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Language Ecologies: Ethics, Community, and Digital Affect

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THE GLOBAL LINGUASPHERE IS IN A STATE OF ECOLOGICAL AND HUMANITARIAN CRISIS. IN A POWERFUL MEDITATION IN *PMLA*, SIMON Gikandi notes that the loss of any language (and of a culture sustained by it) is worthy of mourning and that language death around the globe is a matter of urgent collective concern. Relating great emotion when the "UNESCO *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* confronted me with the bleak reality of language endangerment measured in maps, graphs, and data sets," he ponders the ethical and political stakes of widespread language loss (9). He ends by quoting (and translating) a poem by the anthropologist Miguel León-Portilla "captur[ing] what happens when a language dies" (13), and he builds to a stark closing dictum: "Letting a language die is an injustice, a denial of will to those who speak it" (14). In this forceful essay, metaphorical discourse of language death gives way to a poignant elegy that registers a strong affective and political investment in the sustainment of languages.

A language can and should be mourned upon its loss. An elegiac response to a changing global linguistic ecology not only informs political action in the present but also helps us relate to languages as living beings, each language exhibiting an inexpressible and irrecoverable vitality or life force. This essay considers how we respond to ecolinguistic catastrophe across contemporary digital communities. I examine how discourses of linguistic vitality inform collective online endeavors adjacent to the academy. The first section considers global language preservation efforts, including the National Geographic Society's Enduring Voices Project; the second turns to nonprofessional conlang (constructed language) communities through the emergent Old English (i.e., Anglo-Saxon) version of *Wikipedia*; and the third considers how online crowdsourcing and digital publishing platforms have shaped the publication of Paul Kingsnorth's postapocalyptic historical novel *The Wake* (2014). Although each of these topics can be analyzed in a conventional academic disciplinary framework—linguistic anthropology, amateur historical linguistics,

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and media studies, for instance—I consider how each deftly moves outside institutional structures of the academy. Through three case studies, this essay demonstrates how digital communities offer venues for theorizing language vitality and for mobilizing an affective response to an ecological crisis.

Vanishing Languages

Perhaps the most vivid, most politically urgent mode of thinking about the linguasphere is found in contemporary discourses about global language preservation—efforts by linguists and anthropologists to document, record, and sustain indigenous languages around the world. This mode of thinking uses a species metaphor to explain the linguistic ecology of the planet. K. David Harrison, a self-proclaimed "linguist, author and activist" ("K. David Harrison"), has written academic and general audience books addressing the global linguistic crisis and has popularized the species metaphor to make a public case for preserving languages. In *The Last Speakers*, he compares vulnerable indigenous languages to endangered species to stress the urgency of language preservation efforts. A chart entitled "Species Endangerment Rates Compared to Language Endangerment Rates" and a series of bar graphs show that languages are dying much more quickly than species: fish 5%, plants 8%, birds 11%, mammals 18%, languages 40+% (244). Harrison uses the ecological metaphor to offer conceptual scaffolding for his analysis: "Languages, although not precisely analogous to species, also have an ecology. 'Ecology' derives from the Greek *oikos*, meaning 'home,' and [indicates] the total environment . . . an organism faces in its struggle for survival." Languages "have a home and habitat" that can be threatened, and preservation efforts "must look at the entire habitat" (89). Languages compete for survival, and global languages such as English are invasive, threatening vulnerable languages.[1]

In online linguistic databases, digital interfaces explicitly mobilize the alarmist metaphor of species extinction to effect social change. The *Disappearing Languages* Web site maintained by the National Geographic Society (promoting the society's Enduring Voices Project and listing Harrison as a linguistic consultant) presents global hotspots to indicate the areas in the world that have the highest number of threatened languages (http://www.nationalgeographic.com/mission/enduringvoices/about-the-project.html). The same conceit informs the *Endangered Languages* Web site launched and developed by Google and now overseen by the First Peoples' Cultural Council and the Institute for Language and Technology at Eastern Michigan University (http://www.endangeredlanguages.com). This site allows a user to click on color-coded dots representing the location and risk level of any endangered language and provides links to further information about the language (and at times illustrative media). Languages are designated as "at risk" (green), "endangered" (orange), or "severely endangered" (red), depending on the number and age of surviving speakers; clicking on a dot reveals information about the factors affecting the language's vitality and chance of survival.

