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Desert Dictionary

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Desert Dictionary: in search of a new vocabulary

Bhavisha Panchia

The desert conjures many imaginings for me. I think of Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), Gustave Flaubert's *Desert and the Dancing Girls* (1935), the Trans-Saharan gold-salt trade route across the Saharan desert, and what I had imagined was the harsh landscape of parts of the Karoo in J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983). These four references alone offer varied conceptualisations and accounts of land at the mercy of climate (change), natural elements, and the consequences of industrialised humanity.

The desert is often perceived as not the most welcoming, inviting, or hospitable environment: its hot, dry, thorny, and “woes”.¹ It is a site of geographical extremity, or in the words of Elizabeth Povinelli, “The desert is the figure that stands in for all things denuded of life”.² Despite this harshness, many have been seduced by the desert: Flaubert is one example. Another is Delia Derbyshire, whose ‘Blue Veils and Golden Sands’ (1968) created for *The World About Us*³, evoked the Tuareg people making their way across the Sahara Desert. The composer and musician used electronic oscillators, her voice, and a green BBC lampshade to generate sounds that evoked the migratory movements of the Tuareg people. These brief examples demonstrate how the desert has been a site of reality and fantasy within a global imaginary, whose visual, sonic, and literary depictions have been largely grounded in Orientalist tunings. The desert deters and the desert beckons.

As an artist, electronic musician and composer Boris Baltschun works in a variety of media and strategies, mapping sonic and visual spaces where voice and language, instruments and

objects, situations and histories overlap, cross-pollinate, and collide. The conceptual and formal underpinnings of his individual and collaborative work are guided by observing processes and things – demonstrated in this multi-form project. *Desert Dictionary* evokes various conceptions of the desert through four distinct artistic forms: a solar-powered book edition, a sound installation, or to use the artist's words, a ‘situation’ in the Karoo (also powered by the sun), a radio play, and a vinyl record album. Each iteration is attuned to its respective form and context in which it is situated or circulates.

The sun is a protagonist in this project, a necessary collaborator that activates the playback of recordings. The harnessing of solar energy is a way to harness the voices and perspectives of people Baltschun met and engaged with during his travel to South Africa from 2020 to 2021 – in a series of encounters, conversations, and exchanges in Johannesburg, Kimberley, Bloemfontein, Richmond, Cape Town, Grassy Park, and Krugersdorp. Each contributor to the dictionary was tasked with the same question: *which word would you suggest for a desert dictionary, and how does the chosen word connect to the desert?*

Their responses were recorded and edited into vocalised dictionary entries; each word and accompanying story, anecdote, or memory is used as a narrative device for naming and creating meaning. In formats such as the radio play and record album, he sutures together synthesised sounds and vocal testaments in a way that allows listeners to be more cognisant of their listening habits and modes. His rendering of an artificial

soundscape concerning the selections of words furthermore speaks to the insufficiency of words and language to encapsulate the desert as a physical environment (alienating and desired) and as a metaphor. It is this schism or gap that Baltschun attunes our listening to.

Baltschun treats the desert as a speculative topology; it is a place of thought and imaginative constructions. He looks to the potential of words and subjective experiences to expand on their understanding and conceptualisation through different vantage points. As the dictionary's lexicographer (a compiler of dictionaries), he probes the nature of words and their meaning through a process of exchange. An observer and listener, he adjusted his attention to people's stories, probing into the histories and experiences entrenched in the conflicting processes of colonial modernity and democracy in South Africa, including the resonances and repercussions of land appropriation. *Desert Dictionary* takes a seemingly counter-intuitive approach to the 'dictionary definition' which perfunctorily describes the desert as a wasteland– waste–wilderness wilds–dust bowl–barren land. Conventionally, dictionaries make verdicts about language and meaning. They list words in alphabetical order to give meaning and information such as etymology, pronunciations, and variant spellings. We consult a dictionary when we have a moment of linguistic indecision or uncertainty, or are simply curious about a word, its use, or history. The dictionary is also a familiar, unremarkable book – a household item ubiquitous around the world, it is authoritative, objective, and anchors language. These are books presumably of fact, not fiction. Yet, this seemingly

impassive, neutral repository of information and data is partial, an outcome of a series of selections that are subjective and biased.

Desert Dictionary instead searches for a vocabulary through which we can contemplate the meaning and impact of the relationship to land, history, and subjectivity through people's experiences. In short, Baltschun discloses other channels of knowledge – through the voicing and articulation of the desert as a rhetorical device for self-reflection. *Desert Dictionary* is a carrier, an archive of several generations of southern Africans whose lived experiences reflect the material, spiritual, ecological, and economic condition of a place. The desert here is expressed as an accumulation of experiences, mediated through memory, recollection, and imagination.

The act of making *Desert Dictionary* with others opens up the possibility for a new vocabulary for other definitions from varying perspectives and positionalities. Each contribution holds information and data through voice: we hear their tone, pitch, rhythm, and language. These vocal articulations resonate with oral traditions prevalent on the continent, which afford other perceptive registers for communicating knowledge. These vocalised entries are distinctive from the written word, which has assumed epistemological authority over spoken forms. Saliently, formative modes of listening are demonstrated through oral traditions, meaning that listening is a participatory act, just as much as the telling of the story is.

