

# Indigenous Poetics and Transcultural Ecologies<sup>1</sup>

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## *Abstract*

This article outlines a transcultural fluctuation between indigenous poetics from Australia and South America in order to respond to some of the most pressing concerns in contemporary ecocritical discourse. I propose that we might turn to indigenous knowledge systems not as part of a reactionary, antimodern form of Romanticism, but as an alternative, syncretic understanding of the contemporary, in which the past is partner to the present in the formation of future possibility. I outline key features of Indigenous Australian and South American thought, including the centrality of language and poetics in the maintenance of country, before outlining an Indigenous philosophical poetics that spans the Australian and American continents. Indigenous knowledge systems, while to some extent understandable with generalized terms such as “The Dreaming” or “Pachamama” (“World Mother”), are thoroughly localized conceptions of much more extensive, transnational forces.

Keywords: ecopoetics, Indigenous poetics, Aboriginal Australia, South America, neobaroque

## **INTRODUCTION: ETHNOPOETICS, THE GLOBAL AND THE NEOBAROQUE**

This paper will outline a transcultural fluctuation between indigenous poetics from Australia and South America in order to respond to some of the most pressing concerns in contemporary ecocritical discourse. First of these concerns is that, as a poetics that consciously attempts to recover the agencies of *all* living things and life-worlds, ecological poetics needs to acknowledge the subjugation of non-Western knowledge systems beneath Western thought in many forms of discourse, and then the many inextricable relations between Western thought and Eastern, indigenous and other knowledge systems since at least

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the 1500s. Second, as it continues to attend to particular localities, ecological poetics needs to be able to deal better with the unavoidably powerful shift towards a “global” imagination. Celebratory, embodied experiences of places are abundant in ecologically inflected writing, yet they invariably neglect the complex ways in which knowledge of such places, and the places themselves, rely on much larger networks of climate and capital. At the very same time, however, part of the value of a “place-based” poetics is that it resists the formation of a globally unified constellation of freely flowing, freely accessed capital. To deal with some of these dilemmas, I propose that by using a methodology derived from Latin American neobaroque theorists, we might turn to indigenous knowledge systems not as part of a reactionary, antimodern form of Romanticism, but as an alternative, syncretic understanding of the contemporary, in which the past is partner to the present in the formation of future possibility. Indigenous Australian and South American knowledge systems, while to some extent understandable with generalized terms such as “The Dreaming” or “Pachamama” (‘World Mother’), are thoroughly localised conceptions of much more extensive, transnational forces—different parts of which are illuminated in different ways, depending on where and when one is.

Scholars such as Deborah Bird Rose have pioneered a global interest in, and respect for, indigenous ecological knowledges.<sup>1</sup> There are many reasons to turn to such knowledges in the face of rapidly increasing rates of species extinction around the globe. Not least, many indigenous knowledges are intimately bound up with some of the world’s most biodiverse regions. In the case of South America, for example, approximately 80 percent of the continent’s biodiversity is to be found in indigenous territories.<sup>2</sup> Indigenous knowledges are therefore highly important sources of nonhumanistic ontological frameworks constructed over millennia in concert with complex, many-sided systems. The strong animistic imperative in much ecological poetics and related scholarship is both a recognition of and a search for

the various lives and life forms in such systems. Eco-poetics involves much more than attention to a-cultural collections of flora and fauna, then but, as Jonathan Skinner points out, includes also a critique of Western modernity itself:

any eco-poetics is always already an *ethno-poetics*. It traces the boundaries of a logocentrism that will go unquestioned by even the most radical poststructuralist poets and philosophers when they fail to link the foundation of Western rationalism (the *cogito*) to the repression of subaltern, indigenous writing systems.<sup>3</sup>

What follows in this article is an attempt to draw attention to the nature and function of some of these writing systems, and to reveal how they are deeply embedded in what we might term “ecological” forms of understanding. In part, this involves a re-structuring of the notion of “writing” so that the criterion of *permanence* (where writing forms a printed text) is no longer central to how writing can take place, or to what we consider can be *read*. Although Derridean thought alerts us to the problems with such a monodimensional view of writing, some forty years after the publication of *Of Grammatology* in English it remains the case that very little of the vast corpus of indigenous literatures has been considered in ecocritical research. I will return to this point later.

At the most fundamental level, the need to hunt, fish, and trap places traditional indigenous cultures in close relation with the many other living beings that populate the places in which they live. In the words of the Qom (Northern Argentina) elder and storyteller Mauricio Maidana, understanding the languages of other creatures is a valuable hunting skill:

. . . amongst the Qom  
hunters and their children understand the calls of the birds  
understand  
yes, they know when a bird is crying

and also when a bird is frightened

[. . .]

When a bird

gathers with other birds . . .

When there are lots of birds

something is happening

[. . .]

so you should move slowly

because these birds

are circling

a tiger

or a puma

or a snake . . .<sup>4</sup>

Hunting forces the Runa of Ecuador to assume the points of view of other creatures and, indeed, writes Eduardo Kohn, “to recognize that all these creatures that they hunt, as well as the many other creatures with which those hunted animals relate, have points of view.” The Runa, therefore, understand

that these creatures inhabit a network of relations that is predicated in part on the fact that its constitutive members are living, thinking selves. The Runa [. . .] hold that their ability to enter this web of relations—to be aware of and to relate to other selves—depends on the fact that they share this quality with the other beings that make up this ecology.

Such seamless inter-relationality does *not* result in a completed, fully revealed world, however. That most basic ability to kill—of one self to destroy others—immediately invokes the fact that selves are ephemeral, that their beings are anything but permanent. Death, in

other words, is completely intrinsic to life, resulting in what Kohn calls “a fundamental contradiction” at the heart of existence that can create a “feeling of disjunction.”<sup>5</sup> Such a disjunction, such an experience of the less-than-completely-coherent nature of reality, is also central to the work of contemporary ecological theorists like Timothy Morton and, importantly, has been used to describe the nature of reality in Aboriginal Australia by Stephen Muecke. In *Aboriginal Country*, “real seeing is in the glimpse,”<sup>6</sup> which is to say that the revelations of sight are only ever, at best, partial. Forms might reveal as much as they conceal, an inanimate object might also be a spirit being moving across country, or the source of a songline as much as the endpoint of a journey.

It is within such unstable, unsettled worlds that possibilities for radically transversal forms of communication emerge, where language that crosses between different modes of existence—between human and spirit world, and also between species—results in discourses like the “trans-species pidgin” that Kohn describes.<sup>7</sup> For Kohn, trans-species communication is a manifestation of “the living worldly nature of semiosis”: semiosis and, therefore, thought itself, takes place in all kinds of worldly minds. In turn, mind is not the source of signs themselves; rather, mind is the outcome of semiosis, from which more semiosis can occur.<sup>8</sup> Such communicative practices have little space for concepts like “absolute otherness, irreducible difference[, or] incommensurability,” the assertion of which would imply an equally problematic opposite: “that knowability is based on intrinsic self-similarity.”<sup>9</sup> An irreducible difference implies, in other words, that “being in itself” is completely and coherently singular. For the Runa, for Kohn—and for Morton and Muecke—however, thinking and knowing is constantly mediated, troubled, incomplete, searching. “Similarity” and “difference” are interpretations relative to position; they are not *intrinsic* to things, nor immediately apparent.<sup>10</sup> In terms of language and of poetics, then, Indigenous Australian and South American discourse is rarely predicated upon the transmission of formally coherent,

Aristotelean packages of meaning, but rather language is both the purposeful direction of affect and, as affect wanes, the fragmentation or dissolution of coherence. It is hardly coincidental, therefore, that Kohn's description of South American trans-species pidgins as "middle grounds" correlates with Muecke's description of Aboriginal English as "the language of 'bridging' between the vastly different European and Aboriginal cultures."<sup>11</sup> Certainly, these "bridges" and "middle grounds" are not idealizations: they are fraught with the dangers of unequal power relations, of one learning too much about the other, or of one becoming too much like the other. Nevertheless, they signal the vast, connective tissues of indigenous systems of poetics and the extent to which, should we follow Skinner's critique of Western logocentrism, an ecological poetics predicated on such systems will forgo assumptions of Western priority.

