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The Songs of Others: Contemporary Poetics and the More-than-human



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Stuart Cooke

This essay considers the presence of animal or non-human language in a selection of twentieth century and contemporary poems. Of course, critical discussion of the representation of animals and plants in poetry is hardly unusual in the growing number of forums for ecocriticism. Less common, however, is attention to those moments when a poet attempts to provide space in his or her poem for the poetry of the animals and plants *themselves*. So, focusing first on poems by Tomas Tranströmer and Eugenio Montejo, in which turns to the non-human are quite common, I want to ask why non-human languages are so important in their work. From here I will map out a series of concerns that are often entangled with the presence of animal voices in poetry, involving examples from a number of Australian and North and South American poets, including Les Murray, Judith Wright, Pablo Neruda and José Emilio Pacheco. The aim here is not to provide an historical account of the evolution and tradition of animalistic poetic forms, or literary 'bestiaries', as they are often referred to, but rather to give a sense of the function and importance of such forms in modern and contemporary practice, and to show how, regardless of geographical location, many such poems turn to the animal as part of a similar route of exploration. These poems gesture towards the possibility of poetry beyond the human, just as recent critical theory has also attempted to venture beyond the human in the analysis of concepts such as "body", "text" and "culture". At the same time, there is a palpable absence within critical discourse of a sense of what, exactly, some of these more-than-human poetic forms might *be*. As Kate Rigby argues, however, cultivating an attention to the calls of the non-human might recover "the semiosis of the more-than-human world" and help Western societies "to overcome the perilous condition of self-enclosure" that renders us "dangerously oblivious" to our relations with other creatures.^[i] Thus, the final part of the essay will be a case study of a tango lyric from Argentina, which tells of the disappearance of a South American sparrow known as the *chingolo*. In an effort to recover something of the chingolo's song, I conclude with a reading of contemporary chingolo poetics.

Poetry beyond the Human

The presence of animals in art "radically disrupts" any idea that what we think of as "the environment" is a solid, singular entity, Timothy Morton argues, most particularly because their independent movements immediately contradict the notion that the environment might be controlled by us.^[ii] Animals are the most vital reminders that the world, and the art within it, is not only a human space. Indeed, for Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the animal-in-the-artwork is a sign post for the very edge of human awareness. For them, the intersection of rational thought and the surrounding world can be located in this art-animal, most particularly in the literary work. In such cases, "[w]e think and write for the animals themselves", they say, "We become animal so that the animal also becomes something

else". The aim of such art is not to produce limp, inert representations of something else, but rather to initiate reactions at those liminal regions at the edges of ourselves, to translate, as much as to be translated, from human to non-:

The agony of a rat or the slaughter of a calf remains present in thought not through pity but as the zone of exchange between man and animal in which something of one passes into another [...] Becoming is always double, and it is this double becoming that constitutes the people to come and the new earth.[iii]

The transference, the "zone of exchange", between human and animal in the literary text leaves residues of each on the other. It is my intention here to locate some of these zones in a range of poems, to find moments when spaces open so that the non-human might engage in a particularly human domain (printed language). This will not be all, however, because of the "double" nature of such becomings: from these zones it is indeed true that exciting kinds of invention emerge, but what is the implication of such "new earth" in the colonised, contested landscapes of Australia and the Americas?

Many of the poems I mention here are from the middle- to late-twentieth century; as such, they anticipate the ecological and "post-human" turns in contemporary critical theory. Scholars like Vicky Kirby and Timothy Morton have made important claims for the thoroughly ecological features of textual discourse, and for its inextricability from what we might have thought were more "natural" or "biological" systems, which involve not only other flora and fauna, but also the electro-chemical forces of which we are all composed. Kirby, for example, makes a compelling case for putting aside our "fear of opening *the concept 'text'* to an outside whose determinations do not begin and end with the human subject".[iv] More bluntly, Morton argues that "[i]f life forms cannot be said to differ in a rigorous way from texts".[v] Against "containing the contagion of language within the human repository",[vi] Kirby shows that all life, rather than human cultures alone, "is an informational bio-logy whose involvements have little respect for species division". In Kirby's formulation, human language is but an aspect of "a general and generative field of expressivity", part of which also includes the languages of other animals *and* of the supposedly inert, physical matter on which living systems rely.[vii] For Morton, too, a text itself "has no thin, rigid boundary, what it includes, what it touches, must also consist of life forms, Earth itself, and so on".[viii] In the accounts of both scholars, albeit via different routes, that previously rarefied domain of Culture – language and code – is shown to bleed into and be inseparable from the generative forces of Nature. Morton's description of a forest is particularly resonant in this regard:

