Wading in the Wine-Dark Sea

There was a time when Keith Brown planned to focus his graduate studies on the problem of color terminology in Homer. That is, in Homer's Greece, the sea was red, like wine. Or else the wine—diluted, some say, with alkaline groundwater—was blue, like the sea. Or else the absence of a word for "blue" in ancient Greek meant the color itself couldn't be perceived. Or maybe the distinctions between colors in Homer's time had more to do with depth, opacity, or synesthetic associations with the temperaments (red = angry). Or perhaps, the "wine-dark sea" was simply a poetic flourish, a rhythmic phrase to finish out a line of Homeric hexameter, a challenge posed to sense and to the senses, alluring and unsettling in equal measure.

And while the question of color in the *Iliad* may seem a far cry from his present work as an anthropologist at Brown University's Watson Institute—investigating the interplay of identity, culture, and politics in the Balkans, particularly 20th century Macedonia—I can't help fixating on the wine-darkness of Homer's sea throughout our conversations. Because really the challenge posed by Homer's colors—his red oceans, his golden skies, his violet sheep and pale-green faces—is a problem of translation. How do we make sense of symbols and meanings across space and time, between peoples whose disparate ideologies and experiences constantly jeopardize the possibility of understanding? And this, in a sense, is the challenge of anthropology.

As Brown enthusiastically describes his other pet fascinations—a region in the Balkans where shaking one's head means "no" to one linguistic group, and "yes" to another; the fact that the phoneme ne means "yes" to Macedonia's Greek-speaking population and "no" to those who speak Bulgarian or Macedonian—and later, when our conversation turns to the fractured debates over the meaning of democracy in present-day Macedonia, I keep imagining two people standing at the edge of the Aegean, both pointing at the heaving swells, one saying "red," the other, "blue."

As Brown put it within the first few minutes of our first meeting, "Communication is deeply problematic."

Despite the inherent dubiousness of the endeavor, however, Keith Brown manages to be a tremendously entertaining communicator. Talking with him has a way of making you feel smarter, just by listening, nodding affirmatively, following the thread of his elegantly complex expositions as if his frenetic intellect could somehow jumpstart your own. His is the kind of intelligence that is open and inviting; he smiles, genuinely, while he speaks.

Which isn't to say he's terribly easy to follow. He speaks in circuitous, fractal-like webs of thoughts and ideas, every concept requiring a doubling-back, a positioning in relation to others, every memory a historical context, such that the listener experiences a constant telescoping in and out, senses something elegantly interwoven taking shape. He often pauses mid sentence to do what he calls "circling back,"

picking up stray fragments of conceptual ephemera from the previous hour of conversation, placing them neatly side by side, then suddenly making vivid their previously opaque significance. When he does this, he moves his finger in a small semi-circle, as if pointing out an ingenious shortcut on a map.

But this tendency too seems to arise out of a genuine desire to share and commune. He's fastidious because he wants you to understand completely, to appreciate all the beautiful, terrible complexities that define our relationships with each other and the things we build. His explanations are intricate, meandering, rhizomatic because so is the conceptual terrain.

Keith Brown isn't difficult to understand; the world is.

"It turns out I was actually kind of nice twenty years ago." This, says Brown, is one of the major take-aways of his most recent trip to Macedonia, a six-month Fulbright-funded stint, from which he returned in January. "People remember things I did then that I don't remember, and they remember them fondly." One man recalled Brown teaching his son and daughter at summer school in Ohrid. Another thanked him for changing money for him in Greece two and half decades earlier. (Macedonian citizens could not then travel, nor easily access currency.) This, Brown says, was a humbling lesson, a reminder that "everything you do actually does matter."

In the late 1980s, Brown was a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Chicago. In the first draft of his proposal for research, his

guiding question was "How has Yugoslavia solved the Macedonian question?" That is, how had Yugoslavia successfully consolidated a coherent national identity from a region so riddled with ethnic, cultural, and linguistic fissures? But in 1991, the Soviet Union crumbled and the Republic of Macedonia declared its independence from Yugoslavia. So Brown went back to his proposal, asking instead, "How did Yugoslavia *fail* to solve the Macedonian question?" In 1992, he flew to Macedonia on one of the last flights operated by Yugoslav Airlines before they were closed down by international sanctions. On the last leg of the trip, from Belgrade to Skopje, Macedonia's capital, his plane was full of refugees fleeing the outbreak of war in Bosnia.

Brown remembers sitting in the archives at the Institute of National History in Skopje, sifting through ephemera from early 20th century social movements, while history itself took place in the streets. "My friends were saying, what are you doing? Look outside the window!" All over Macedonia, people were asking fundamental questions about how they should govern themselves—about parliamentary democracy, about reconciling the deep cultural divides that cut across Macedonian society, and reckoning with the great economic challenges posed by independence. Moreover, says Brown, Macedonians were suddenly "orphaned from the political system of federal Yugoslavia within which Macedonian identity had first gained formal recognition."