Accessing data through a bar graph or interactive map can be informative, but its affective power is limited. A "Vanishing Languages" article published in the July 2012 issue of *National Geographic* transports the conceptual logic of the hotspots map into the more intimate medium of portraiture (Rymer). Lynn Johnson, the photographer, takes on the task of translating lived, dynamic human language into images for mass consumption and edification, and these images, captioned, offer evocative scenes (http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2012/07/vanishing-languages/johnson-photography). In one portrait, a Chemehuevi speaker (in Arizona) embraces the species analogy, likening the loss of his tongue to a bird losing its feathers;

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in another, a Wintu speaker (in Montana) notes the intricate relation between language and native land (invoking the "heart" of the mountain); in one caption, the Tuvan language (in Russia) is shown to encode unique cultural practices and modes of thinking about the world. These nomadic people think of the past as ahead and the future as behind, and their throat singing and vowel harmony evoke rhythms of galloping horses. The force of these photographs is like that of other photograph galleries in the pages (or Web sites) of *National Geographic*. Just as colorful and vibrant sea creatures make an implicit call for us to preserve our oceanic environments, an engaging visual pageant of exotic linguistic life-forms makes us feel that our linguasphere should be preserved.

Turning curiosity and interest into action is the next step in such digital interfaces. The *Endangered Languages* Web site, for instance, offers the public ways to participate in the project. Even before the visitor clicks on the map to activate it, text on the home page says that "our resources include information on anthropology, sociology, education, cognitive science, environmental science, public policy" and that "users and researchers alike" are invited to upload to the site directly "papers, presentations, links, recordings" to communicate "resources or samples of endangered language." The project has its own blog and *Facebook* page. This digital interface is the first step toward collective custodianship of the linguasphere.

Englisc Wikipædia

The political and social urgency in my next case study might not seem immediately apparent, but the viability of this linguistic project, like that of online language preservation efforts, draws on collective knowledge and a careful manipulation of emotions: an ongoing effort to create a *Wikipedia* page entirely in Old English (Anglo-Saxon). The *Englisc Wikipædia* project, even if it is a leisure activity for enthusiasts, scholars, and students, continues to grow (https://ang.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hēafodtramet). The effort builds from vocabulary found in historical Anglo-Saxon texts, and *Conlang Wikia* notes that it takes creative work to generate neologisms for things or concepts that did not exist in Anglo-Saxon England. Sometimes new coinages are derived from cognate Germanic languages or crafted through kennings, which are compound words ("Englisc"). The repurposed *Wikipedia* logo on the *Englisc Wikipædia* page exemplifies this process of recombination: archaic letters are incorporated (the vowel *æ* or "ash," *þ* or "wynn," equivalent to the Roman letter *w*), and "Wikipedia: The Free Online Encyclopedia" is now rendered as "Þikipædia: Sēo Frēo Þisdōmbōc" (literally, "The Free Wisdom Book"; see fig. 1).

This project has some intriguing political implications. The use of the word *Englisc* for what we now call Anglo-Saxon or Old English creates its own radical reorientation of time and space, because the language that we now call English becomes rechristened "Nīwenglisce sprǣc" ("new English language"). The adjective *new* anticipates, from the vantage



FIG. 1
The adapted *Wikipedia* logo as it appears on the *Englisc Wikipædia* home page.

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point of medieval Anglo-Saxons, the migration of the English language from the British Isles to the New World and beyond. The repurposed *Wikipedia* logo is not without postcolonial implications. The spherical logo features letter shapes drawn from various languages fitting together to form an incomplete puzzle-piece globe. Astrid Ensslin observes that *Wikipedia* aspires to a polyglot global reach, but the logo remains Eurocentric in its presentation of scripts, and the logo unwittingly perpetuates power structures that privilege an Anglo-American digital sphere (81–82, 87).

