have a spell of mischief in you, Emily!<sup>4</sup> I cannot understand why my terror amuses you so...

*(EMILY plays with the beetle in her palm as she speaks. She continues to play with the beetle off and on.)*

EMILY: Because I enjoy leading you where you would not dare go of your own free will...

CHARLOTTE: What kind of answer is that?

EMILY: The kind that answers your original question.

CHARLOTTE: Emily, I am not talking about the moors, or ruins, or caves or spiders—

*(CHARLOTTE bats at her leg as though knocking off a bug that is crawling on it; looks around nervously and pulls her shawl tighter around her)*

EMILY: Neither am I.

*(EMILY picks up a twig and begins to play with it, drawing on the cave floor)*

CHARLOTTE: Ah—there's that clever wit I enjoy so much! Now, would you mind telling me exactly *why* you contacted that scoundrel Thomas Newby—

EMILY: *(Exclaims)* Newby is my publisher!

CHARLOTTE: And, why didn't you tell me that you were working on a second book?

EMILY: *(Calmly)* Newby is my publisher, I should be wanting in common civility if I did not thank him—and what makes you think that I'm writing a second book?<sup>5</sup>

*(CHARLOTTE pulls a letter from her pocket, unfolds it and reads)*

CHARLOTTE: "Dear Sir—I am much obliged by your kind note and shall have much pleasure in making arrangements for your next novel."<sup>6</sup>

*(CHARLOTTE folds the letter and defiantly puts it back in her pocket and looks at Emily; EMILY looks angrily, sharply at Charlotte)*

*(EMILY speaks angrily, throws the twig she has been playing with)*

EMILY: Ah. I see you *found* my letter from Newby. Much like you *found* my poems.

CHARLOTTE: And I am glad I found them. And glad to have spent hours reconciling you to my discovery. And glad to have spent days persuading you that such poems merited publication<sup>7</sup>—how could you not see that? In any case, Newby is a scoundrel, his publishing house is of questionable reputation—the books he publishes are not well got up – they abound in errors of the press, not to mention once he took our money, he sat on the manuscripts, would not respond to our correspondences, a pure example of—<sup>8</sup>

EMILY: One of the worst forms of humanity?

CHARLOTTE: Of an ignoble character.

EMILY: Possibly.

*(EMILY stands, walks to the front of the stage and faces the audience)*

But, he did eventually publish what others would not...what *did* that reviewer from the *Atlas* call my book?

*(She thinks a moment, taps her head)*

Ah, yes, "fictitious literature which presents such shocking pictures of the worst forms of humanity!"<sup>9</sup>

CHARLOTTE: Why didn't you tell me you were writing a second book?

EMILY: Just because Newby would have much pleasure in making arrangements for my next novel does not confirm that there is one. You really shouldn't believe everything you read, Charlotte.

*(EMILY looks amusingly at Charlotte)*

CHARLOTTE: It's just that, formerly, we used to show each other what we wrote, but, of late, we seem to have discontinued this habit of communication and consultation...<sup>10</sup>

*(CHARLOTTE Looks down, pulls the note from her pocket and looks at Emily)*

Had we continued as before ...perhaps we could have discussed whether it is right or advisable...to create...<sup>11</sup>

EMILY: Beings like Heathcliff?

CHARLOTTE: Yes, beings like Heathcliff.

*(EMILY picks up a twig and taps the syllables on the ground)*

EMILY: Heathcliff. Heath cliff. Heath. Cliff.

CHARLOTTE: Yes, a heath and a cliff. Perhaps it would have been best if Heathcliff did not take human form—he's volatile, unpredictable, violent, excessively brutal—

*(Upstage, scene from movie is projected where Heathcliff (H) beats on Isabella and Hindley: begins with driving rain and H demanding entrance to WH; ends with H opening window and finding solace in the driving rain)*

...the other characters seems to positively *fear* him—and for good reason I might add—his part might have been played by Nature or God, or even the Devil, to great effect...not to mention that this violence seems accessible to everyone in the novel...<sup>12</sup>

EMILY: *(Shrugs)* It was important that he be human. It was important that the volatility, unpredictability, violence and brutality be embodied, be of humanity.

