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BRUCE PASCOE REWRITES HISTORY

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"We didn't fight for land. Our Lore was so strong and logical that we knew that our responsibility was to look after the land and I think it's

work after the rain, and I think it's just genius of the Old People to do that."

CONVERSATIONS 28 FEBRUARY 2019

Bruce Pascoe rewrites history

Interview by Lydia Fairhall

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Bruce Pascoe Yuin Land Writer and Farmer TO Scarcity Doesn't want to be a farmer

Lydia Fairhall on

Bruce Pascoe...

This story originally ran in issue #58 of Dumbo Feather

Yarning with Bruce (Yuin/Bunurong)

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experience that transcends the parameters of everyday conversation. On face

value, it's hard to grasp that the radical and defying

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concepts Bruce has spent

his life writing about

researching and

practicing come from

a calm and unassuming

exterior—he is measured,

steady and mild. His

higher purpose and

work is anything but.

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Brené Brown is a grounded researcher

LYDIA FAIRHALL: So just so you know Bruce, my

DISCUSSED IN THIS STORY

background, my agriculture farming
homeland is a little place
called Karuah ju indigenous Australia
Sydney. So we're Worimi
Gamipingal mob indigenous rights

BRUCE PASCOE: C... , -----
 regenerative farming

**And have lived off country
 for the last three
 generations. So my great
 grandmother married an
 Indian fella and they ended
 up working the railway
 lines. Living in tents,
 moving up and down that
 east coast. A lot of the
 usual story. The
 displacement,
 disconnection. All of those
 things. But I'm very
 grateful to my mum and
 my uncle in particular for
 bringing us home.**

I'm in the same position. A
 few people in the family gave
 me the support and
 information when others in
 the family weren't so

forthcoming.

It's tough isn't it? But I think it's always good to connect with where you're from, who your people are. 'Cause you're Bunurong and Yuin. Is that right?

Yeah. I was born on Bunurong country. Lived on Yuin land. But we've also got that Tasmanian connection, also a South Australian connection as well. You start following the family line and it spreads out around you.

[Laughs]. And once you turn that light on it never goes off, does it?

No, no. You can't go anywhere. Because everyone knows you some way or another.

Yep. Well Bruce, I've been reading some of the interviews that you've done in the past, and lots

**of your writing. And you
talk about Acknowledging
Country as being good for
your health. So even
though we're on the phone,
maybe we start our yarn
today by each
Acknowledging the
Country that we're on.**

Yeah. Well I'm on the very southern end of Yuin land. I'm looking, as we talk, down over the Wallagaraugh River. This river reaches right into New South Wales. It links up with other rivers that reach right up to the foot of Kosciuszko and they're really important spiritual sites for our people. But also incredibly beautiful. There's just water all around me. Even though we're not on the sea, this is salt water here and it just snakes all round, all over you, over the land here. It's real Rainbow Serpent country.

So is that saltwater river country?

Yeah. The sea's not very far away. But the river winds its way slowly down to the sea.

Wow. Well my mob is from the mouth of the river. So saltwater river country.

What river is that?

Karuah. So Port Stephens.

Oh gee. You are on a lot of water there.

Yes! All dolphin dreaming. And we would go into the mountains for winter 'cause there's a bit more food and stuff during the colder weather. But these massive, massive sand dunes were the sites for all of our ceremony and business. Right now I am on Wurundjeri country here on the Kulin Nations. And I feel very blessed to

live here. And I always think in Melbourne what it must be like being a Traditional Owner of such a big city! And we look around and see all of these houses and cars and skyscrapers, but this is still somebody's homeland.

Yeah, well like I said I was born on Bunurong country. Most of my family was too. But it was more or less an accident because our people came from other places. That corridor of land that goes from Wilson's Promontory right around Port Phillip Bay and Western Port Bay down to Werribee River is all Bunurong land. I don't think people really acknowledge that as much as they should because that corridor was really so important spiritually and economically. And Bunurong and Wurundjeri ought to get along really well because

they were always cousins. You know, all Kulin people are cousins. One of the things I find really difficult in Aboriginal life is how easily we get to argue with each other. And it's not the way it used to be. Native title is the most insidious thing. If you wanted to design a thing to disrupt community you couldn't design it better than native title. We ought to take control of that. Our people ought to take control and just say, "No, we're not going to do it like this. We are not going to have sister fight sister and brother fight brother." 'Cause that's what's happening now. Because it's such a small pool of money, it can't be divided satisfactorily. And we just have to start designing our own system. A system that the Old People would be proud of, not ashamed of.