Forests appear "natural", yet they follow the quite logical order of algorithms programmed by tree genomes. An algorithm is a script – a text – that automates a function, or functions, and in this case the script is coded directly into matter.[ix]

As a poetics, such theory leads to a decidedly messy, or open-ended, conception of poetry. Indeed, my discussion of the ways that human poems search for other *kinds* of poems – other, non-human kinds of poetic language – can be situated within contemporary eco-poetical discussions, particularly to do with Jonathan Skinner's understanding of eco-poetics as "the pursuit of connections that reach beyond the human sphere of interest and also [...] beyond the frame of the artwork or poem".[x]

To reiterate, I'm not interested in the simple representation of plants or animals in poetry here, or in talking about which animals are present in poetry, and how or when they relate to human subjects and speakers. Rather, I am talking about moments in certain poems where a gesture is made to a non-human poetry or song, or to an art that lies outside the domain(s) of human culture(s). In an early Tomas Tranströmer poem, for example, the elegiac nature of the verse, its dedication to a human body which will decay and re-enter cycles of decomposition and regrowth, leads the young Swedish poet to envision a music structured by the rhythms of a non-human world:

Beyond, the black cock crooning of the spheres.

Guiltless in our shadow, Music, like

the fountain's water rising among beasts

artfully turned to stone around the spray.

With the violin bows now as a forest.

The violin bows like rigging in a downpour—

the cabin flung under the downpour's hooves—

a gyroscope's suspension is us, joy.

(Tomas Tranströmer, "Elegy")

What the poem leaves us with is "Music's mute half", which is discernible only when its more audible partner is absent, "like the smell of resin / from the thunder-injured spruce".^[xi] Then, as if to pursue such music, a later poem invites us into the root system of a "squat pine", within which, like the roots themselves, "I you she he also branch out" beyond human thought and space. The act of perception which is integral to this poem – the observation of this pine tree – also *relies* on this very tree: the pine tree is not an object, but is rather like a kind of cybernetic (or symbiotic) enhancement to the senses of the otherwise solitary poet: "It feels", he writes, "as if my five senses were linked to another creature".^[xii]

We can approach the set of forces that often combine to produce such cross-creaturely "linkages" in some poems by Venezuelan poet Eugenio Montejo. The poem (and poet) needs to acknowledge its relationality with things otherwise considered external to it. Most famous of relevant examples from Montejo, perhaps, is "The Trees", whose thoughts are so "vague" and "fragmented" that they could barely fill "the shortest book". The trees "speak so little" but when the poet finally hears the voice of one, it comes through the "shriek" of a black thrush:

I realized that in his voice a tree was speaking,
one of so many,
but I don't know what to do with this sharp deep sound,
I don't know in what type of script
I could set it down. [xiii]

The lines above are the poem's last: an admission of ignorance. The work's function, therefore, is not to take us to a place to which the poet, by virtue of his privileged insight, has been granted access. Rather, the poem reveals an edge of sorts, where it points to what lies beyond. Importantly, however, that "beyond" is not hidden within the depths of another being, or another order of existence, where it remains forever beyond reach. The beyond, in the context of a poet like Montejó (and indeed, of Tránströmer), is a vast, complicated series of entanglements; its externality to us, and to the poem, is precisely what grants us, and the poem, relation to other things. In "The Rooster's Song", for example, the song begins "outside the rooster" but, during the course of the night, it falls "drop by drop" into his body:

Uncontainable, the song fills the rooster
like a deep pitcher;
it fills his feathers, his crest, his spurs
until its enormous cry breaks the limit of his being
and rings out,
spilling without pause down the length of the world.