CHARLOTTE: (*Exasperated*) Heathcliff, *human? Of humanity* –

EMILY: (*Assuredly*) Yes.

CHARLOTTE: Why? Because of his love for Catherine? A love that shows no forgiveness, no caring—just a thirst to possess?

*(Upstage, edited scenes from the movie projected of H and Cathy (C): a montage of clips showing the possessive, unforgiving, ruthless qualities of their bond)*

What cruel lover damns his love as she lies dying?...if this being you created betrays any human feeling, it is certainly NOT his love for Catherine; which is a sentiment fierce and inhuman...a passion such as might boil and glow in the bad essence of some evil genius; a fire that might form the tormented centre—the ever-suffering soul of a magnate of the infernal world: and by its ceaseless ravage doom him to carry Hell with him wherever he wanders—<sup>13</sup>

EMILY: Look, Charlotte, look at this little beetle...I've turned him on his back...isn't he funny?

*(EMILY put the beetle on its back, giggles)*

No, really, Charlotte, look...he's trying so hard to right himself, his legs all flaying in the air...

CHARLOTTE:

*(CHARLOTTE approaches timidly, grimaces, backs away with a start)*

EMILY: Come on, Charlotte, he can't hurt you; he can't even turn over or stand up, or—are you afraid of him Charlotte? *(Suppresses a laugh)*

*(Seriously) Are you, truly...afraid?*

CHARLOTTE: *(Sighs heavily) Heathcliff, has no redeeming qualities, he shows not one thread of remorse or human compassion, he is doomed to perdition—*

EMILY:



*(EMILY points the twig at Charlotte, returns to sit on the boulder)*

You, sister, are missing the point.

CHARLOTTE: And, what *point*, exactly would that be?

EMILY: Heathcliff is not the caricature of a man, he *is* man—a shard of man, at least. There's a difference.

CHARLOTTE: Now you invoke philosophy? Perhaps...there is a difference...but, clearly, the public...reviewers, critics... see no difference.

EMILY: It's my job to make them see is it? See...see what, exactly? What's good, what's evil? What's right and moral and what's not? What's in their own hearts and minds?

CHARLOTTE: The *point* seems more that your book appears a rude and strange production...in a great measure unintelligible, and—where intelligible—repulsive! In Heathcliff there is nothing but a man's shape animated by demon life – a Ghoul – an Afreet—the public is repelled by Ellis Bell's novel.<sup>14</sup> The *Atlas* review confirms the popular sentiment that Wuthering Heights casts a gloom over the mind not easily to be dispelled. It does not soften; it harasses; it exenterates.<sup>15</sup> It—

EMILY: Can centre both the worlds of Heaven and Hell?<sup>16</sup>

CHARLOTTE: And, how does it do that, exactly?

*(Upstage, we see edited images from the movie projected: Nelly washing H when he arrives at WH; Joseph whipping H; H with his father; H with Hindley C&H together on the moors; Hindley's son hangs a dog as H looks on)*

By rough, strong utterance, harshly manifested passions, the unbridled aversions, and headlong partialities of unlettered moorland hinds and rugged moorland squires, who have grown up untaught and unchecked, except by mentors as harsh as themselves?<sup>17</sup> By romanticizing an amoral, immoral, not to mention illegal, passion? Not even the offspring seem to learn from the doomed love affairs of their parents...Emily, you have their *offspring* engaged in the same *dangerous passions* as their parents...they haven't learned anything...the sins of the father—

EMILY: Well, sometimes that happens, doesn't it? Children *don't* learn from the mistakes of their parents, not all wounds heal and not all scars can be seen on the surface of the skin...Besides, Charlotte, no need to be so dramatic, even as Catherine is clasped to Heathcliff's breast we dare not doubt her purity.<sup>18</sup>

CHARLOTTE: Her purity? If only her purity was at issue here! If only! For goodness sake, Emily, their relationship is tantamount to incest!