I'm a songwriter and I've

**just finished recording
some stuff for a new
album. And one of the
songs on there is called,
“The Smaller the Feed, the
Bigger the Shitfight.”**

Yeah. That’s exactly right.

**[Laughs]. And this is one of
the ultimate tactics, right?
To divide people. And
we’re buying into it and it’s
devastating because
ultimately, like you said,
there’s not enough
resources to go around.**

And that’s the way they get
the best result—to make sure
there aren’t enough
resources so that we will then
tear each other apart.

**And this is not the way of
our Old People. These are
the things that keep me up
at night the most. How do
we acknowledge that
resistance is a part of a
daily life for us? But also**

**acknowledge that there is
a place and time to
connect back and move
beyond colonisation
towards consciousness.
And nurturing each other.
And nurturing is a form of
resistance in itself.**

Well you mentioned it before,
that you've got dolphin
dreaming at your base. And
the community that I belong
to, part of Yuin community,
we've been connecting up all
the old whale stories. Which
are also dolphin and shark
stories. That whole dreaming
is a dreaming of peace. And
the reason that we're doing it
is it's just naturally
interesting to know about
your culture obviously. But
also because it's a way of
bringing our people together
again. So we've put a lot of
work into the whale's story
and its cousins, the shark
and the dolphin and the
dugong. All of those beasts

are part of us. And when we start talking to people you can see how it binds us together. I was in South Australia just the other day and people were talking about whether the whale beached itself on the eastern side of the river. Well, they always do. It's part of their Lore. And once we started talking about that, you could see that any negotiation we had from then on would be by whale. That's the way we work. That's the way the Old People designed it so that we've always had more in common than not. When we fight, it's typically over some kind of Western system.

And those songlines are so important. We each hold a tiny piece of a bigger story. Without each other, there is no unity or community or connection. It's all very fragmented. And when you're dealing with 700

language groups, it gets tough when you try to do that within a Western context. But you're right. Going back to those old ways is the point of power.

That's the genius of the Old People. To work out a system which was so intrinsically fair and so caring of country that young people, with all the propensity young people have to disagree, accepted it as a logical and fair system

and readopted it, generation after generation. And to create something which was so intrinsically logical was a piece of genius. And I think it's an important thing for the world, not just for us. It's very important for us but it's important for the world. 'Cause look at how the world has allowed war to become seen as a natural part of the human condition. I don't think it is. I think our Old People proved that. And they should be respected for having done something that humans elsewhere couldn't do.

Absolutely. I'm very lucky to travel and spend a lot of time with First Nations people from all over the world. And there's this growing sense and momentum that the future

is First Nations. And I think the work that you've done with *Dark Emu* in particular, you set out to paint a radically different picture of what life was like before invasion. And I think it's very important to acknowledge that the absence of that knowledge in our history books is no accident.

Nah.

And I'm keen to talk to you about how you survive for over 80,000 years without a cultivated and complex local economy?

Yeah. And how do all of those language groups stay on their country? You know? Not taking advantage of drought in another area or some kind of weakness and invade other people's territory? It's because of the Lore. The Lore said you can't and our people

didn't. Obviously, because we're human we had bad hair days and bad temper days and we'd bitch and carry on. But we didn't fight for land. Our Lore was so strong and logical that we knew that our responsibility was to look after the land, and I think it's just genius of the Old People to do that.

And it's because we don't see the ownership of it. We only see the relationship between us and country.

That's a great way of putting it.

So how important do you think food security and Indigenous farming practices are to the broader social justice aspirations? Or even to reclaiming Lore?