Most of the articles in *Englisc Wikipædia* are stumps, no more than suggestions of the structure that this resource will someday form. The brief entry for "Ænglisce sprǽc" (literally, "English language" but referring to Old English) is only three short sentences with a table indicating where Old English falls in relation to other Germanic languages. A message at the bottom of this entry calls attention to its brevity, calling it a "stycce" ("piece or fragment"), a word cognate with the Anglo-Saxon *stocce* ("tree stump"). The tree metaphor suggests that *Wikipedia*'s articles are built out and linked to one another through a taxonomic scheme, specific articles branching off from more general ones, and the image of a tree offers a foundational structure not only for linguistic data presentation but also for information architecture.

Centuries before Franco Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees* created a bridge between large-scale data crunching and abstract models of literary history, trees were employed as a metaphor for the graphic display of knowledge—or, to put this idea in more contemporary parlance, they were an early form of networked data visualization. In two lavishly illustrated books for general audiences, Manuel Lima notes that tree models provided early conceptual paradigms for organizing knowledge and that Ramon Llull, a medieval scholastic, marked a major shift in using the tree metaphor to present informational schemata (*Book of Trees* 36–37 and *Visual Complexity* 31–32). According to Mary Franklin-Brown, Llull's arboreal experiments informed the conceptual structures of medieval compendia of knowledge (comprehensive works we might later call encyclopedic) as well as their digital counterparts, such as *Wikipedia* (129–81).

The invocation of the stump at the end of a brief entry is standard practice for anglophone Wikipedians, but in this broader linguistic and cultural context the stump invites deeper questions. How well does an arboreal metaphor convey the life of languages in the past or the present? The entry indicates that Englisc is a dead language, having no more living speakers; but Englisc now has a life online: "Hēo is gāstlēas sprǽc, and hēo ne hæfþ nān folc tōdæg, ac hēo is gesprecen on þisse Wikipǽdie" ("It is a dead language, and it does not have a people [i.e., a speaking community] today, but it is spoken on this Wikipedia"). The word for *dead* is the poetic "gāstlēas" (literally "soulless," but the sense is "nonliving"), the implication being that those who speak (or write or type) the language are people ("folc") who give it life. The discourse of the stump or tree is a call for further human custodianship, which will foster the language's growth and healthy expansion. Just as the species metaphor exploits nonhuman animal life to encourage people to become mindful custodians of a shifting linguistic ecology, the arboreal metaphor, implicit yet pervasive, invites Wikipedians to keep an undead tongue alive.

A Shadow Tongue

My third case study explores how ecological crisis and language preservation inform a bold work of literary fiction and its online reading community. Kingsnorth's *The Wake* was a project entirely supported by the crowdsourced funding platform and publisher Unbound. The site generated great en-

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thusiasm, and the book, which first appeared as an e-book as well as a hardcover, was later released in the United States. It won the Gordon Burn Prize and Bookseller Book of the Year Award for 2014 and was long-listed for the year's Man Booker Prize. It has garnered extensive coverage in mainstream media and the academic blogosphere.[2]

In the online trailer promoting *The Wake*, Kingsnorth voices a snippet aloud referring to the Norman Conquest as "probably the most traumatic event in English history" (Unbound). This interview with the author has a distinctly cinematic sensibility: presented in a panoramic letterbox format against a green backdrop of watery fens, it is interspliced with close-up shots of moss-covered trees, antlers in dark woods, mossy trunks, dark watery surfaces, and hovering insects. Passages from the book read aloud by the author are accompanied by atmospheric sound effects such as weapons clanging.