EMILY: I never represented Catherine and Heathcliff as blood relatives; Catherine never marries her *demonic* brother/lover—

*(Upstage, we see edited images from the movie projected: C with Edgar; H with Isabella)*

She has a perfectly ordinary marriage to Edgar, and Heathcliff marries Edgar's sister Isabella—while, I admit, that their marriages are not exactly the kind one would want—

CHARLOTTE: Not the kind one would *want*?!

*(Upstage, we see edited images from the movie projected: Heathcliff courting Isabella; Heathcliff terrorizing Isabella)*

Heathcliff hangs his betrothed's dog on the eve of their elopement and after they marry he beats her, imprisons her, demeans her (*shakes her head in disbelief*)...

EMILY: Heathcliff never deceives Isabella. She knew the man he was. His brutality does not disgust her...(*Smirks*) as long as her precious person was secure from injury. She should have taken the dog hanging to heart...<sup>19</sup>

CHARLOTTE: ...Catherine seems to have nothing but indifference and contempt for Edgar—who is a devoted and tender husband—and, as for Heathcliff and Catherine, it may not have been corporeal incest, but certainly emotional incest! You know as well as I do that English law prohibits the marriage of siblings by adoption and of non-related children raised in the same household.<sup>20</sup>

EMILY: I thought I was writing fiction, not a textbook on *legalities*, or a novel-with-a-purpose...<sup>21</sup>

CHARLOTTE: And, what of Heathcliff's parentage? Why would a man of noble character bring home a little black-haired swarthy thing, as dark as if it came from the Devil<sup>22</sup>—now those are *your* words, Emily, not *mine*—and raise it as his son...among his other children...unless, the little black-haired swarthy thing was an illegitimate son born out of some immoral circumstance?

*(Upstage, H's baptism scene from the movie is projected: begins with the image of the tree and church bells in the background [13:38]; ends with H and C running up the hill [15:13])*

EMILY: Do you remember when you were at school in Brussels? I wrote to Ellen and implored her to go over for half a year as perhaps she might be able to bring you back with her otherwise you might have vegetated *there* till the age of Methuselah for mere lack of courage to face the voyage.<sup>23</sup>

*(She chuckles at the remembrance)*

Besides, you're a fine one to scold me on improper class distinctions and proper gender relations—you have read your own novel, *Jane Eyre*, I take it?

CHARLOTTE: *Jane Eyre* is different...there's...there's a thread of morality that holds everything in check. In *your* novel, everything is unchecked! Heathcliff, stands unredeemed; never once swerving in his arrow-straight course to perdition.<sup>24</sup> And there's Catherine, his sister/lover, who declares "I am Heathcliff" and loves him because he's more herself than she is because "Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same."<sup>25</sup> A woman surrendering her identity to a man, Lord knows that is not new, but she surrenders to a monster. God help her if their souls *are* the same...

EMILY: God, help us all!

CHARLOTTE: Don't make light, Emily. This, this...*man*... is compelled—as if possessed by the Devil himself—to *physically* unite with her in death.

*(Upstage, scene showing H embracing C's dead body is projected: begins with H climbing in the window; ends with H embracing C's dead body)*

It was acceptable when he views her body before the burial— there was grief, despondency—all understandable given their intense, if not disturbing bond. But, then, he...he *takes* her hair...body...

*(Shakes her head and closes her eyes, as if trying to erase the memory)*  
...he makes arrangements... that they be buried together with the sides of their coffins removed so that their bodies can *be* together in death, with his cheek frozen against hers...of dissolving with her<sup>26</sup>...*honestly, Emily!*

EMILY: Would you have preferred a physical consummation of their relationship in life? Even though their relationship was amoral, immoral and, oh yes, illegal.