Yeah look, there's a lot of very generous non-Aboriginal people who really

understand the issues and get involved, and there are a lot of people who don't care. The thing that's happening now with climate change, and we're going to a period of drier seasons, and the farmers are the ones who are very enthusiastic about *Dark Emu*. I thought they would be throwing tomatoes at me. I really did. But it's not like that. The farmers are desperate because their economy is being affected. They know that they have to grow crops that are going to survive this drying period. So they're very interested in the issues in *Dark Emu* as a result of that. And some of them would have come to that of their own accord through a natural affiliation. But others have come to it through an economic realisation. So what we're trying to do is say,

*“You can’t eat our food
if you can’t swallow
our history. We’re
going to help you out
now with this stuff, but
you have to
acknowledge us and
acknowledge the
land.”*

Really, what everybody who is on the land needs to do is treat the land like it is our mother and start growing perennial grasses like the Old People did. Because this continent can’t be ploughed. It doesn’t respond to ploughing. And it just makes you wonder that people could see how the country deteriorated with sheep and cattle on it and deteriorated after ploughing, and yet continued to do it. And yet when Europeans first arrived, the grass was higher

than the horse's saddle. That gradual reduction in fertility should have rung a few alarm bells. And instead of that we just poured superphosphate on. Which is actually a poison for the soil.

Yeah. And we've definitely seen the last 230 years have been such an intense period, to say the least, for our people. This period of history is so small in the grand scheme of things yet has been so detrimental to our ways of being and really disrupted our rights to food security and relationship to land and Lore. So how do we start to pick up the pieces and explore what a new Aboriginal economy might look like?

Well, on the farm here I'm growing the Old People's foods. And experimenting with others and trying to

encourage the local communities to do the same. I've been supplying seed now for six years for other people around the place. And non-Aboriginal people are going to grow these things. Some of the grasses are already growing on people's property. Once they realise that's what they've got, and that they can sell the seed, and that the government will pay them to keep those perennial plants in the ground because they sequester carbon, they'll be all over it like a rash. We can't stop them selling it because Monsanto exists so we'd just be wasting our time trying, I believe. I know I'm talking to people who know more about this than me and I'm willing to take advice. But it seems like we can't avoid that. What we can do is say, "Look, these are Aboriginal domesticates, our people put a lot of time into these so there is an

intellectual property involved. You're going to be involved because there's nothing we can do to stop you. But can you see a justification for making sure that our people are involved in this industry too?" And insisting, you know, the good-hearted people of Australia, insisting that Aboriginal people are part of the industry. What they don't have is land. So let's readdress that. Let's make sure that Aboriginal people are given access to land. And a lot of these grasses grow in marginal farmland.

These farms that are just going backwards, people are walking off them. The banks are reclaiming them and leaving them fallow. Get our people onto those lands. All sorts of land. Go at it, bust your guts Australia.

Make sure that Aboriginal people have got some land. It's so simple. And yet apparently so difficult to do for Australia. So if we can do that, get our young people on the land, get our young people growing the old ancient foods and raise their family on that, they'd never go on social welfare. Never even think about it. You know. They raise their family, send their kids to school on the back of those old domesticates. That's my

ambition for them. I really don't want to be a farmer again. But I have to. I'm looking for young Aboriginal people to work here. And I'm looking for government to give me a bloody hand. I've been working on this for six years. Everyone's so bloody enthusiastic about it because we're such wise and beautiful people.

[Laughs].

As you know. But no one coughs up a dollar. And when you try to do something, the bloody shire want to argue whether this is actual farming. "Oh, but that's Aboriginal foods. You're playing with your land. You're not farming it." So they want to rate me as if I'm a bloody hobby farmer or something. And that's the myopia of it. And also the racism. There's a level of racism involved. Sorry to

have to say it but there is.

And it's the systemic kind of racism that's the hardest thing to battle isn't it?

Yeah, they say, "Well this is the law." Yeah, but if the law is wrong, let's change the law.

I think even in a business context separate to agriculture. Well, not really separate but you know what I mean [laughs].

There is so much for non-Indigenous Australia to gain from our ways of doing business. So if you could erase all of the systemic racism and power-grabbing that you're facing, what's your highest aspiration or vision? How do you see a new Aboriginal economy and its relationship to the current ecological threat that we're facing at this particular point in time?

Well this is a bit of a dream.

Yeah.