In the novel, set in the Lincolnshire fens before just before and after the Norman Conquest, an ecological crisis is rendered political and a political crisis ecological. Narrated in the first person by the free landowner Buccmaster of Holland (a shire in Lincolnshire), the story relates the transformation of the local environment with the coming of the Normans. The "frenc" (as the grumpy and often vulgar Buccmaster calls them throughout) subject him to many hardships, destroy the land he inhabits and loves, and radically alter England's landscape by building castles (creating hills and forcing the English to put towers on them). The narrator laments the loss of the old gods ("eald gods") of the land and fens in the face of a culture increasingly oriented toward Christianity; he refers to "the crist" throughout as an alien influence, "this ingenga [incomer, invader] god from ofer the sea" or the "ingenga god from a land where there is no treows [trees]" (23, 249).[3]

The media buzz surrounding this book shows fascination with the work's atmospheric style and language. In both the mainstream media and the academic-semiacademic blogosphere, the focus is on Kingsnorth's crafted rendition of Old English. Kingsnorth notes the pains he took to rely whenever possible on words of Anglo-Saxon origin, but he did not hope to achieve a historically accurate reconstruction to enable fictive world making. In his author's note, he remarks that the work's "shadow tongue" is "a pseudo-language intended to convey the feeling of the old language" by combining features of Anglo-Saxon with present-day English (353).[4] From the perspective of historical linguistics, this book takes much poetic license: the Old English grammar is radically simplified, and its vocabulary is significantly reduced. Kingsnorth does not avail himself of a plethora of poetic synonyms, nor does he use creative kennings. The spelling is consistent, but its overarching principles are erratic: at times words resemble modern English for the purpose of legibility (354–55). Some French words even sneak in (most strikingly the abstraction "beuty" [240]), and Buccmaster—the author admits—is not even an Anglo-Saxon name (358). These linguistic efforts create a "ghost image of the speech patterns of a long-dead land: a place at once alien and familiar" (356).

In crafting a "shadow tongue" or pseudo-language, Kingsnorth—to put things slightly differently—conjures a language that is both dead and alive, an alien tongue flickering into legibility and then vanishing in unexpected ways. In one chapter, Buccmaster recounts his memories of floating on a boat on the fens with his grandfather at Ely, a watery landscape that is now lost but preserved in the name of the town and in local lore. Eels swimming in summer breeding time almost transform the dark water into land: "there was so many aels [eels] in the fenn" and "writhan it was with aels long and blaec sum times thu colde almost walc on them across the water so many" (33). Another time on the fens, the narrator looks "into the deorc water" and

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discerns "naht [nothing] but the blaec and the ael" (51). In these moments, the ecological setting resonates with the novel's language: the reader encounters a "shadow tongue" that is, and is not, what it appears to be.

The grandfather implicates *englisc* itself as an "ingenga" (incomer or invader), a foreign tongue, coming from beyond the sea:

> anglisc folc cum here across the sea many years ago. wilde was this land wilde with ingengas with wealsc folc [pre-Germanic inhabitants of England] and aelfs and the wulf. cum we did in our scips [ships] our great carfan scips . . . and we macd good this land what had been weac [weak] and uncept and was thus ours by right. (34–35)

While the book conveniently inhabits a time before England's implication in colonialist expansion and later imperialism, it does at least acknowledge in moments such as these that even the "anglisc folc" who hold such an intense connection to land and tongue are ultimately "ingengas" themselves: new arrivals who have displaced others in the process.

In a later scene on the fens, trees prompt the narrator to contemplate a shifting ecology and the agency of language. "Under the water and not so deop," he sees "the stocc of a great blaec treow torn to its root lic a tooth in the mouth of an eald wif" (51). This large uprooted tree trunk evokes the remnants of an ancient site now known as Seahenge, which was discovered in the fens of East Anglia and whose excavation and removal was contested by neopagan communities (see Pryor). Another passage meditates on the renaming of trees as an act of forced transformation. Placing his "hand on [the] great stocc" of a tree, the narrator wonders if "the ingengas will haf another name for this treow"—and if the "frenc cums and tacs this land" and gives the tree "sum frenc name they will not be the same treows no mor" (124). Throughout *The Wake*, Kingsnorth's representations of vanishing ecologies (transformed eel-filled marshes, uprooted trees, displaced earth to form mottes and castles, and renamed landscapes) do not convert the natural environment into metaphors for political change. Rather, the novel suggests that a mindful contemplation of the historical and cultural consequences of ecological change can be related—and theorized—only through a vanished tongue.[5]