CHARLOTTE: Well...yes... it would have been scandalous, but at least it would be *normal* to some extent, if not particularly moral...

EMILY: Authors write about what they know, and I know about death, some would argue, more than life...

CHARLOTTE: It's not just that, Emily...

*(Upstage, scene with H being haunted by C and driven to dig up her coffin is projected: begins with blurred images of C; ends with Heathcliff saying 'Cathy' and misty image of WH)*

Catherine torments him...*haunts* him...it was bad enough that your Heathcliff dishonors her corpse, but then your *hero*...he...he digs down to her dead body...

*(Covers her face, eyes with her hands)*

EMILY: Yes, but he doesn't actually reach her! He disturbed no body...<sup>27</sup>

*(EMILY smirks)*

CHARLOTTE: *(Suppressing a little laugh)*

Honestly, Emily, I think, you would surely agree, that hopes for a spiritual union after death accompanied by excessive weeping and declarations of love or the uselessness of existence would have probably been sufficient and certainly more palatable...

EMILY: And certainly more proper and expected...Then God forgive my youth, forgive my careless tongue!<sup>28</sup>

*(Quietly)* Perhaps, you are right, sister, it was not wise to bring the unreal world too strangely near...<sup>29</sup>

CHARLOTTE: Or, at least a declaration of insanity...

EMILY: Yes, because surely locking up your insane wife and keeping her a secret from all is perfectly palatable, understandable and, quite possibly, necessarily legal.

CHARLOTTE: I am not suggesting that your novel should have been more like *Jane Eyre*...

EMILY: You mean more like a novel which affects the reader to tears; that touches the most hidden sources of emotion, rather than one which presents such shocking pictures of the worst forms of humanity that cast a gloom over the mind not easily to be dispelled?<sup>30</sup>

CHARLOTTE: You *know* that I do not for one moment doubt your talent—when I read your poetry I thought to myself never was better stuffed penned...<sup>31</sup>

EMILY: So you've said.

CHARLOTTE: And, perhaps I was a bit unjust in suggesting all of the reviews of *Wuthering Heights* were less than favourable—too often reviewers do remind me of the mob of Astrologers, Chaldeans and Soothsayers gathered before the “writing on the wall,” unable to read the characters or make known the interpretation...<sup>32</sup>

EMILY: There were those who appreciated the freshness of the book's structure, the short, crisp lines, the brevity of the minutia of daily life...

CHARLOTTE: Yes... and you were very clever in your use of the *dubious* narrators, Nelly Dean the housekeeper and Lockwood the tenant...what are the critics calling it? Your Chinese-box style of narration...<sup>33</sup>

*(Upstage, we see edited images from the movie projected: Nelly with H & C at various times/ages; being kind to H; in the background to C & H's encounters)*

...and, Nelly is, at least, a specimen of true benevolence...and there was that one writer...his name escapes me now... endowed with the keen vision and fine sympathies of genius, that has discerned the real nature of *Wuthering Heights*, and has, with equal accuracy, noted its beauties and its faults.<sup>34</sup>

EMILY: It is not often that a “true seer” comes along; someone who can accurately read the ‘Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin’ of an original mind—<sup>35</sup>

CHARLOTTE: Yes...however unique, however inefficiently cultured and partially expanded that mind may be.<sup>36</sup>

EMILY: Alright, alright, dear sister. Enough of this stuff. You may not be suggesting I rewrite *Wuthering Heights* to mirror *Jane Eyre*; but, you are suggesting something. Why don't we walk, and you can let me in on what scheme is at present in agitation...<sup>37</sup>

CHARLOTTE: Gladly, dear sister, gladly.