A lot of the stuff I do is cold,
hard reality. But

*my dream is that
Aboriginal people
teach non-Aboriginal
people that you can't
divide the spirit and
the economy. Every
time you go to work
you're going to work
for the Lore. For the
Lore of the land. To
honour Mother Earth.*

And every time you do
something with the land it is
Mother Earth that you're
working with, not against. So

this is our Lore. I mean I'm talking about you and the Lore. But it's pretty universal to Australia. Every time you want some wood from a tree you have to ask the tree and ask yourself, "How much wood do I need? And how do I take that wood and make sure the tree lives?" You know, we did cut down trees. But there was a considered approach. And as soon as you start asking yourself, "How badly do I need this?" It makes you more conservative. That's why our economy needs to be a blend of economy and spirit. Now it might sound a bit twee for people but it's so bloody iron-clad philosophical rigour. Because what we've done is we've tried to destroy Australia with a purely economic approach. And now is the time to restore the fertility of Australia by thinking of the earth first and ourselves last. We're just

animals. We're no more important than anything else. And we have to encourage everybody to think like that because that's the way to save ourselves. I think a lot of non-Aboriginal Australians are actually hungry for this. They want to belong to the land. And this is a way that they can belong. You know, they'll never be Aboriginal but they'll be truly Australian.

It's funny 'cause I feel like I have this same conversation in First Nations communities, particularly in North America and New Zealand. But this way of being in the world that is so patriarchal and capitalistic is just not good for very many people.

No.

And it definitely feels like there is a movement

towards seeing money and growth in a different kind of way. Because we still have the right to pursue those things. We still have the right to want to be successful in a Western context and all of that business. But I think there is definitely a small but strong growing movement of people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, that are embracing our old ways and really trying to figure out what that means. When we talk about First Nations ways of business, what is that? And how do we apply it to different kinds of contexts?

I've been saying to people that capitalism is very new in the world. And this kind of built society, the style of it, is very new. And I've been using this example, that our people could build a wall that was four foot high, over a

metre high, for their houses.
And they could build a house
—we know this for a fact—
that could hold 55 people. So
if you can do that, you can
build a castle. But we didn't.
Because a castle is not to live
in. A castle is for the rich or
for the warrior. And we
weren't building so that we
could go to the war or so that
some people could be very,
very comfortable and others
in poverty. We had the ability
to build the castle and the
moat but we didn't.

We chose not to. The wisdom
of the elders chose not to.
And now the corollary of that
system of building castles
and moats and putting gold
on the roof and all that
rubbish is that we've got a
tennis player now with an
\$800,000 watch. This is
ridiculous. And if that's the
heart of your ambition, if
that's the heart of your
society's evaluation of a

person, then we've really lost the plot. And our Old People were so egalitarian and so careful of the earth. And so careless of rank. You know, Marcia Langton tells the yarn, and I don't think she was the first to tell it, but going into a community and looking around for the person that she should talk to. Asking this person and this person and that person. And eventually finding out that the person she needed to talk to was the old man sitting under the tree. And he looked no different from anyone else but he was the Lore holder. That's how we should be. I think that's the way to live. Now it's not going to happen quickly. But capitalism has to die or the world will die with it.

Well it has within it its own seed of destruction, doesn't it?

It's resource-based and it's running out of resources. And the first resource will be water. Perth is a city that doesn't have its own water anymore. It will collapse. It will be like Atlantis. It will disappear. Unless we get more frugal with water, start growing crops that don't need water, crops that want to grow here. That'll make a huge difference to this country but also to the world.

I think as Aboriginal people the daily battle is acknowledging and validating the struggles that a lot of our communities and our environments are going through. But doing so in a way that doesn't destruct you from the inside. And I'm guessing you're a person that has a lot of these hard conversations. How do you practise self-care and look after your

**family and nurture land
when you're also fighting a
big fight?**

Well I have to be very conscious of it and I'm super conscious of it this last few years because I'm rarely home. It's been very hard on my family; it's been incredibly hard on me. And my dogs.

Aww bless.