If there is a "traditional" ecocriticism, it is aligned with Heideggerian and phenomenological accounts of the body's relationship to locality, and focuses on ways of cultivating deep and lasting attachments to particular, cherished places.<sup>12</sup> Until recently, however, missing has been an attempt to *link* regions of environmental concern, a challenge made many times more pressing by global climate change. Ursula Heise's seminal *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* compels ecological discourse to engage not only with "local places" but with "territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet." Heise's argument powerfully demonstrates how excessive focus on local ecosystems and on local belonging can be detrimental to "the planet as a whole."<sup>13</sup> While a sense of place "might function as one useful tool among others for environmentally oriented arguments," she cautions that it can become "a visionary dead end if it is understood as a founding ideological principle". Environmentalism, she argues, "needs to foster an understanding of how a wide variety of both natural and cultural places and processes are connected and shape each other around the world, and how human impact affects and changes this connectedness."<sup>14</sup>

What is equally important is that this sense of “connectedness” does not come at the *expense* of attention to local ecologies and, in particular, localized indigenous ecological knowledges and custodial rights. Otherwise, a “global” sense of the environment risks replicating older and more familiar kinds of colonization. In Heise’s terms, this amounts to a challenge to “imagine local environments less as foundations for an unalienated existence than as habitats that are ceaselessly being reshaped by the encroachment of the global as well as their own inherent dynamism.” With such an open-ended notion of “place,” the focus for environmentalism would not be “to preserve pristine, authentic ecosystems,” but would instead nurture their capacity “to change and evolve.” Nevertheless, such a resolution still comes with its own problems:

it raises the difficult question of how an endorsement of constant transformation and change would allow one to discriminate between the inherently dynamic evolution of ecosystems and the kinds of disruptive change that might ultimately lead to serious ecosystemic problems and failures.<sup>15</sup>

Along with the environmental sciences, across vast regions of the world, with their millennia of attentiveness to more-than-human systems, indigenous knowledges can best determine what constitutes “disruptive change.” An ontology embedded in the precariousness of a world at once dangerous and fulfilling, requires that even the very locus of experience—the human “I”—must negotiate its particularity in concert with pervasive, dynamic processes. To paraphrase Vicky Kirby, these are subjects whose limits are “chiasmatically given”; thus, “‘my’ situation is more than local.”<sup>16</sup>

Elsewhere I have written about the value of a nomadic eco-poetics in Australian contexts, or a poetics which turns to Aboriginal knowledges of land management and habitation as a methodological template for describing and responding to places not as

discrete sites for permanent “dwelling” (in the Heideggerian sense of the term), but as various nodes in much larger, interconnected flows.<sup>17</sup> Applied at an international level, such notions could be responses to Heise’s contention that a central challenge for contemporary environmental thought is “to shift the core of its cultural imagination from a sense of place to a less territorial and more systemic sense of planet.”<sup>18</sup> Attention to language and poetics is especially important in this context because, fundamentally, it is to do with the ways that we conceive [of] and relate to the world. Heise again:

Like other processes of global systemic transformation, ecological or not, climate change poses a challenge for narrative and lyrical forms that have conventionally focused above all on individuals, families, or nations, since it requires the articulation of connections and events at vastly different scales.<sup>19</sup>

By thinking ethnopoetically about ecology, to reiterate Skinner’s notion, we encounter poetic systems that already and always span these “vastly different scales”: indigenous poetics often engage simultaneously in a collaborative dialogue with other creatures and forces in the fields of their composition and performance, *and* with ancestral beings who are drawn into the event of the work in order to summon a possible future.

This ethnopoetic expansion of what might have been hitherto a uni-planar topography of intersecting ecosystems is also a disruption of master narratives that describe a source of culture and reason (the West) and its path of conquest across the New Worlds. In this way, the expansion might take much from Latin American theorists of the neobaroque. As Monika Kaup describes, the neobaroque, with its sources in the baroque of the seventeenth century, is a far more relevant framework with which to understand the history and culture of the Americas than in terms of the “modern” or “post-modern.” Néstor García Canclini, for example, conceptualizes a “multi-temporal heterogeneity,” which is the consequence of a

history in which modernization rarely operated as a simple substitution for the traditional and the ancient. Of course, it is easier to make this claim in some Latin American countries, such as Mexico, Colombia, and Peru, than in others, such as Chile or Argentina, where “the traditional and the ancient” are invariably tied to ignored or repressed histories of indigenous cultures, along with their dispossession and genocide. Nevertheless, critics like García Canclini emphasize the important, transhistorical similarities between the processes of global transculturation (and, we might add, environmental destruction) of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and those that occurred much earlier in the Iberian colonies of the Americas.<sup>20</sup> As a white, Western scholar, therefore, by turning to a predominantly Latin American body of indigenous philosophy and poetics as a strategy for re-thinking global ecological and cultural relationships, I am engaging in an explicitly neobaroque enterprise, where the neobaroque is “a contemporary strategy for entering and exiting modernity, a strategy inspired by similar hybridizing processes in the seventeenth century.”<sup>21</sup>

To talk about the baroque is not to talk merely about a certain style or school of art, but rather “a productive force, the emergence of the new.”<sup>22</sup> “The new” is so necessary here because of Western modernization’s “demonstrated incapacity for integrating the ‘non-Western’ (Indians, mestizos, blacks, urban proletariat, rural immigrants, etc.) into a national project of consensual democracy.”<sup>23</sup> And, indeed, the baroque originally arrived in the New World as a function of Spanish-Catholic imperialism: “the Spaniards felt a need,” writes Mariano Picón-Salas, “to match a new splendour against the former glories of the Indians so as to displace their pagan gods.”<sup>24</sup> Quite to the contrary, however, baroque theorists point out that “the implanted Spanish baroque was appropriated and transformed,” citing examples of various churches that were constructed by indigenous artisans who “surreptitiously introduced elements and ornaments from their own cultures into the official Catholic iconography.”<sup>25</sup> Jumping into the present, and into the literary, we might cite examples like

Muecke and Roe's *Gularabulu* and Maidana and Messineo's *Arte verbal qom* as explicitly neobaroque texts, in which indigenous literary traditions intersect with, and dramatically transform, the potential for Western conceptions of "book" and "narrative." The neobaroque temporality is neither linear nor circular, but twists like a spiral, "moving both backward to recreate and forward toward total creativity."<sup>26</sup> With its emphasis on syncretism and adaptation, the thoroughly contemporary, but thoroughly antimodernist and anticolonialist, Latin American baroque might find its boldest expression in the new constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia—constitutions that fuse the Western notion of political democracy with Indigenous Andean understandings of *Pachamama*, or "Mother Earth."