*(EMILY stands, dusts herself off, releases the beetle gathers her things  
and begins to exit the cave; CHARLOTTE follows without hesitation)*

CURTAIN

MUSIC AND LYRICS PLAYED

**ACT I: Scene 3: A Proposal**

*Setting:* It is late afternoon, a clear day on the moors.

*At Rise:* EMILY enters, bends down, picks up a beetle. CHARLOTTE follows. They are walking on a well-worn path along the heath.

EMILY: Look, Charlotte, another one of those beetles—this one has markings...

*(EMILY moves to show CHARLOTTE, CHARLOTTE recoils)*

I think I'll bring him along, perhaps he can advise me on the merits of your grand plan...

CHARLOTTE: Be serious, Emily. Now I will ask *you* to hear *me* out—without judgment.

EMILY: Alright. No judgment—at least I'll try.

CHARLOTTE: *(Stops walking)*

I was thinking, perhaps, we could start by revealing the true identities of Currer and Ellis Bell...

EMILY: *(Turns to the audience)*

To what end? We had very early established the dream of one day becoming authors—and we've done that. As we are, or, perhaps, I should say as *I* am averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names...and, in any case, we all have the vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice...<sup>38</sup>

CHARLOTTE: Yes...but that was before...before we ever suspected that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called *feminine*...and now...now it is thought that all the works published under the names of Currer and Ellis Bell were, in reality, the production of one person...<sup>39</sup>

EMILY: A little mystery; some harmless pleasure...<sup>40</sup>



CHARLOTTE: Yes, perhaps...once...but now I feel we have a duty to explain the origin and authorship of the books...<sup>41</sup>

*(EMILY walks away from Charlotte, continues to face the audience)*

EMILY: A duty? I feel no such thing; but, clearly, you do. *Duty* does imply there is an underlying compelling interest that needs to be acknowledged, responded to and served. What is the compelling interest here, Currer? Could it be that what concerns you is critics attributing *Wuthering Heights*, and all the horrors it reveals and conceals, to a younger, cruder, less formed Currer Bell?<sup>42</sup>

*(CHARLOTTE approaches EMILY)*

CHARLOTTE: It was only after *Jane Eyre* proved that the Bell name might be worth something that Newby even resumed production on *Wuthering Heights*...

EMILY: Ah...you're concerned that the Bell name will somehow become tainted unless we reveal our true and separate identities? That somehow the *truth* of a writer can be discerned by the words he or she writes?

CHARLOTTE: You're not seeing the problem clearly, Emily...

EMILY: I disagree—I think I see it quite clearly—the problem. The *problem* is how the *truth* of a writer gets drowned out by the chatterings of reviewers, critics and other writers—and starts to slide into fiction—<sup>43</sup>

CHARLOTTE: *(Frustrated)* Look, your novel is generally dismissed as the freakish, unholy product of a terminally ill child...<sup>44</sup>

EMILY: Once again, dear Charlotte, you shouldn't believe everything you read...*do* you believe everything you read?

CHARLOTTE: *(Calmly)* Emily...your imagination is a spirit more somber than sunny, more powerful than sportive...perhaps having formed these beings...perhaps you did not know what you had done...sometimes the writer who possess the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master...<sup>45</sup>

EMILY: Ha! Ellis Bell, the mystic!  
(*As an aside*) Otherwise known as Emily Brontë NOT Charlotte Brontë—  
let's be clear on that!

The pagan seer, skipping the moors in the company of her wild, bucking  
imagination, not a talented craftswoman, but a being of rare spiritual  
gifts!<sup>46</sup>

(*EMILY skips around, being silly, looking wildly at the heavens; she grabs  
CHARLOTTE by the hand, makes her skip along*)

Come along, Charlotte! You might be inspired to write your next book!

(*CHARLOTTE breaks free, smooths her skirt, smooths her hair*)

CHARLOTTE: ...We could explain that our circumstances favoured your tendency to  
seclusion...had your lot been cast in town, perhaps your writings would  
have possessed another character...<sup>47</sup>

EMILY: A mystic, a recluse, a nursling of the moors!<sup>48</sup> Unworldly and immature!