It's only now, Brown says, in the past few years, that he has begun to "return to that present." His current project, titled "Democracy in Macedonia: Oral History, Civil Society and the Practices of Pluralism," investigates those questions by interviewing the people who were asking them in the late 80s and early 90s. Twenty years ago, he was studying one hundred years ago. Now he's studying twenty years ago. Now he's studying then. Now. Then. "I'm really fascinated," says Brown,

in characteristically elliptical prose, "by what has happened, and what hasn't happened, and how what might have happened influences how people think about what has happened." And so last October he returned to Macedonia where the ghostly traces of his earlier work, as well as the deeds of his younger self, endure.

Such is the eerie iterative quality of Brown's scholarly work, a kind of recursive historical belatedness that threads together the shifting pursuits of his career. As an Oxford undergraduate reading classics, Brown focused on the proto-populism of the Gracchi brothers, Roman nobles who called for land reform and a "fair shake" for the common people. But the cultural and social modes of analysis he preferred had yet to enter the disciplinary mainstream in classics, and he was, as he put it, "interested in doing something a bit more contemporary than 2000 years ago."

As a grad student, he kept his focus on the Balkans—the historical meeting place of the Hellenic and Roman tradition—but sped forward a few millennia to study late 19th century social movements among emergent "Bulgarian," "Greek," and "Macedonian" elites, at least some of whom sought support from the populace with similar calls for land redistribution. But even as he immersed himself in the social and cultural upheavals of the late 1800s and early 1900s, contemporary Macedonians, including many of Brown's friends and colleagues, were grappling with the fall of Yugoslavia, with how to distribute resources after communism. And with the passing of communist historiography's hegemony, they were renegotiating their relationship with the ancient past, and therefore, with the very meaning of the term "Macedonia."

Last fall, Brown left for Macedonia intending to conduct an oral history of that period, a time two decades ago when Macedonians were asking themselves, "What kind of future do we want for our country? And what is the meaning of our past?" But

as he settled back into life there, walking the same streets to the same institute where he had worked twenty years prior, he found yet another impetus to "look outside the window," to shift his focus from the history of the present, to present history.

Over the past year, volatile tensions between the ruling and opposition parties in parliament, threats to journalistic freedom and freedom of expression, and mass protests in the streets have re-ignited questions about the meaning of democracy, economic justice, and civil society in Macedonia. According to Brown you could reprint a newspaper from 25 years ago, and the questions being discussed in the public sphere then would be just as "relevant and vital" today.

While accepting the Jerusalem Prize for literature in 2009, the novelist Haruki Murakami said, "Between a high, solid wall and an egg that breaks against it, I will always stand on the side of the egg."

On December 24, amid fierce debates over Macedonia's 2013 budget, a group of opposition party MPs attempted to suspend parliamentary procedures by occupying the speaker's platform. Under orders from the government, which is controlled by the ruling right-wing VMRO-DPMNE party, security personnel entered the chamber, cleared all journalists from the room, and then forcibly removed the opposition party representatives. A video surreptitiously recorded by someone inside the room depicts the opposition MPs standing, arms locked in the front of the chamber—a lit Christmas tree twinkling garishly behind their heads—before black-suited security guards descend, shoving and pulling some passively resistant MPs by their arms and legs. The VMRO-DPMNE legislators can be heard cheering as the security forces enter the chamber and begin their work. The budget passed 64 to 4. The Macedonian parliament has 120 members.

Immediately, the pro-government national media blamed the opposition for the incident, calling them a threat to public order, accusing the Social Democrats and their supporters of using obstructionist tactics to try to topple the government. But Keith Brown had another name for it: civil disobedience. In an op-ed for GlobalPost a few weeks after the parliamentary incident, Brown quoted Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 1963 *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*: "The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?" Brown went on to say that the December 24 incident "laid bare a party-dominated government's utter contempt for free media and parliament, two key institutions of democracy." Resistance of the kind engaged in by the opposition MPs, and by thousands of Macedonians in the wave of protests that followed December 24, was not only justified but necessary.

Brown calls himself a "very lily-livered activist." He wrote the GlobalPost piece after participating in a demonstration in Skopje against the government's anti-democratic actions in December. (He's actually very careful to say he was "walking with" or "walking alongside" the demonstration.) His main contribution to the protest, he says, was to secure a Macedonian translation of King's *Letter* and make it available online. But the outrage that simmers below the surface of his very carefully chosen words is discernable in the GlobalPost piece. Government supporters responded in the column's comments section, accusing him of bias, of being paid by Greece, of being an outsider who couldn't possibly understand the situation. One commenter called it a "shame that so much money [was] wasted in educating a man who has only learned how to speculate [and] distort facts." Brown said it was the first time he had ever been "flamed online." I asked him whether this was perhaps a hazard of writing about something that happened a few weeks ago, instead of a few centuries.