### **Indigenous Thought and the More-than-Local**

As part of defining the nature of the poetics to which this paper, as a work of ecocriticism, is inevitably headed, I want to contextualise such poetics with an outline of the philosophical systems from which they are derived. Although the following discussion will be relatively brief, I should point out that, regardless of the length, any attempt at proposing links between international indigenous philosophies will always need to resort to generalizations at some point or another. Importantly, however, my aim is not to focus on these generalizations in order to forge some sort of homogenized, globalized concept of "indigenous poetics." As local, grounded sets of knowledge and culture, indigenous knowledge systems might have as many differences as similarities. Differences between bioregions, however, do not preclude the existence of many material links. These links—these sites for semiotic exchange—are what can construct a viably substantial, transnational ecological poetics as an alternative to a discourse derived predominantly from Western Europe and its colonial offshoots.<sup>27</sup>

Obviously I cannot approach anything like an overview of the world views that I mention here; rather, I wish to highlight three key points. The first point is to do with the

foundational importance of language in the emergence of land and law in Indigenous South American and Australian cultures. Here, poetics, in so far as it might refer broadly to a process of creation, occurs through, and as a result of, language. The second point concerns the “regions” produced by poetic language, or the territories to which indigenous peoples belong. Made manifest through language, indigenous law is inextricably tied to the regions in which such language occurs. At the very same time, however, precisely because of the nature of such law, because it is so provisional and local, “the law” itself—the histories that converged to create a region; the ways such histories, for the health of the region, need to be maintained—necessarily relies upon a more-than-local assemblage. For example, contemporary, generalized understandings of Indigenous Australian philosophy in terms of “The Dreaming” can obscure the fact that it is not a transcendent representation of all Indigenous Australian thought, but rather a term created by an anthropologist (William Stanner) and often used in a discourse that collects Aboriginal cultures together into a single, homogenous group.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, however, such a term has great currency as a contested or problematic label for a variety of interconnected cultures that resist this very ascendance into religious or philosophical abstraction. Third is the concept of what I call “deep integration,” which is meant to refer not only to the ecological interconnectedness of different species in a given indigenous landscape or country, but also to the inextricability of the ancestral past from this same landscape, and of the world as it is seen from the world of the beyond—of the spirits, of the possible.

Returning to my first point about language and land, anthropologists such as Eduardo Kohn have demonstrated that the ethnographic study of indigenous cultures can alert us to the relationships between “distinctively human forms of representation” and those other forms—those “partially shared semiotic propensities”—of nonhumans. From such ethnography emerges an analysis of “how the human is both distinct from and continuous with that which

lies beyond it.”<sup>29</sup> For Kohn, “The Open Whole” is a term that describes how all of life, rather than just humans, is involved in representational processes,<sup>30</sup> and it correlates closely with conceptualizations of Aboriginal Country by scholars such as Peter Minter. The “compositional ethos” of Country involves the production of an earthly semiosis with both material and spiritual or supernatural participants.<sup>31</sup> Here we enter into a framework that also resonates powerfully with recent Western critical theory concerning biosemiotics and the cultures of supposedly “natural” formations. In posthumanities scholarship, the textualization of human subjects and their cultural objects is finding an ever-increasing number of parallels in the natural sciences; as Vicky Kirby writes, “[f]rom the study of astronomical bodies and their ‘signatures’ to the operations of the tiniest signs of life, the world [now] appears as a body of interlocking information.”<sup>32</sup> The ability of “so-called oral peoples . . . to read the country, [and] perceive its grammar” reveals the existence of language systems that extend well beyond the limits of the printed text.<sup>33</sup> Kohn describes how the Runa of Ecuador, for example, are able to read an operatic array of signs “associated with fruiting regimes, increases in insect populations, and changes in animal activity” in order to take advantage of the short but delicious moment in which winged leafcutter ants take flight to start new nests, and thus can be caught and eaten.<sup>34</sup> The ants emerge at dawn, and Kohn’s companion, Juanicu, uses both kerosene lanterns and song to attract them:

As the ants began to emerge Juanicu spoke only in whispers [ . . . ] Many [ . . . ] were attracted by the light and came to us instead of flying into the sky. Juanicu then began to whistle like a siren [ . . . ] This, he later explained, is something the flying ants understand as the call of their “mothers.”

Juanicu is able to “communicate directly with [the leafcutter ants], calling them to their deaths” because he participates in a more-than-human system of semiosis.<sup>35</sup> The

“compositional ethos” of these worlds produces a linguistic field in which the human, however cunning, is only one participant.

In human terms, such an ethos often manifests as a very special importance attributed to the word—particularly, the speaking of it. Moving south from Ecuador into Southern Chile and Argentina, we find a culture in which the relation of word and earth is perhaps made most explicit. For the Mapuches, speaking is not only a medium of communication and expression, but an art form. Oratory capacity is so valued that one who possesses it is known as a *weupin* [“one who conserves the language of the earth”]. Furthermore, speaking *Mapudungun* [“the language of the earth”] enables an understanding of the universe and of the relationships between all things.<sup>36</sup> For Mapuche poet Elicura Chihuailaf, the words of Mapudungun express the conception of the world as it was created by his ancestors—words are, he says, the world’s “gestures [*gestualidad*]”:

people, human beings, travel through life in a world invested with gestures. These gestures express themselves before the initial murmur between the spirit and the heart is completely understood.

Little by little, with the growth of experience, meeting with the words of the others, the colours, the aromas, the textures, the impression we are given by these things and by the mysteries of our Dreams, this said murmur transforms into a language. It is this language that translates the presence of the ancestors, of each one in his or her actuality, and the creation—and all of its potential—of his or her “future.”<sup>37</sup>

For Chihuailaf, language is a production of the engagement with myriad linguistic and other-than-linguistic forces. Not only does Mapudungun integrate and reinforce social and worldly relationships, but also it necessarily confirms the speaker’s relationship with his or her origins and ancestors, while at the same time refreshing their values and beliefs.<sup>38</sup> Language,

therefore, functions on a variety of levels and ultimately, when constituted as poetry, is necessary for the synthesis of human and world:

With Silence, and resulting contemplation, understanding of the language of nature will be more profound. Consequently, there will be greater capacity to synthesise thoughts and their forms with those that we use to construct the architecture of poetry, the song that is necessary in order to live with ourselves and with others.<sup>39</sup>

What this amounts to is a conception of the speech act as a composition of earthly, material forces, implicit in which is a vast archive of the actors who were involved in the development of language. The moment of speaking draws a thread between the past from where it came, the world of which it speaks, the body from which it is emerging and the community *into* which it is directed. This correlates usefully with understandings of language derived from Deleuzian theory, where speech emerges from a virtual world of indirect or possible discourse. Here, one's language is "an infinitely complex concertation of forces" driving the moment of speaking.<sup>40</sup> Every production of meaning is a becoming that results from this forceful confluence; the context of speech is enabled by it. The I is not a discrete subject in control of the production of meaning; what I think of as "my speech" is actually "a detached fragment of a mass," or a "collective assemblage":

the collective assemblage is always like the murmur from which I take my proper name, the constellation of voices, concordant or not, from which I draw my voice.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, when we turn back to Mapuche thought, we find that the word is

sustained by Memory, moved by it, from the speech of the source that flows through the [Mapuche] communities. The written word is not a mere linguistic artifice [. . .] but a commitment of Dream and Memory to the present.<sup>42</sup>

Consequently, Mapuche poetics has an axial quality designed to gather and reinvigorate Mapuche communities. Language, and poetry in particular, can revitalize, reconstruct, or even give birth to new modes of “being Mapuche.” “We were born Mapuche,” writes Chihuailaf, “we will die Mapuche and writing [. . .] is one of the greatest ways to dignify, to guard and to recuperate [. . .] the soul of our people”.<sup>43</sup> For poet-critics like Chihuailaf, poetry not only fortifies the elements of Mapuche culture, but it also generates them.<sup>44</sup>

From the fundamental priority of language as an earthly system of poesis and semiosis we move to the second point for emphasis here, that of the more-than-local natures of indigenous localities. On a broad level, for example, the concept of Pachamama manifests in a range of Indigenous American communities, in which the world or earth is revered as a feminine life force. Yet while there is much overlap, there is no uniform correspondence between understandings. Pachamama itself is concentrated around the Incan regions of the Andes, but it has relatives as far north as Tontanzin (the Aztec mother goddess) in Mexico, and correlatives extend well into Chile and Argentina, not to mention Brazil and the Caribbean.<sup>45</sup> What Pachamama and her cousins protect, therefore, is not an abstracted system of laws that can be readily transferred from one place to another, but an earthly manifestation of particular, local systems across an extremely large area. Consequently, “living well” (known as *Shumaq Kawsay* in Bolivia and Ecuador) in accordance with the principles of Pachamama results in extremely pragmatic ethics that are conducive to individual and social survival across a remarkably diverse range of environments. Pachamama is part of a philosophical system that is not centered on the substantiality of entities and of the universe, but rather on facts born of *relation*. As Charles Pigott writes, “Andean lifeways stress the

mutual constitution of entities, so that relation, not the “entity,” is the ontological prime.”<sup>46</sup>

Networks of relations can be many-sided and complicated, and resist the comparison of orders proposed by national, political, or taxonomical boundaries.