(*EMILY hunches down and pulls her shawl over her head, appearing  
small, vulnerable*)

CHARLOTTE: Seems more agreeable than considering your words as something that  
might boil and glow in the bad essence of some evil genius...or a  
magnate of the infernal world...

EMILY: (*Stands, resumes her composure*)

Ah. So now we are getting to the heart of the matter...

(*EMILY and CHARLOTTE face each other and each settle on a boulder*)  
...you are upset that I have once again led you where you would not dare  
go of your own free will—perhaps this is what has troubled the lot—I have  
stirred the dread of the unknown animal...or...led you to it in your own  
soul...So, tell me, Charlotte, which unknown animal has filled your heart  
and mind with dread—me...or you?

CHARLOTTE: (*Looking uncomfortable*) There's more.

EMILY: Pray, tell.

CHARLOTTE: You know I am not an advocate of flowing common effusions, or other such stuff as women generally write;<sup>49</sup> but, I thought, perhaps, as you are in contact with Newby, we could republish *Wuthering Heights*...we could alter some of the particularly disturbing scenes...just slightly...the ones we spoke of...we could make Heathcliff an unrelenting force of Nature...your descriptions of our native hills, their tenants—they are vivid and convey more than spectacle, they convey a sense of...home. We could tame your form—in truth, the practice of hinting by single letter those expletives with which profane and violent persons are wont to garnish their discourse...I cannot honestly tell what good it does...<sup>50</sup> We could include a notice revealing the mystery of our identities, correcting the unjust and grievous errors of authorship<sup>51</sup>...we could include a preface—unveil the strength of your character, the circumstances of your upbringing...

EMILY: Hm. A defense of my disturbing creation...a defense of me...a way to make me into an image of your own desiring...a way for you to come to terms with my responsibility in creating the unredeemed creature...<sup>52</sup>

CHARLOTTE: Emily...

EMILY: Come, Charlotte.

*(Emily stands, begins to walk)*

I'll walk, but not in paths of high morality, and not among the clouded forms of long-past history...I'll walk where my own nature would be leading—it vexes me to choose another guide.<sup>53</sup>

*(EMILY turns to CHARLOTTE and throws the beetle she has been carrying in her direction; CHARLOTTE jumps, almost falls, EMILY smiles)*

CURTAIN

MUSIC AND LYRICS PLAYED

**ACT I: Scene 4: Mystery, Harmless Pleasure and Duty**

*Setting: It is dusk. We are in Charlotte's room at the parsonage. The room is dimly lit by the light coming in from a small, rustic window. We hear the hammering of rain on the window pane. It is clear now that Charlotte is wearing mourning clothes. There are writing materials on the desk: quills, ink, blotting paper, writing paper, wax, seals, spectacles.<sup>54</sup>*

*At Rise: Poem is read by the narrator (offstage) while it is still dark. Charlotte sits at wooden desk and chair (centrestage, centre), barely a silhouette. Charlotte reaches to light the oil lamp sitting on the desk. The scene brightens. Charlotte picks up a quill and places a sheet of writing paper before her. She opens the small ink pot and dips her quill. She takes one look out the small window.*

EMILY: *(Narrator, offstage)*

Twas grief enough to think mankind  
All hollow, servile, insincere;  
But worse to trust to my own mind  
And find the same corruption there.<sup>55</sup>

*(CHARLOTTE mutters softly as she looks out the window)*

CHARLOTTE: "Pilloputate, pilloputate, Ya pitter pottering there instead of pilling a potato"

*(CHARLOTTE bows her head and begins to write)*

CHARLOTTE: (*Narrated off stage*)

It has been thought that all the works published under the names of Currer and Ellis Bell, were, in reality, the production of one person...Indeed, I feel myself that it is time the obscurity attending those two names was done away...The little mystery, which formerly yielded some harmless pleasure, has lost interest; circumstances are changed. It becomes then, my duty, to explain the origin and authorship of the books written by Currer and Ellis Bell. I must not be understood to make these things subject for reproach or complaint; I dare not do so; respect for my sister's memory forbids me.