Then, after leaving the body of the rooster, the song continues, "outside / scattered in the black wind" [xiv] Here, song and poetry are part of a worldly, indirect discourse passing through all manner of bodily forms. That the poet can participate in such discourse, whether as writer or reader, implies necessarily that others can as well; what Kirby would call "the archive of the world" is here present in every word, in "the flesh" of all kinds of creatures. [xv]

For Montejó, that "worldly archive" is what Peter Boyle translates as "earthdom" (*la terredad*). Montejó's earthdom is the condition by which something takes part in the earth's processes, it is a thing's "earthiness", we could say. Or, in avian terms:

The earthdom of a bird is its song,
what leaves its breast and returns to the world ... [xvi]

Crucially, earthdom is *not* a concept of the-world-itself. It does not refer to a container or a unified thing, within which different parts can be discerned. Rather, it provides a "fundamental and surprisingly minimalist cohesion" [xvii] it is a dynamic energy that manifests in different creatures in different ways and which, by virtue of "its travelling

wings”.[xviii] grants possibilities for relation. Montejó’s earthdom can therefore be contrasted with conceptions of the earth as an empty container, into which things like flora and fauna are then placed. Such conceptions are largely derived, argues Morton, from the German Romanticism of Humboldt and Herder. Here, organisms can be inserted or removed from the environment, but the ontological status of “the environment” remains unchanged; in other words, the environment is a transcendent sign. With the benefits of modern biology, however, we know that “[e]nvironments coevolve with organisms”. As Morton writes, “The world looks the way it does because of life forms ... there is no special ‘environment’ separate from [them]”. [xix] We can see the legacy of Romantic thought, and particularly German Romantic thought, in all kinds of moves to “unify” experience into a coherent whole, or to bring together those parts that – it is insisted – have been unjustly separated. Words like “nature”, “the environment”, “Gaia” and even “ecology” bear to various degrees the traces of transcendent confluences of innumerable, not necessarily compatible, systems. In part, too, this legacy persists in areas of contemporary biology, where the emphasis of research is on collective accounts of ecological systems and biomass, rather than, as biosemiotician Stephen Pain argues, on the experiences, perceptions and “exploits” of particular organisms.[xx]

Differing from the German Romantics, the explicit yearning in poems like those I’ve looked at so far is towards dialogues that can only ever take place with particular creatures. The poetics of such work is thus specifically ecological, which is to say that a notion of “landscape” is forgone in favour of an understanding of a world that exists as a function of – not a container *for* – different creatures. The poem, therefore, works not to evoke a pictorial assortment of various objects that produce an aesthetic affect, or to represent “the land” or “the environment” (which, because composed by it, is necessarily delimited by the poet’s language). Rather than producing an aesthetic luminosity, the poetry proposes an ethical position which results from interpersonal relation, not dissimilar to Gary Snyder’s expanded “moral compass”. [xxi] Instead of attempting containment, these poems have explicitly open ends that are not finalised by the stance of the poem itself. That is, the turn towards the trees or the rooster is an invitation that cannot, of course, be accepted (such beings – in these poems, at least – do not write), but the poet is *cognisant* of this: he is prepared for his poem to be left wanting, rather than to claim it stakes out a clear territory. At the same time, however, the gesture to the plant or animal isn’t towards some unreachable or divine absence: these pleas are too pointed, too specific; it is as if the others are *indeed* present in the composition, and would be visibly so, were it not for the faulty recording technology of the traditional, human-composed verse. Later in this essay I will show how, in the reading of another poem, we can remove the “as if” from the last part of the previous sentence.