Ontologies of relation, as opposed to definition [and exclusion] of substance, are fundamental to Aboriginal Australian philosophies as well. In many cases, Aboriginal philosophies oppose what Muecke calls an “ecofascism.” An ecofascist defines the landscape in terms of conflict and contradiction between various sharp, impermeable borders. For the fascist, the question of *belonging* becomes paramount (does my neighbour belong as much as I do?). Thus, liminal figures that cross boundaries, including humans (foreigners), animals (ferals), and plants (weeds) need to be exterminated “on the basis of a general principle of not belonging or of competition with good pure life forms.” On the other hand, the great Nyigina philosopher from the West Kimberley, Paddy Roe, sees such beings not so much as impure or ambiguous, but as parts of a system that require more effort to be understood. As an example, Muecke refers to Roe’s treatment of a stand of three or four acacias on his country:

What is extraordinary about these trees is that they don’t belong here; they are montaged into the landscape: this gives them a kind of sacred power. A positive one, like you wouldn’t go and cut them down because they are being ecologically anomalous or useless, rather, you would be charmed by this anomaly or singularity.

And the next thing you know there is a story about them.<sup>47</sup>

Crucially, in this ethical assemblage alterity *demand*s relation. Furthermore, relation occurs as a result of story, or the creative performance of language in country. With this in mind we can move east to Yarralin country in the Northern Territory, with whose people Rose spent many years developing a decolonial ethics:

[t]he ethical challenge of decolonisation illuminates a *ground* for powerful presence. Against domination it asserts relationality, against control it asserts mutuality, against hyperseparation it asserts connectivity, and against claims that rely on an imagined future it asserts engaged responsiveness in the *present*.<sup>48</sup> (my emphasis)

I have highlighted the words “ground” and “present” in the above quote because they reiterate the foundational mechanism of the earthly field as catalyst of local, relational systems for contemporary ethical behaviour.

However, to summarize these specific, local instances of ethical relation in broader terms such as Sumaq Kaway, or the West Kimberley concept of *wunan* is dangerous.<sup>49</sup> Since Sumaq Kaway became part of the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions in 2008 and 2009 respectively, it has been deployed in primarily nationalist-political contexts, but is not in wide circulation among Andean communities themselves.<sup>50</sup> Given that there is so much diversity among Andean cultures, the term cannot be reified to represent a homogenous philosophy and thus used as a method of determining “true” or “pure” Andean knowledge. After all, writes Charles Pigott, the Incan empire, with which Sumaq Kaway is most commonly associated, “were imperialists” and “defined themselves as the pinnacle of a rigid hierarchy that had little to do with *Shumaq Kaway*.”<sup>51</sup> Although such terms are useful for broad generalizations, therefore, they must be grounded—as Muecke, Pigott, and Rose ground them—in illustrations of story, song, and other kinds of performance. This point is vital because these ethical systems are not simply “disinterested,” in Pigott’s words, where the Other is always given preferential treatment over the Self. Both “disinterested altruism and egoism deny the sociality of any individual”; instead, these systems aspire to be “life-affirming . . . for all involved”:

The individual is not seen as a discrete and atomized entity, but as a form that emerges and transforms in relation with the environment. In this worldview the “ethical” and the “pragmatic” are not diametrically opposed but are mutually reinforcing, and attunement towards the Other enhances one’s own existential possibilities.<sup>52</sup>

Here, powerful possibilities for reproduction emerge: partnerships allow both Other and Self to be revived, related, and incorporated in innumerable ways. Such assemblages can only assume any kind of intelligible form, however, in specific, local circumstances; otherwise there can be no subjects present to assemble relations.

The imperative for relation rather than categorization, therefore, means that the “ground” of the “present,” from Rose’s quote earlier, “is a category in permanent construction and reproduction.”<sup>53</sup> Not least, pragmatic instantiations of these ethics undermine a variety of Western dualisms. Importantly, however, the dualisms do not *dissolve* in Indigenous South American or Australian thought, since that would involve a form of absolute negation that conflicts with open-ended processes of comprehension and integration. Instead, categories and their terms can be reoriented, to be conceived not as the structure for reality, but as descriptive forms that may be more relevant in some situations than in others. As Kohn and Pigott both point out, it may sometimes be useful to distinguish between “humans” and “nonhumans,” but this does not mean that the distinction has an axiomatic validity as a fundamental ontological separation.<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, writes Pigott, “everything is reducible to everything else.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, categories have particular, contextual validity, but are not valid in and of themselves. Accordingly, various scholars have commented on the Derridean inflections of Indigenous American and Australian philosophies, whereby meaning is constructed through preontological conditions of discourse.<sup>56</sup> However, rather than this semantic contingency demanding a form of linguistic scepticism, it has provided “reason for

proactive optimism, an acknowledgement that our relational nature opens us to new existential potentialities in each dialectic encounter.”<sup>57</sup> Difference is not a gap to be overcome here, but a possibility to be harnessed, wherein poetic acts of translation and relationality from one self to another are of vital importance for the genesis, flourishing, and conservation of life. As all things are potentially relatable to one another, so too must the self be multiple and contingent upon this multiplicity, since it is in this way that the different vectors of the self can intersect with the many others in its environment.

With bodies that are so mutable, and when the human body is only one of so many kinds of living bodies, semiotic exchange—as opposed to the development of a taxonomy of discrete organisms—becomes the process with which life occurs. With so many different selves inhabiting so many differently situated worlds, in the Amazon we find what Viveiros de Castro calls a “multinatural” understanding of reality.<sup>58</sup> Here, semiotic translation can occur not only across human cultures (as in a “multicultural” reality), but across vast webs of different animal and spirit communities. Accordingly, for many Amazonians, Kohn writes that “the social principles found in human society are the same as those that structure animal and spirit societies.”<sup>59</sup> Daily life in Mapuche country, too, must be understood not only in terms of human activities, but as the confluence of a variety of perceptive, porous materials. To be Mapuche is to be the manifestation of a diversity of cultural and geographical forces, a process illustrated by the energy of the Great Cinnamon Tree:

a Tree sustained by the memory of our ancestors . . . that the parents of our parents  
planted, they tell me. Our Spirits are the waters that continue singing beneath its  
leaves.<sup>60</sup>

The danger, however, is to assume that holistic world views such as these are necessarily egalitarian, or to imagine uniform distributions of power and material. That there is no center

of transcendent power or authority does not mean that there aren't different levels of complexity, or beings with more power than others.<sup>61</sup> Rather, each member of this system can potentially conduct dialogue with any other, and it is on the basis of this dialogue, as opposed to an enshrined set of rules for behavior, that the earth is maintained. Prior to the arrival of Christianity, most Indigenous American cosmologies did not include a supreme entity; the situation is similar in Australia as well, particularly in the north of the continent. Precisely for this reason, the role of the shaman in such communities is vital because he or she—through the articulation of a sacred semiosis—maintains an ongoing diplomacy with the more-than-human world.<sup>62</sup> A relational ontology, in other words, is enabled by poetic reiteration.