A situation for a listener, a speaker, and a semi-desert

Baltschun brings these three protagonists into relation: the listener, the (loud) speaker, and the desert are actors of this situation, each relying on the other for activation. Time, though not explicitly stated, is another necessary actor for the unfolding of Baltschun's intervention onto the land, with or without the presence of a listener. Nestled in the middle of a privately owned farm, Baltschun's 'situation' is site-specific, located just outside the small 'Booktown' of Richmond⁴ in the Great Karoo. This is where he spent time working on the project with the support of Modern Art Projects South Africa (MAPSA). The geographic location and characteristics of the Karoo are worth mentioning here: it is an arid to semi-arid geographic region of the Eastern Cape, Western Cape, and Northern Cape provinces of South Africa. Its vegetation consists of over 9000 species of succulents and wildlife, despite the area being devoid of surface water. The sounds of the Karoo are minimal, sounded by the wind, dassies, insects, and the occasional crunch of dry, brittle grass underfoot.

A loudspeaker protrudes from this field of short grass and thorny shrubs, surrounded by low-lying hills. It is powered using solar energy to play Baltschun's recordings of the participants' responses. The voice of each of the twenty-nine contributors bears a unique accent, position, and subjective imprint on the surrounding landscape. Each utterance offers a personal reflection, anecdote, memory, or experience. These are individual responses that form a collective sense

of what it means to be located in the psycho-geography of a place. Idiosyncratic in tone, these short narratives and stories reveal and expose the many manifestations that the desert can take. We hear the lightness and weight of personal experiences echoed outwards onto the land; some perspectives reveal the harshness of the land they have to contend with daily (Mongezi Ncombo; Eldi van Loggerenberg), yet for others the desert is a metaphorical site or rhetorical device with which to think (Tubatsi Mpho Moloj; Gerhard Marx; Lindiwe Matshikiza; Maja Marx). Particular words worth mentioning here include 'echo', which Matshikiza describes as a box wherein ideas, words, and feelings bounce back off of invisible walls; and 'to desert', which references separation and exile – to desert one's place of home.

The chosen location for the installation-as-situation can only be accessed by visitors temporarily with permission from the owner of the farm. It is a fenced-off piece of land, a reminder of separation and private property, and the violence of land ownership; it is a cut into the landscape. The project thus raises questions about land, occupancy, resources, and those 'deserted' by the state. The desert is a locator of presence and absence. Baltschun's use of solar power to activate the installation and book is a reminder of the incessant electricity shortages and collapsing infrastructures in South Africa and many postcolonial countries in Africa.

Inherently tied to white settler colonialism, land (physical) and its representations (landscape) have been a site for the negotiation of class, history, and race since the arrival of British and

Dutch settlers. Landscape paintings of the Karoo desert by South African artist Jakob Hendricks Pierneef, for example, evidences a *manifest destiny* approach to imagining empty, unoccupied land for colonial occupation. Yet the landscape is not empty.⁵ Arguably, Pieneef's painting reflected this mythic perception of empty land to be possessed, advancing a representation of the land as dehistoricised and depoliticised. The 1913 Natives Land Act⁶ arguably led to a white monopoly of landscape painting by artists such as Pierneef. Painting became the *modus operandi* for white artists to express nationalist ideals and idioms, or the notion of 'South Africanness' during the 1910s and 1920s. They captured the intense sunlight that struck mountains and the ground.⁷ Baltschun's dictionary can be read as a sonic retort to the visual representations so pervasive at this time – paintings that gave precedence to 'pure nature', devoid of human presence. *Desert Dictionary* instead positions the human voice at the core of its lexicon.

Writing this text from Singapore, I am reminded of Ho Tzu Nyen's *The Critical Dictionary of South East Asia* (2017-present), which takes a pluralistic approach to defining Southeast Asia through an ongoing algorithmic database of texts, music, and online images. His dictionary problematises and questions the complex definition of territories under a geopolitical framework. In this way, he generates unexpected connections to disrupt the parochial and contrived definitions of the region.

Who makes a dictionary – when and where – are crucial factors which impact and influence the kind of dictionary that is produced. Baltschun's *Desert*

Dictionary comparably searches for a language and lexicon that lies beyond established definitions. It is through others that he constructs and compiles a repository of words, stories, and narratives anchored by the desert. Dictionaries are not cast in stone ad infinitum but are open to change in attitudes and opinions in ways that reflect the social and cultural paradigm of the time. *Desert Dictionary* is a dictionary that reconsiders the desert in the form of a sonic lexicon derived from a southern African perspective; one that is tethered to the land but also liberated from it.

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- 1 Woes in Afrikaans refers to angry (of people) and 'wild' (of) natural surroundings. It is derived from the word for desert in Afrikaans, 'woestyn'. See, <https://dsae.co.za/entry/woes/e07921>
- 2 Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies* (Duke University Press, 2016), p.58.
- 3 *The World About Us* first aired on the BBC on 3 December 1967. The programme set out to combine natural history with an element of adventure.
- 4 Richmond is one of twenty book towns globally and the only one on the African continent: the idea being to boost the economy in rural areas through books and tourism. This quaint town is passed by many travellers making their way to Cape Town along the N1 highway that cuts through the country.
- 5 Sean O'Toole, 'The Landscape Is Not Empty', *Frieze*, 30 September 2015, <https://www.frieze.com/article/landscape-not-empty>.
- 6 The Act restricted Black South Africans from buying or occupying land except as employees of a white master. It opened the door for white ownership of 87 percent of land.
- 7 Jeremy Foster, *Washed with Sun: Landscape and the Making of White South Africa* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 73.

The *Desert Dictionary* LP is available at:
www.arbitraryproject.com/desert-dictionary

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