Songs Hidden under the Wake of Environmental Destruction

In poems like these, there is an explicit recognition that music and poetry are not found purely within the domains of humans; indeed, the presence of poetry throughout the world signals the way that things in the world – by being able to create and listen to such music – become part of, and help to make, the world. But rather than steer the discussion towards what would be a literary history of Romantic thought, I want to ask why such turns are made so often, and so powerfully, across a range of contemporary cultural contexts. To return to Tranströmer’s oeuvre, for instance, these turns occur repeatedly, and a later poem

provides a clue as to why:

Tired of all who come with words, words but no language
I went to the snow-covered island.
The wild does not have words.
The unwritten pages spread themselves out in all directions!
I come across the marks of roe-deer's hooves in the snow.
Language but no words.[\[xxii\]](#)

Here there is, of course, the illustration of language as both an act of sounding and of inscription, as opposed to a schemata of symbolic “words” that conventionally might be confined to the realm of “human culture”. No doubt, the poem would be of interest to a Derridean scholar like Kirby. But what is it about the poem as a form of expression, and the act of writing it, that provides a space for this stark illustration of non-human language to occur? The answer is to be found in the first line: the poet is “[t]ired”; he seeks solace. Overwhelmed by waves and waves of words, he escapes to an island, where at last he might recover sufficient energy to listen to other kinds of language. Crucially, however, the poem *enacts* this peace; it is less than a quarter of the page, leaving us with blankness beneath. What tumultuous, tiresome experiences might have *led* the poet here have been cleaned away before the poem has begun. “Beneath” such cream-white blankness, therefore, is the hint of a frenzied, destructive, and increasingly meaningless world, where language, like everything else, approaches pure commodity.

If escape to an island isn't possible, however, then this more-than-wordly language might remain hidden, as in the case of Montejo's “Hidden Song”[\[xxiii\]](#) Yet it is not so much that what is hidden is necessarily invisible, but rather that it cannot be clearly distinguished from other things:

I couldn't distinguish the bird from the song.
I heard whispers, sudden blasts, chords,
golden oracles in droplets ...

The conflation of material and vibration – of bird and song – and of a variety of language and sound forms – whispering, sharp blasts and musical chords – suggests not only a cacophony, but also a state of incomprehension, similar to the experience of listening to another language with which one is completely unfamiliar. Key here, however, is the way in which the poet responds: putting aside the question of whether such discordance is the modulation of “ancient sound”, or the contamination of “this hour ... with machines”, he begins to write, to “jot down”. Writing too, then, also becomes entangled in this medley of indecipherability: the poem is littered with phrases that emphasise the speaker's inability to clearly *read* what is going on (“I couldn't distinguish ...”; “... I didn't know ...”; “... I didn't even know ...”; “... I don't know ...”). Where the Trströmer poem took us to that place from which the deer tracks in the snow could be seen quite clearly, “Hidden Song” barely manages to inscribe “one line of [the bird's] shadow”. Nevertheless, each poem is in some

important sense *written* by a non-human presence, be it the way the poem opens out into space written by deer tracks in “March” or the “jotted down” notes of “Hidden Song”.

In part though, I’d suggest, the differences in what is *seen* in each poem are to do with the simple fact that semi-tropical and tropical Venezuelan ecologies are far more complex, and far more overwhelming in their complexity, than a Swedish winter landscape. But this is only “half” the issue, because it is also true that Montejo is dealing with a significantly more disruptive set of social and political stimuli. As Montejo scholar Miguel Gomes points out, he “is a poet, but also a Venezuelan or Latin American poet – which entails a very concrete set of social references”. When Montejo began publishing poetry books in the 60s and 70s, Venezuela was undergoing profound economic and social change, showing the signs of what Gomes calls a “vigorous capitalist spatiality”. Older, feudal property relations were dissolving, causing

the new commodification of rural and urban land; the geographical concentration of both labor and industrial production in urban centers, with the concomitant disintegration of earlier forms of urban and rural life; and, last but not least, the divorce of residence and work place
... [xxiv]

Gomes’s points usefully emphasise the fact that Montejo is writing very much in *resistance* to a process that he understands to be destructive. In Gomes’s own words:

It is hardly surprising that Montejo chose to speak of trees, birds, roosters, oxen, horses, forests, and cicadas – topics having little or nothing at all to do with the only political or material reality imaginable back then.[xxv]

These animals, and the earthly poetry in which they participate, are, therefore, the end point of a decidedly political poetics. But the politics are not reductively pastoral, which is to say that Montejo isn’t interested in simply contrasting an [idyllic] Venezuelan past with the decaying present. Instead, he is looking for ways out of the grotesque quagmire of *neocaudillismo* that has overrun Venezuelan space:[xxvi] seeking to articulate the art of other creatures, then, is an attempt to articulate, and activate, a contemporary and radically alternative polis. Non-human poetics orient the poet’s yearning for an alternate state of affairs, which alludes to a wake of appalling colonial and industrial destruction.