But what is the precise nature of this relational ontology? Or, of what is it composed? Minter argues that the legislated status of La Pachamama in Ecuador and Bolivia correlates with the creative, legal status of Country in Aboriginal Australian contexts. The *Law of the Rights of Mother Earth* in Bolivia, for example, grants legal personhood to nature, thereby reducing the power of extractive corporations. For Aboriginal people as for Indigenous Bolivians, Minter argues, “Country has always been a “legal person” whose protection is paramount.”<sup>63</sup> “Country” is not synonymous with “place”; indeed, there can be many important places within one country. Rather, to draw on Rose’s seminal definition, Country is “multidimensional” (or “multinatural,” as de Castro might say):

it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings, underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air. There is sea country and land country; in some areas people talk about sky country. Country has origins and a future.<sup>64</sup>

We could draw many compelling links between the multidimensional features of Country and the multinatures of *Meli Witran Mapu* (“the four domains of the earth”) in Mapuche cosmology, along with the “cosmic ecology of selves” in Indigenous Andean communities.<sup>65</sup>

Pachamama is a live, animate organism composed of multiple existential categories where rivers and streams, for example, are important sources of water as much as tangible manifestations of a vast circulatory system of spiritual flow.<sup>66</sup> As in Country, there is no inanimate “land” to serve as the object of a subject’s actions, but a series of ongoing interactions between mutually animate entities. It is the intimacy of interactions between humans and their spiritual counterparts that leads to the success of future harvests for the Bolivian Aymara, for example.<sup>67</sup> For many indigenous cultures, Pachamama or Country is related to on a profoundly empathetic basis, which is premised on the capacity for multinatural semiosis. This is the “deep integration” that I alluded to earlier as the third aspect of the philosophies being discussed here: anticipating the “new materialism” of recent years, concepts like Shumaq Kaway are about the relationship of everything to everything else, where life is “a characteristic of every entity.”<sup>68</sup> All things have significance and agency, therefore, and are “parts of a thick fabric of stories,” which can be read and contributed to by many different beings in many different ways.<sup>69</sup> As the earth is the container for such stories it therefore provides the “existential possibilities” for their future.<sup>70</sup>

In contemporary academic and critical contexts, to approximate such thought is to engage in a neobaroque reaction to dominant narratives of Western globalization, and to recover the forces of an alternate temporality. In our attention to the co-presence of the ancient and the contemporary, to the material and the spiritual, we are engaging with the most fundamental problems of both indigenous and baroque traditions, which adamantly resist linear descriptions of time and progress, and authoritarian limits on the potentials of bodies and their velocities. In Aboriginal Australia, creation beings or Dreamings, writes Rose, “are masters of an art that includes both motion and stasis; they are both here and there. They are also both then and now, both origins and contemporary presence.”<sup>71</sup> It is the enduring force of these Dreamings that is claimed and nurtured in Aboriginal land claims and the gradual

subversion of a mapped, colonized territory, just as it is the force of Andean and Amazonian cosmology that survives in a syncretization like the new Ecuadorian constitution:

More than five hundred years of colonialism, neo-colonialism, genocide and domination could not erase the cultures of the Andean pueblos, the worship of the earth, and the ideal of harmonious coexistence from Sumak kawsay, so that today—removed of the layers that were covering it—it returns to the surface as a message to the world and, in particular, to the human species, at risk of collapse and extinction.<sup>72</sup>

The neobaroque incorporation of indigenous poetics into a contemporary politics means that any recursion to the ground—to land, territory, or ecology—continues “below” into its ancestral populations, an extension previously erased in the name of God and/or capitalism, at the very same time as these forces push us back “up” into an ever-expanding, incorporated present.

### **Indigenous Philosophy as a Philosophical Poetics**

I have outlined the concept of deep integration in a relational matrix of material and spiritual forces, in which language is one of the ways these forces are made manifest, and which makes their creative reformation possible. In broad, Indigenous Australian and South American terms, then, “language” is part of a poiesis in which meaning concentrates in, and necessarily escapes, any actor but, crucially, the vector of this escape from and back into Country ensures that all meaning, as all language and life, is but a component of the land in which it occurs. Semantic meaning is necessarily “protosemantic,” therefore, a term which, to follow Gerald Bruns, refers to “the hither side of [human] mind or spirit, namely, the sensible or fleshy side of signification.” Bruns imagines the voice “as a limit or resistance rather than

a presence” so that speaking and, with it, poetry, is not just an aesthetic gesture, but also inaugurates a distinctive kind of ontology. Here, “the voice exists as the physical excess or remainder of what it otherwise accomplishes as a medium that expresses a meaning, a psychological interior, or a cognitive presence.”<sup>73</sup> In indigenous poetics, however, this “physical excess” has a direct relationship to the surrounding field; rather than an excess, it is a vital force. Opposed to the subjugation of all things beneath anthropocentric parcels of meaning, a protosemantic poetics acknowledges and leaves room for “proto-semiosis,” or for things-in-themselves and their alternative expressions of life. Relational indigenous philosophies are made manifest in the iterations of these kinds of poetic systems.

For many new materialists and biosemioticians, “arbitrary” or symbolic representation is peculiar to human beings. Entirely dependent on human cultural and political contexts, symbolic representation requires such contexts in order to function. Other representational modalities, however, belong to all forms of life, a fact the Runa understand when they interpret the rainforest’s vast variety of more-than-human signs in their daily lives.<sup>74</sup> The possibility for cross-species interpretation and communication is a direct consequence of this proto-semiosis, in which every material expression has the potential for at least partial interpretation in some context or other. In the communities of the Qom and the Mapuche, narrative and oratorical abilities are of high value in the election and legitimization of chiefs and religious leaders because of their proximity to the code which binds things in relation. Indeed, where for Mapuche poetics the inextricability of language (*Mapudungun*) from the earth is primordial, in Qom poetics analogies between language and blood are similarly foundational:

Just as blood is a symbol of life that is transmitted from generation to generation, the word is the bearer of the knowledge and the ethnicity of Qom people across generations.<sup>75</sup>

Language-as-blood is not a purely symbolic analogy, however, and the importance of language is not simply to maintain social cohesion among the humans in a Qom community:

Language is not conceived of as a mere instrument of communication between people because words have power . . . beyond their referential function, words entail intention and agency, and exercise influence over people, objects and events. In this way, a significant part of the authority and power of leaders, priests and shamans is based on their verbal prowess, whether it is oratorical in the case of the first two, or in the capacity to converse with non-human entities and pray for the physical and spiritual integrity of people in the case of the shamans.<sup>76</sup>

Here we see why the Qom philosopher Timoteo Francia says that “the word is the bearer of human vitality”<sup>77</sup>: verbal art functions here as a form of cultural fuel. The Qom literary genre of *el consejo* (“advice”), for example, works in the present to enable the future. In a *consejo* by Maidana entitled “I have come for your advice,” the narrator begs advice from an elder in the hope that his words might help the narrator to “reach a mature age” and “lengthen” his or her life.<sup>78</sup> All of this accords very closely to Chihuailaf’s assertion from earlier that the “word is not a mere linguistic artifice . . . but a commitment of Dream and Memory to the present.”<sup>79</sup> Where human expression is an expression of subjectivity, subjectivity is also and at once an expression of Country.

Indeed, it is no consequence that for many Indigenous Australian and South American cultures, the most sacred poetry is composed almost entirely of nonsemantic language; beyond anthropocentric signification, the poetry is not intended solely for human ears, but for revitalization of the earth. The sacred *täyel* of the Mapuche, for example, is often completely devoid of spoken words from Mapudungun, although there remain clear vocal units; often,

these “sound songs” will be for events with a much more-than-human significance. Similarly, much sacred Aboriginal songpoetry has little “denotative” power—little ability to label things with anthropocentric associations—and instead evokes affect through sound and rhythmic patterning.<sup>80</sup> Furthermore, sacred and shamanic poetry is invariably part of a broader performative matrix that includes dance, painting and theatre: in the case of the Qom, the most powerful work is “generally accompanied by ritual actions like dances or dramatizations that emulate and anticipate the desired situation”.<sup>81</sup> The poetics extend, in other words, beyond the act of linguistic enunciation. All such instances indicate that the most important capacities of poetry and poetics are protosemantic ones.