Emily was a naturally sensitive, reserved, and dejected nature; what she saw sank very deeply into her mind; it did her harm. While full of ruth for others, on herself she had no pity; the spirit was inexorable to the flesh. Stronger than a man, simpler than a child her nature stood alone.

I have just read over *Wuthering Heights* and, for the first time, have gained a definite notion of how it appears to other people—it was hewn in a wild workshop, with simple tools, out of homely materials. It is Moorish, and wild, and knotty as a root of heath. The author being herself a native and nursling of the moors. Doubtless, had her lot been cast in town, her writings, if she had written at all, would have possessed another character.

Whether it is right or advisable to create beings like Heathcliff, I do not know: I scarcely think it is. Having formed this being, she did not know what she done: the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master—something that, at times, strangely wills and works for itself—it will perhaps for years lie in subjection; and then, haply, without any warning, it will revolt.

*Wuthering Heights* stands colossal, dark, and frowning, half statue, half rock: in the former sense, terrible and goblin-like; in the latter, almost beautiful, for its colouring is of mellow grey, and moorland moss clothes it; and heath, with its blooming bells and balmy fragrance, grows faithfully close to the giant's foot.

This notice has been written, because I felt it a sacred duty to wipe the dust off my sister's gravestone, and leave her dear name free from soil.

Currer Bell, September 19<sup>th</sup>, 1850.<sup>56</sup>

*(Lights dim on CHARLOTTE; lights on EMILY (centrestage, left))*

EMILY: My sister's words would have an equivocal effect on my reputation. It would take a long time for critics to stop regarding *Wuthering Heights* as the flawed product of a childish mind or the mystic ramblings of a moorland sibyl.<sup>57</sup> In the words of Nelly Dean...my words: "But you'll not want to hear my moralizing, Mr. Lockwood: you'll judge as well as I can, all these things; at least you'll think you will, and that's the same."<sup>58</sup>

CURTAIN

MUSIC AND LYRICS PLAYED

THE END

## 2.3. Epilogue: Cutting Across

*The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered...*

—*Tradition and the Individual Talent, T.S. Eliot (37)*

It was with the idea in mind that perhaps Brontë was trying to alter the existing order of things that I undertook the task of research-creation, and to use the language acts of theatre to explore this contention, who Emily Brontë was and what she was trying to do in her one significant work of fiction. The central research question to this work is: can we consider Emily Brontë a proto-modernist writer? My conclusion is that she was, and that she was a pioneer of modernist literature and the Poundian notion of “make it new.” Furthermore, with this work, my aim was to also open the door to discussions about and draw some conclusions on the weight of responsibility that is inherent to biography, and whether it is possible (or dangerous) to reap autobiography from an author’s work—to discern what is the *truth* about a writer.

The tensions at play in the work between text and performance lie in the conflict, the social drama that underlies the discourse between the two sisters, the depiction of raw animality that is present in Brontë’s novel and the setting of the play. It is precisely these tensions that are latent in the work and brought out by the performance. The text creates dramatic allusions to the novel that may be lost without careful attention to performance: when Emily tells Charlotte she enjoys leading her where she would not go of her own free will and Charlotte insists she is not talking about Emily’s choice of walking habits, and Emily responds, “Neither am I;” when Emily tells Charlotte that she shouldn’t believe everything she reads, and then asks, “are you, truly...afraid?” or when Emily insists that Heathcliff “disturbs no body.”