Given the genesis of *The Wake* as a born-digital initiative (a project collectively funded and published online through a digital platform), it is fitting that this intricate literary crafting of a vanished or shadow "anglisc" tongue is quickly assuming a second life in the digital realm. One reviewer, David (Northampton, UK), gives the book one star, mocking the pretentions of Kingsnorth's language: "i thinc this is a lode of creapp! haven't got past page 10." A quite positive review (four stars) by Elizabeth (Auckland, New Zealand) is written in modern English but ends with her opinion of the narrator using "anglisc": "Buccmaster was a fuccan esol." Philip Tearney (London, UK) offers a middling review (three stars) in a version of Kingsnorth's own "shadow tongue":

> A tale of esols, preosts, eald gods and blud. I cnawan that the boc makes me blithe and in parts soars like a hafoc [hawk] in the heofans and has deorc places too but sum times the socman [free tenant farmer] made this gebur [landless peasant farmer] want to feoght him as he is stubburn like swine or esol and he repetes hyself micel.

Readers, whether in praise or derision, creatively repurpose Kingsnorth's ecological metaphors of *scit* ("shit," "lode of creapp"), animals ("esol," "hafoc"), and environmental space ("deorc places"). Like the *Englisc* Wikipedians, the *Goodreads* reviewers of *The Wake* engage in a perpetual process of reanimating a vanished tongue—or the illusion of it.

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Critical Theory and Digital Affect

Biometaphors of the vitality of language infuse digital spaces: nonhuman animal species (language preservation efforts), tree metaphors and arboreal life (*Englisc Wikipǣdia*), and nonhuman environmental forces (the reader community of Kingsnorth's *The Wake*). In her wide-ranging study *Animacies*, Mel Y. Chen, a cognitive linguist and queer theorist, offers reflections on a feral approach to thinking across the perceived boundaries of academic disciplines: "Thinking and moving ferally constitutes a risk, both to the borders of disciplinarity and to the author who is metonymically feralized with the text" (18). Insofar as digital endeavors cross the borders of academic disciplines, this essay's discussion of language and affect runs a bit feral, unwilling to be fully domesticated. In an evocative rethinking of philological paradigms, Karla Mallette offers the medieval notion of the spiritus of language to evade long-standing discourses about a mother tongue. Instead of asserting an affective bond between a native tongue and native land, she suggests a new orientation toward a "mistress tongue" (I even might rephrase this as a "lover tongue"): "Language is not a living being; nevertheless, it may possess a conative force," and "[w]e love the language not as mother tongue but as mistress tongue: the language we covet and desire but never fully possess" (422, 423).

Online communities, whether they are conceived in the framework of environmental humanities or digital humanities or some combination of the two, have much to contribute to sustaining the global linguasphere, both embodied and virtual. The proliferation and dispersal of vulnerable mother tongues, vanishing or vanished languages, shadow tongues, and emergent conlangs can inform crowdsourced endeavors, such as amateur knowledge building or pseudo-historical literary creation, that are adjacent but do not belong to traditional, discipline-defined modes of academic scholarship. Digital interfaces and online communities reveal how public modes of linguistic ecology provoke disorienting configurations of theory, ethics, and affect.

Notes

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1. For nuanced criticism of the limitations of the species metaphor in ecological sustainability discourses, see DeLoughrey et al. 11; Fill and Penz 2.

2. As of 5 October 2015, reviews have appeared in the *Guardian*, *NPR Books*, *Slate*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. For academic perspectives on the book, see Wood; Tisdall.

3. Brackets in my quotations from the book are glosses for the purpose of clarity.

4. The term "shadow tongue" reminds me of discussions of "modern Old English" as "shadow poetry" in Jones (238, 233).

5. For more on Kingsnorth's environmental activism and involvement in the Dark Mountain Project, see Smith; Kingsnorth and Hines.

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