That such language is protosemantic does not render it completely delocalized, however. While the words of a poetic text may have little apparent semantic value, it does *not* follow that the text is easily transferrable from one place to another. In those most local languages, those languages so attached to particular geographies that their semantic values recede, we find that it is almost impossible to separate them from dense webs of ecological connection and association. Writing about the Yanyuwa people in the Gulf of Carpentaria, John Bradley says of their language that

there is almost too much knowledge attached to the words ever to be able to express them fully, let alone translate them exactly. Yanyuwa words are so entangled and inextricably held within a web of associations that I am sometimes rendered inarticulate in the language and in translation, not because of any ignorance but because the words hold such a surfeit of meaning. It is the specificity of Yanyuwa knowledge that makes it unappreciable to the academic and public gaze of “the West.”<sup>82</sup>

Language becomes nonsemantic when the listener, rather than the text, is removed from the context. While semantic meanings may be revealed (if at all) as a listener progresses through stages of initiation in a local cultural-linguistic matrix, the removal of language from the place in which it belongs deprives it of connection to “a web of associations” that are vital not only for human understanding, but for all of life. In this light, we can also understand something of the importance of riddles as a literary genre for many indigenous peoples: a riddle unsettles the established semantic field by highlighting the potential for gaps or disjunctions within it. In the Americas, writes Gordon Brotherston, the origins of riddles are in shamanic methods of hearing words from multiple angles, “seeing their meaning through the eyes of, say, a jaguar or a snake.”<sup>83</sup>

When language is the articulation of earthly relation, or when, as in the case of the Qom, it is the world’s very blood, the distinction between the “written” and “spoken” is a shaky one, to say the least. In a Derridean sense, each gesture—human or nonhuman, written, spoken, or otherwise—is a material one. In turn, a collection of gestures framed in accordance with an inner structure, while at the same time forming part of a larger textual or gestural system, is a material *text* and, depending on one’s level of initiation, can be read and studied as such.<sup>84</sup> In the context of Central Australian Walpiri people, for example, *guruwari* (visible marks) can refer both to abstract signs and the concrete tracks or traces left upon a surface, such as a footprint or the trail of a snake. In turn, explains Martin Harrison, *guruwari* “are not restricted to being only visible and therefore locked down into the modality of visual literacy. As visible marks, they also have a logical relationship with, and are seen within the same set as, vocal marks, names, songs and sounds.” Drawing on Nancy Munn, Harrison writes that all Walpiri mark making practices

line up along the same conceptual track and travel together across the earth whether as visual mark or sound. The marks can be scored, painted, drawn, heard, seen, left

on the landscape as ancestral footprints as rocks, trees, lakes and ranges, or be artefacts or insects or animals.<sup>85</sup>

All kinds of marking, as all gestures of articulation, are methods of translating fecund, ancestral forces into expressions of territorial vitality and form. To add to Skinner's point from the start of this essay with a reference to Brotherston here, to deny indigenous *writing* systems their relationships to important earthly articulations is to "contribute to the long history of an imperialism for and within which alphabetic script has in practice been a main agent of dogma and repression."<sup>86</sup>

For the Yanyuwa people, writes Bradley, "singer, song, being [and] homeland" are joined by the breath. As the poetry becomes more sacred, lyrics and even melody give way, so that what remains is "only the rhythm of the breath", and this breath accompanies "the pulse of country." Breath, like the Dreaming itself, is primordial; proper use of the breath creates the sonic "matrix" of the *kujika*, the songpoetry which articulates the ecological coherence and unity of Yanyuwa Law.<sup>87</sup> Although Derridean deconstruction permits "no externality, no outside position" to what we might call a "text," Kirby makes a compelling argument for how "this articulate enclosure without limits has nevertheless been located and even given a name—*Culture*." So all-consuming is Culture's power that even Nature has been "unveiled . . . as Culture's creature".<sup>88</sup> In the case of indigenous poetics, clearly there is a need to either reclaim Culture as a Natural formation, or to do away with the terms altogether: language, culture, and art is part of country, having come from it, rather than an imposition upon it. In North-Eastern Argentina, poetic enunciation does not simply take place in a given setting, but also has the capacity to "express and translate . . . the relation between nature and culture," or to evoke a landscape "impregnated" with ancestral significance.<sup>89</sup> In Aboriginal aesthetics, "[l]anguage . . . becomes corporeal in becoming Country, and Country composes language."<sup>90</sup> Language, in other words, is one of Country's creative compositions.

In such poetics the breath functions as a literal and mythological act of modification—both as the lungs take in and release turbulence into the surrounding air, and as the singing voice borrows from the primordial breath of ancestral presence so that it may restore and nourish their ontological and ethical templates. A poetics that summons a relation to the Dreaming is a channel to ecological poiesis itself.

The Dreaming is, to quote Stanner, the “poetic key to reality,” or “a perpetually spoken, sung and reiterated discourse” that draws upon, as much as it fuels, the composition of Country.<sup>91</sup> In turn, we can talk of Pachamama as the source of a “system of signification,” with which poetry maintains “a direct and fluid relationship.”<sup>92</sup> As reality’s “key,” poetry is a node through which ancestral and spirit worlds can translate forces into contemporary material fields. Poetic enunciation is therefore the creation of a space in which communion with spiritual forces strengthens reciprocity with beings of other spheres. After all, invariably in indigenous philosophies from both continents, life is not hierarchically ordered—it does not “progress” from inanimate through vegetable and animal toward human—but rather locates beings within “an egalitarian system of mutual dependence.”<sup>93</sup> To sing “communally” is to call the community into being, where the community is manifest not just in humans, but in the spiritual-material complex of the landscape itself. This is pertinent when considering the following piece by Maidana, for example:

our ancestors really had that power to revive.

In the old days this practice was called power.

[...]

Because of this (thanks to them, the shamans), the Qom community still exists.<sup>94</sup>

Poetry is the discursive expression of an identity embodied in place, or what Thomas Solomon calls an “ethno-phenomenology of place-self.”<sup>95</sup> Autobiographical confessions become biological, even geological, expression.

As it draws upon it, language is also drawn back into Country; opposed to a self-reflexive poetics—in which the Self enunciates for the benefit of the Self—this could be understood as a “Country-reflexive” poetics.<sup>96</sup> Consequently, the “I” is often “communalized”—it refers to more bodies than a single, authorial subjectivity—not only in traditional poetics but also in work by contemporary Indigenous Australian and South American poets.<sup>97</sup> In many Amazonian communities, for example, the first-person pronoun can refer “to a self that is distributed over a lineage that includes both the performer and the performer’s ancestors.”<sup>98</sup> Greg Urban refers to this as a “projective *I*”, where the narrator embodies an emergent lineage of prior selves or ancestors.<sup>99</sup> “His *I* becomes an *us*,” writes Kohn, or a self in continuity, not only an accumulation of the past, but also projecting into the future with “indefinite possibilities.”<sup>100</sup> Indeed, there is a palpable absence of “authorship cult” in many Native American literatures, so that the “ownership” of texts by individual writers is sometimes “positively guarded against.”<sup>101</sup> In many cases, this reflects how the texts themselves do not emerge in a solitary act of writerly composition, but arrive during dreams or by virtue of spirits who come to the poet like muses and grant him or her part of that country’s code. With its depth of spiritual and historical significance, along with its breadth of performative modes, indigenous poetics might offer much to the “productive poetry” theorized by Laura Elrick:

A poetry that challenges the relegation of cultural activity to the page or stage, one that engages and attends to the production of lived *and* abstract space, analysing and intervening in the naturalisation of such processes, contributes to the production of an ecology for living things.<sup>102</sup>

A way to read such work might be to consider Muecke's theorization of a "reproductive aesthetics." Heavily influenced by Bruno Latour but also, significantly, by his many years with Goolarabooloo elder Paddy Roe, Muecke outlines a multirealist conception of existence in which poetry, story, and other works of art exhibit multiple relations to other regions of the world. The poem or story is a conflation of various discursive and nondiscursive processes, many of which can be traced to other confluences in the bodies of other texts, or other forms of existence altogether. This means that the literary text is not a single-channel "*language bridge*" between the human subject and an object. "Rather," writes Muecke, "its tentacles extend in all sorts of directions."<sup>103</sup>