While the text describes scenes from Brontë’s novel to add drama and inform the dialogue, the power, raw emotions, disturbing contexts and differences from the norm inherent to *Wuthering Heights* are fully felt and understood by the showing rather than the telling (or reading) of these scenes. The setting, spring 1848, serves well to accommodate the timeline of the publications and ensuing (possible) conversation between the sisters, but

it also offers a tension between the lightness of spring and the darkness of the subject of their conversation.

The dramatization of the scenes to create an accurate summary of the novel, however, did prove problematic and challenging. *Wuthering Heights* is a BIG story—choosing a handful of significant scenes was difficult in the context of trying to produce a complete one act play and provide a true summary. The challenge then becomes the competition between the story of the author and the story she wrote: balancing Brontë's biography with a truncated adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*. Furthermore, the scenes necessary to create an accurate representation of the novel are, for the most part, extremely dramatic or excessively brutal and violent. While the drama and intensity of these scenes is clear in the text, the problem arises in trying to dramatize such scenes without it looking comical to a modern-day audience. The introduction of film clips from a recent adaptation to dramatize these difficult scenes helps to resolve this challenge while adding the modern element of film to the production.

This leads to another challenge of this work: how do you keep modern audiences interested and engaged in a play that essentially takes place in Victorian England? While the play itself has a Victorian feeling, the play is postmodern by illustrating points of interaction between disparate language acts and mediums. As *Wuthering Heights* has transcended its roots and found a place in the modern lexicon, I attempt to bring the modern day into conversation with Victorian England by the use of film clips, music and lyrics from a recent, critically acclaimed adaptation that more closely mirrors Brontë's novel than previous adaptations of its kind. The introduction of multimedia would bring its own set of challenges: the necessity for effective sound and film editing into montages and clips, the technological ability or support to do so and obtaining and paying for the necessary copyright permissions. The addition of film and sound is in keeping with a contemporary affinity for multimedia and virtual experiences, and provides commentary on the ability of Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* to transcend tradition and historical context and find a home in the now.

The staging of the performance was in large part responsible for the biographical integrity of this work. The realm of writing is brought to the realm of performance by showing rather



than telling the contexts and environment of Brontë's life: showing how and where she lived, adding to the "truth" of who she was. By recreating the simplicity of life at the parsonage and the harshness and beauty of Brontë's beloved moorland landscape, elements of Brontë's biography merit their own worth, bringing awareness of the temptation to delve into *Wuthering Heights* as an indicator of who Brontë was as a person. The staging also benefits the work by creating environments that allow the nature of the characters to emerge: Emily's affinity for nature and her ease with what many would consider disturbing; while equally showing her sister's discomfort with nature, its creatures and her unease with the disturbing.

In my estimation, the dialogue and the simple staging are the most successful aspect of this work. Creating the dialogue was challenging: natural-sounding speech in an antiquated form of English, where the structure of the phrases and words can seem awkward for a contemporary reader, actor and audience; and integrating naturally into the dialogue what is in large part quotation, in an effort to address the biographical responsibility of this work in some way.

Whatever the limitations or failings of integrating the multimedia aspects are, however, they do not negate the challenges associated with dramatizing such difficult scenes by live performance. However, it would certainly be interesting to attempt these scenes with professional actors on stage—or at least some scenes. Perhaps some of the more brutal scenes should be left to the realm of film, serving, at the same time, to keep a connection with modernity. The film clips also enable an experiencing of the wild nature of the moorlands and the threats they pose as a character unto itself. This is particularly evident in the film clip where a driving rainstorm heralds Heathcliff's arrival and wrath, and where into the rainstorm Heathcliff returns to quell his violence. The wild, threatening, unyielding nature of the moorlands as can only be depicted with complete realism by modern film serves well to mirror the character of Heathcliff himself.

Ultimately, however, does *Wuthering Heights* = Emily Brontë? This may be answered best by the words penned by Emily herself, the words of *Wuthering Heights*' narrator, Nellie Dean, and the words that end my play: "you'll judge as well as I can, all these things; at least you'll think you will, and that's the same."

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