"I don't know. I have never felt this in my career before," he said. "I have always maintained that we [anthropologists] have to stay in the middle. We have to respect all sides to the argument. We don't really want to come down on positions." But December 24 was different. "The government crossed a line." In his mind, the jeopardizing of press freedoms, the legislating by muscle, and the protection of business interests at the expense of other freedoms, indicates an effort by the ruling regime to return to "something like a single party system."

Which is ironic, Brown says, because the VMRO-DPMNE were precisely the party most "virulent about the dangers of single party system" in the wake of the communist era. "It's an irony," says Brown, "rooted in a kind of amnesia…a selective representation of the past." And given this willed forgetting of history and the struggles for democracy that have led to this moment, Brown says, "I feel like it's not just an opportunity but a sort of responsibility to a place that I care about to actually insert my voice."

On January 26, Brown was interviewed on an episode of Zevzekmanija, a weekly Macedonian TV news show. Wearing what he calls "an unfortunate yellow turtleneck," Brown discussed the economic and political challenges facing Macedonia and how the country has changed and not changed over the past 20 years. At the end of the segment, the host, Goran Veličkoski, called Brown, a "true friend of Macedonia" who "says things that Macedonians don't see or don't want to see about themselves."

And that, said Veličkoski, "is what true friends do."

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But of course, that's not how all Macedonians see Brown, especially those VMRO-DPMNE supporters who attacked him online. In response to their criticisms of bias, Brown acknowledges that "the core empirical stuff" of anthropology is "what

people tell us." That as you get to know a place better, even as you become more aware of the "complex and riven and internally divided" nature of the culture and society, you inevitably become more "affiliated with one group or the other." You hear their stories more. But that's also precisely what makes the discipline so powerful. "It's open to a narrative account of micro processes," says Brown, "A domain of story telling, an attention to ground-level human stories, that has the potential to cross over, to persuade others, to actually break down some of the barriers that academia still erects around itself and its knowledge." Brown admits that he has "stronger and deeper ties with folks who are in opposition to the current regime than with those who are on board," but in his defense he says, "that's always been the case."

"Eggs and walls?" I ask. And he says that's part of it. "As a discipline, we may be committed to being on the side of the egg, but we are also committed to understanding and embracing the worldview of the people we've decided to study." Including, he suggests, those cheering ruling party MPs in the video from December 24, the angry commenters on his article, even the government officials who gave the order to clear the parliament. "It matters what people think they are doing, and especially what they imagine the legacy of what they are doing is— what they're trying to build. Because," he adds with the blunt clarity that often punctuates his complex arguments, "we're all trying to build stuff with the stuff we do."

Indeed, Brown makes a compelling argument for acknowledging the egg-ness of certain bricks in the wall. In his work on the military and US intervention abroad, for example, Brown is fascinated by a figure he calls the corporal at the checkpoint. "The corporal at the checkpoint is a 19- or 20-year-old member of the US military, probably a marine or infantry, who doesn't really know why they are there, and doesn't really know what the mission is. They have a whole set of legal constraints over their

behavior and there's an unidentified car driving towards them at 40 miles an hour. Now, I absolutely understand that the corporal is part of the wall and the Iraqi civilians in the car are the egg," says Brown, "But from another perspective, the corporal isn't really very wall-like."

At the end of our interview, when I asked Brown what he was hopeful about, he says three things: first, growing acknowledgement around the world that the 'iron law' of GDP and democracy is not so iron (India being the exception that disproves the rule). Second, growing scholarly literature and public awareness that reducing economic inequality improves lives. And finally, "the enduring faith of folks everywhere—often fragile, like the egg—that truth and justice do matter in the long run."

Keith Brown was born to British parents in Ireland. But when he talks about the challenges facing Macedonia and Macedonians he often uses the pronoun "we." I'm not sure if he notices. Probably, it's a habit borne of familiarity, affection, and time, like the way my father talks about the New York Mets—"I really think we have a shot this season" or "you know, we have the worst outfield in MLB history"—as if Macedonia were a scrappy underdog team and Brown a devoted fan, sharing vicariously in its triumphs and tribulations. But as we talk about the current political climate in Macedonia, I begin to see that this "we" embodies a much more complex and intimate relationship: a career's worth of passionate intellectual engagement, yes, but also, I think, solidarity, friendship, even love. And Brown's "we" discloses fundamental ambivalences at the very core of anthropology: the scholar's situatedness within a set of social and cultural conditions that are themselves the object of study, and the precariousness of a discipline concerned with—and dependent upon—human relationships.

In other words, sometimes you have to call a red sea, red. And it won't please everybody.