And my country. Because I'm supposed to be looking after this country. And I'm determined to be at home more but that means not responding to every request from an Aboriginal community. And I'm going to hate that. I've never knocked an Aboriginal community back before. I'm going to have to do it next year. And I'm going to hate it. I don't know that I can do it actually but I'll be trying because I

have to look after myself.
And not just me. I'm
responsible for part of this
country down here. I've got
Lore that I ought to be doing.
I have been doing it for years,
but I need to return to that
Lore and nurture country
and respect country so that it
will look after me. I need to
have the time in the day to go
swimming again. To get
myself in the salt water. To
spend hours on a river. That's
what I'm determined to do
next year. And that is what
has kept me alive even
though I've been having
these arguments with
Australia for 50 years. People
think that with *Dark Emu* I'm
an overnight success. They
haven't looked at what I've
been doing since I was 20
years old. And I've been
working slowly at that, and
I've always had other jobs so I
could support my family. But
this is a long-term job. I
remember when John

Howard was Prime Minister
how hurtful it was, and how
hurtful it is to walk into a
meeting with non-Aboriginal
people and be sneered at.
And I'm not a fighter. I don't
see anything to be gained by
fighting people. It's just so
destructive. And our people,
when they respond like that,
only cause themselves more
trouble and more wounds.
And in my darkest hours the
thing I've done is gone
straight back onto country.
And usually lay down on the
earth and just slept there and
let the earth restore me. I can
feel it through my bones. I
get up out of that and walk
home and usually I see
something miraculous, in
nature. Because I've been
quiet, all the animals come
around and I wake up and sit
up and there is a bird staring
at me that I've never seen
before. Or a mob of
kangaroos come within 20
metres. Mother Earth will

provide something which will say to me, “It’s okay, old boy. Everything’s okay. We’re here. You’re here. So forget your troubles.” And I’m so grateful. She’s a good mother.

It’s a beautiful thing. To be always able to come back to that and fill your cup. And one of the biggest obligations that we have in the new economy and in new kinds of agriculture and connection to country and Lore is to not just work with the land but to heal our relationships with each other. Because so long as our relationships with each other are toxic, so is the earth.

Yeah. It’s so true. We were talking this morning about healing. We were just saying that we can do that physical thing of the healing hole, with the heat and the herbs and the stones and things

like that. And it does have an apt physical impact. But it also requires that the ceremony goes with it. It's not just about fixing arthritis or whatever. It's about the spirit being healed as well. So it has to be done on country. And all of these spirits have to be acknowledged. That's the most profound thing. And I'm sure the thing that has the most effect is that you're going back into yourself and you're acknowledging the spirits of the land. I think everybody needs to do that.

It's not like taking a tablet and depending on the tablet to do its job. You're depending on your interaction with the spirit of the country to work on your behalf. I've seen people recover simply by re-establishing that connection with country.

I was reading the other day, and I think this might have been a statistic from the States, that children spend less time outdoors than the average prisoner.

What a terrible thing.

And how can we think about wellness when that is the norm? It's extraordinary. And being on country for us is a huge

part of that. We get so caught up in the work. But actually the work is on the inner world as well.

Yeah. People think I'm crazy living six hours from Melbourne and eight from Sydney. And I do complain about the length of time it takes me to get to any meeting. So I really shouldn't complain at all because I've made that decision for a good reason. I shouldn't whinge about it.

[Laughs]. I just wanted to ask one more thing. Going back to six years ago when you started to plant on your land, if you were giving anybody advice on how to start that process, what would it be?

It felt to me like when I learned language. Now I'm not a fluent speaker by any means. But when I learned

language I went straight back onto country, and this is why I wanted to learn it. I wanted to talk to the animals. Now, you know, people are going to think you're crazy doing that. But I'm surrounded by animals. I wanted to know their real name. I wanted to interact with them in a culturally appropriate way. Because they're my cousins and I need to know who they are and who I am in relation to them. So that's the way I learned language. And it's exactly the same with your interaction with the earth. As soon as I started handling these old seeds with the old spirit within them, it made a big impact on me. You know, I felt differently about the earth. I wasn't planting tomatoes and carrots, although I do. Plant tomatoes anyway. I don't need to plant carrots 'cause I've got murnong, and they're superior to carrots. But as

soon as I'm feeling with the spirit of these plants, it made all the difference to me in relation to why I was growing stuff, how I treated the land, what I thought of as a weed and what I didn't, all of those things. And you know these plants are Lore. Like the Darug people from Sydney, out the back of Sydney, their language name, Darug, actually means "yam." So that's how important it was to the people. That they call themselves after a vegetable.

This article is part of our healing the land campaign at Dumbo Feather. For more stories, inspiration and ideas, purchase Issue 58—"Healing the Land" or subscribe.

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