The story or poem does not exist *primarily* in relation to human subjectivities (phenomenology), nor *primarily* in relation to objects (materialism). It has its own existence not reducible to either of those privileged poles in the modernist conceptual architecture.<sup>104</sup>

Reproductive aesthetics are understood in multi-real ecological terms. As a bird's call can suggest not only a certain species, but also a location, sex, motivation, and mood to whom or whatever might hear it, so too do the "series of transformative differences" in a line of poetry "tempt or try out the Other," to see if a "reproductive partnership" between text and Other can take place. Such partnerships

are constituted as chains of intimately connected transformations which, working with alterities, generate vitality. There are no metaphors or depth or transcendence, just a ceaseless trying of things out with others. To say that a poem lives in a place, and can go on to live in new places, is to refuse modernist universalisms, and to engage the facts and values of its particular existence as a local voyager.<sup>105</sup>

There are two equally important features of indigenous poetics in this context, therefore. Firstly, gestural manifestations of poetics cannot be understood as empty, modernist signs that can be translated across cultures with minimal fuss. They are, rather, expressions of earth or Country in the *places* in which they occur. For Muecke, “place-based devotion or cultivation,” or analysis that concentrates specifically on how that text came from a *particular place* (or set of places) actively critiques European literary models of universalism and transcendentalism.<sup>106</sup> Invariably, indigenous knowledges are segmented and local; they do not deal with generalizations, but with the specific qualities of the country in which they emerge. Paddy Roe’s stories, for example, are frequently infused with disclaimers like “dunno,” and he would often say to Muecke, who was transcribing them, “That’s all I can give you about that story, if you want the rest you had better go see so-and-so.”<sup>107</sup> Lagoons and waterholes are not uncommon sources for this localized knowledge: Maidana tells of an important lake in his country from which have emerged “many shamans,”<sup>108</sup> and many song cycles originate in sacred waterholes in different parts of Australia.<sup>109</sup> The “projective *I*” is a summative articulation of a region, just as the region is a projection of the articulations of the “I.” </EXT>

The second, and equally important, feature is that poetic productions can move. As he emphasizes the importance of place, Muecke also emphasizes that place-based analysis is not enough in itself; what is also needed is an analysis of how “the text’s relations expand into an *empirical multirealist* world.”<sup>110</sup> In the context of indigenous poetics and philosophy, this involves understanding how a text can be inherently local, but can still move—whether across country, or between worlds (and languages). This duality is what Rose has called “a particular nomadic problematic” with relation to the moving-yet-local cultures of Aboriginal Australia: “that of being here and not-here at the same time, of being both local and

mobile.”<sup>111</sup> Indigenous poetics requires us to think about texts not only in a range of material formations, but as being “always here, and always on the move.”<sup>112</sup> Books like *Gularabulu* and *Arte verbal qom*—translated multiple times across languages and media—are material manifestations of this movement, but movement structures are inherent to more traditional literary forms, too. In both South America and Australia, formulaic verse structures can travel across enormous distances, but they become localized by individual poets, who will use their own descriptive and melodic flourishes.<sup>113</sup> This is the nature of a *relational* poetics: language forms as a becoming-other. Devoid of essences, linguistic code is a method of developing relation, as opposed to category or demarcation. Elsewhere I have referred to this situation as an example of “echocoherence,” in which the locality of “here” joins in a dialogical process with “co-”. Locality, therefore, is nonlimited, “defined only by the velocities of energies that travel between it and the other localities to which it connects.”<sup>114</sup> An *echological* poetics is a moving poetics that, like the sounds waves of echoes themselves, disperses into the surrounding field. Language is not rooted in its origin; rather, its speakers transform its energies across multiple subjectivities. Poetry therefore is the expression of Country in language, where Country itself is a reiterative system of relational code.

Relation and, by extension, empathy, is a particularly useful means of securing what one requires in order to survive. Rather than wasting energy through aggression, empathetic relations will work more efficiently because each subject is willingly involved.<sup>115</sup> In difficult climates like the Andes, where the air is thin, temperatures low, and soils poor, or like Central Australia, where temperatures are extreme and rainfall is highly variable, these are proven, productive strategies. Indeed, they might be *pioneering* strategies for the rest of us, as an ever-increasing portion of the planet’s bioregions become subject to the damaging effects of climate change. To marry contemporary concerns about climate change to specific, localized bodies of indigenous philosophy, however, is to attempt a dramatically neobaroque

heterogeneity of multiple temporalities and modes of existence. To theorize a transcultural indigenous poetics is to expand the continent-wide spirals of baroque hybridizations that have been occurring for hundreds of years throughout the Americas. This is to realize the protosemantic potential of language, to read gestures as earthly, as accretions of ancestry irrupting into an open present. Only within and across such a landscape can a transcultural ecological poetics move; language produced in relation to Country finds partners in multiple realities, and through those partners it travels onward. Transcendent articulations, on the other hand, leave language piled up in un-locatable nowhere, within which it desperately seeks a species of order.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Deborah Bird Rose, Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Eugenio Raúl Zaffaroni, La Pachamama Y El Humano (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Madres de Plaza de Mayo, 2013), 155.

<sup>3</sup> In Angela Hume, “Imagining Ecopoetics: An Interview with Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Evelyn Reilly, and Jonathan Skinner,” Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment 19.4 (2012), 763.

<sup>4</sup> Cristina Messineo and Mauricio Maidana, Arte Verbal Qom: Consejos, Rogativos Y Relatos De El Espinillo (Chaco), Colección Ethnographica (Buenos Aires: Rumbo Sur, 2014), 53-4. The original text is in Toba and is accompanied by Messineo’s Spanish translations. This English translation, and each subsequent English translation, is mine.

<sup>5</sup> Eduardo Kohn, How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 17.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Muecke, No Road (Bitumen All the Way), 1999 ed. (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1997), 135.

<sup>7</sup> Kohn, How Forests Think, 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>11</sup> Paddy Roe and Stephen Muecke, Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley, 1985 ed. (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1983), iv.

<sup>12</sup> See Stuart Cooke, “Echo-Coherence: Moving on from Dwelling.” *Cultural Studies Review* 17.1 (2011): 230-46.

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<sup>13</sup> Ursula K. Heise, Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 21. See also Cooke, “Echo-Coherence”

<sup>15</sup> Heise, Sense of Place and Sense of Planet, 114.

<sup>16</sup> Vicky Kirby, Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 136.

<sup>17</sup> Cooke, “Echo-Coherence”.

<sup>18</sup> Heise, Sense of Place and Sense of Planet, 56

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>20</sup> Monika Kaup, “Neobaroque: Latin America’s Alternative Modernity,” Comparative Literature 58.2 (2006), 132.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>23</sup> Irleamar Chiampi in *ibid.*, 138

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 139

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>26</sup> Bejel in *ibid.*, 142.

<sup>27</sup> For a detailed reading of the similarities, and the irresolvable differences, between the creation stories of two different indigenous cultures, see Stuart Cooke, “Fire was in the Reptile’s Mouth: towards a transcultural ecological poetics,” *Landscapes*, 7.1 (2016).

<sup>28</sup> At the same time, various Latin American scholars have associated, not unproblematically, the Andean concept of Pachamama with the James Lovelock-inspired theorization of Gaia. Zaffaroni writes with the least equivocation: “*Gaia is Pachamama*” (my translation). See Zaffaroni, La Pachamama Y El Humano, 89.

<sup>29</sup> Kohn, How Forests Think, 9.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Minter, “Writing Country: Composition, Law and Indigenous Ecopoetics,” Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature 12.1 (2012), 3.

<sup>32</sup> Kirby, Quantum Anthropologies, 92.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>34</sup> Kohn, How Forests Think, 79

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>36</sup> Sonia Montecino, “Literatura Mapuche: Oralidad Y Escritura,” Simpson Siete 7 (1992), 156.

<sup>37</sup> Elicura Chihuailaf, Recado Confidencial a Los Chilenos (Santiago: LOM, 1999), 69.

<sup>38</sup> Jaqueline Caniguan, “Poesía Mapuche Registrada: Un Primer Rescate,” PhD thesis, Universidad de La Frontera, 1997, 15.

<sup>39</sup> Chihuailaf, Recado Confidencial a Los Chilenos, 69.

<sup>40</sup> Paraphrasing Brian Massumi, A User’s Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari, 1996 ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 30.

<sup>41</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Brian Massumi (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 93.

<sup>42</sup> Chihuailaf, Recado Confidencial a Los Chilenos, 62.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Iván Carrasco, “Metalengua De La Poesía Etnocultural De Chile I,” Estudios Filológicos 28 (1993), 71.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>45</sup> Zaffaroni, La Pachamama Y El Humano, 119–21.

<sup>46</sup> Charles Pigott, “Ecological Ethics in Two Andean Songs,” Studies in American Indian Literatures 26.1 (2014), 82.

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<sup>47</sup> Stephen Muecke, Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 50.

<sup>48</sup> Rose, Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation, 213.

<sup>49</sup> Like Sumaq Kaway, wunan can be thought of as an ordering mechanism for the coherence of different social and mythological structures. See Valda Blundell and Robert Layton, “Marriage, Myth and Models of Exchange in the West Kimberleys,” Mankind 11 (1978).

<sup>50</sup> Pigott, “Ecological Ethics in Two Andean Songs,” 82.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 83 (citing Brian Bauer).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>53</sup> Alberto Acosta in *ibid.*, 106.

<sup>54</sup> See Kohn, How Forests Think, 146–50; Pigott, “Ecological Ethics in Two Andean Songs,” 106.

<sup>55</sup> Pigott, “Ecological Ethics in Two Andean Songs,” 106.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example: *ibid.*, 107; Martin Harrison, On Composition: Five Studies in the Philosophy of Writing (Sydney: Vagabond Press, in press), 100–105; Gordon Brotherston, Book of the Fourth World: Reading the Native Americas through Their Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 42–43.

<sup>57</sup> Pigott, “Ecological Ethics in Two Andean Songs,” 107.

<sup>58</sup> In Kohn, How Forests Think, 156.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>60</sup> Chihuailaf, Recado Confidencial a Los Chilenos. p. 46

<sup>61</sup> Zaffaroni, La Pachamama Y El Humano, 124.

<sup>62</sup> Messineo and Maidana, Arte Verbal Qom, 21.

<sup>63</sup> Minter, “Writing Country,” 8.

<sup>64</sup> Rose, Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation, 153.

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- <sup>65</sup> Kohn, How Forests Think, 200.
- <sup>66</sup> Pigott, “Ecological Ethics in Two Andean Songs,” 92.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.
- <sup>68</sup> Josef Estermann in *ibid.*, 94.
- <sup>69</sup> Serenella Iovino, “The Living Diffractions of Matter and Text: Narrative Agency, Strategic Anthropomorphism, and How Interpretation Works,” Anglia 133.1 (2015), 81.
- <sup>70</sup> Eric Dardel in Sarah Millard, “Geografía Del Folclore Del Noroeste Argentino: Una Música Entre El Hombre Y La Tierra,” Revista Española de Antropología Americana 42.1 (2012), 235.
- <sup>71</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, “Dreaming Ecology: Beyond the Between,” Religion and Literature 40.1 (2008), 111.
- <sup>72</sup> Zaffaroni, La Pachamama Y El Humano, 114.
- <sup>73</sup> Gerald L. Bruns, The Material of Poetry: Sketches for a Philosophical Poetics, 2012 ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 50.
- <sup>74</sup> Kohn, How Forests Think, 39.
- <sup>75</sup> Messineo and Maidana, Arte Verbal Qom, 31.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 30–31.
- <sup>77</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 31.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 81–82.
- <sup>79</sup> Chihuailaf, Recado Confidencial a Los Chilenos, 62.
- <sup>80</sup> Andrée Rosenfeld, “Structural Convergence in Arrernte Art and Song,” Many Exchanges: Archaeology, History, Community and the Work of Isabel McBryde, eds. Ingereth Macfarlane, Mary-Jane Mountain, and Robert Paton (Canberra: Aboriginal History Inc., 2005), 180.
- <sup>81</sup> Messineo and Maidana, Arte Verbal Qom, 84.

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- <sup>82</sup> John (with Yanyuwa families) Bradley, Singing Saltwater Country: Journey to the Songlines of Carpentaria (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2010). p. 243
- <sup>83</sup> Brotherston, Book of the Fourth World. p. 49
- <sup>84</sup> For further discussion with relation to Indigenous American literature, see *ibid.* p. 46. See also the new materialist correlations in Iovino, "The Living Diffractions of Matter and Text." Eg. Iovino writes of "stories and all formative patterns" as "networks of agencies [that] manifest themselves in forms that can be read as narratives". p. 76.
- <sup>85</sup> Harrison, On Composition. p. 104
- <sup>86</sup> Brotherston, Book of the Fourth World. p. 42
- <sup>87</sup> Bradley, Singing Saltwater Country. p. 245
- <sup>88</sup> Kirby, Quantum Anthropologies. p. 12
- <sup>89</sup> Millard, "Geografía Del Folclore Del Noroeste Argentino." pp. 239-40
- <sup>90</sup> Minter, "Writing Country." p. 7
- <sup>91</sup> In *ibid.* pp. 5-6
- <sup>92</sup> Millard, "Geografía Del Folclore Del Noroeste Argentino." p. 230
- <sup>93</sup> Pigott, "Ecological Ethics in Two Andean Songs." p. 89
- <sup>94</sup> Messineo and Maidana, Arte Verbal Qom. pp. 183-4
- <sup>95</sup> Thomas Solomon, "Dueling Landscapes: Singing Places and Identities in Highland Bolivia," Ethnomusicology 44.2 (2000). p. 272
- <sup>96</sup> See Stuart Cooke, Speaking the Earth's Languages: A Theory for Australian-Chilean Postcolonial Poetics (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2013).
- <sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* Chapter 7.
- <sup>98</sup> Kohn, How Forests Think. pp. 205-6
- <sup>99</sup> Quoted in *ibid.* p. 206
- <sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* p. 206; "indefinite possibilities" cites Charles Peirce.

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- <sup>101</sup> Brotherston, Book of the Fourth World. p. 48
- <sup>102</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, "Cosmopolitics: The Kiss of Life," New Formations.76 (2012). p. 199
- <sup>103</sup> Stephen Muecke, "Reproductive Aesthetics: Multiple Realities in a Seamus Heaney Poem," Mindful Aesthetics: Literature and the Science of Mind, eds. Chris Danta and Helen Groth (NY & London: Bloomsbury, 2013). p. 168
- <sup>104</sup> Ibid. p. 169
- <sup>105</sup> Ibid. pp. 170-71
- <sup>106</sup> Ibid. p. 168
- <sup>107</sup> Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, "Words from the Other Side," Social Alternatives 9.4 (1991). p. 27
- <sup>108</sup> Messineo and Maidana, Arte Verbal Qom. p. 137
- <sup>109</sup> See, for example, the case of *The Bulu Line* in Stuart Cooke, ed., George Dyungayan's Bulu Line: A West Kimberley Song Cycle (Sydney: Puncher & Wattmann, 2014).
- <sup>110</sup> Muecke, "Reproductive Aesthetics." pp. 170
- <sup>111</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, "Dance of the Ephemeral: Australian Aboriginal Religion of Place," Experiences of Place, ed. Mary N. Macdonald (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). p. 165
- <sup>112</sup> Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984), 3.
- <sup>113</sup> For example, see Solomon, "Dueling Landscapes," 270. Also see my introduction in George Dyungayan's Bulu Line: A West Kimberley Song Cycle (Sydney: Puncher & Wattmann, 2014).
- <sup>114</sup> Cooke, Speaking the Earth's Languages. p. 293.
- <sup>115</sup> Pigott, "Ecological Ethics in Two Andean Songs," 90.

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