As one might expect, given the region’s history, we can find similar situations in the work of a variety of South American poets. In poems like “God Undresses in the Rain” (*Dios se desnuda en la lluvia*) and “It Wasn’t Necessary” (*No era necesario*) by Argentinian Juan L. Ortiz (1896-1978), the earth is alive with a creative, and very seductive, spirit. While God undresses, birds sing and plants dance; God’s clothes rain down to catalyse an operatic crescendo:

Rain, rain!
God’s springtime
nakedness,
that falls dancing, dancing ... [xxvii]

For Ortiz, then, the divine is manifest in an earthly creativity:

It wasn't necessary to look to the sky nor to the branches.

I saw you here, in the pure earth, in the naked earth.

I saw you here, spring spirit, dancing or burning serenely like joy

without name ... [xxviii]

Again, as for Montejó, the earth is not configured in grand scale as "Nature", but rather "as confidant and friend", or as a variety of zones in which intimate relations can take place.[xxix] Just as importantly, however, Ortiz's search for intimate or "naked" relation with the earth is motivated by the destruction of such intimacy elsewhere. Similar to Montejó, and also to Pablo Neruda (who I mention further below), the natural world for Ortiz is the base of all history. Where Montejó's "earthdom" expresses a "primordial and always necessary union between culture and anything material existing independently of human beings",[xxx] Ortiz's Marxist, materialist poetics mean that, similarly, material conditions – the land, its environments – must provide the template for human morality.[xxxi]

In the next part of this essay I will turn to focus more squarely on a comparative reading of a set of Australian and Latin American poetry. Before doing so, however, it is useful to refer to a book that in many ways "bridges" the Pacific space that I am about to leap back and forth across myself. As the title suggests, Jeffrey Yang's *An Aquarium* (2008) is a marine bestiary, specifically of Pacific species ranging in size and existential order from abalone and kelp to orcas and the United States. Expansive both in geographical and cultural terms, the book embraces Chinese and US poetics, Pacific histories, plus Arabic, Indian and European cultural references. Each poem in the collection is named after a different species, but the poems aren't simply caricatures of different marine life. Instead, Yang's creatures are inseparable from the social ecologies he enacts to describe them:

The life phases of a parrotfish

are expressed in colors. By day,

the parrotfish replenishes coral reef

sands, and by night spins

its mucous cocoon bed-

room. Is this art's archetype

abstracted from politics?

Picasso thought abstraction a cul-de-

sac. The CIA loved Abstract

Expressionism ... [xxxii]

Like the poem above, much of *An Aquarium* shifts between marine and human worlds in order to illustrate, on a Pacific scale, the impact of US-led imperialism and over-consumption. By the end of the collection, Pacific biology has become completely inseparable from the history of US military expansion; a poem about a species of algae called “zooxanthellae” locates its subject by excavating the remains of dead coral from the islands of Bikini Atoll, site of atomic bomb tests held by the USA after World War 2. As the poem’s lines balloon, so too does the sickness of the ecosystem it describes. Finally, after scientists from the US Department of Energy have finished their investigations into the lingering effects of radiation, we discover the zooxanthellae in “the skeletons of the coral”. They are the keys to all relation, “subsisting in an evolutionary relationship intimately defined by mutualism”, but the vectors for their symbioses have been severed by radioactive poison.[xxxiii] Of all the moments in poems in which animals become protagonists, this is one of the most revealing: *An Aquarium* has compelled us to a point where it is no longer possible to *think* of any kind of ecology, let alone the relationships between organisms of which any ecology will be composed, without also considering its destruction. This is the last poem in the collection, and on the following page the book ends with an epigraph from Sir Thomas Browne: “ ... there is something in us that can be without us and will be after us ... ”.[xxxiv] This “something” is what “opens” the text in Morton’s or Kirby’s terms, and it is a thing’s capacity for earthdom in Montejo’s. In Yang’s aquatic parliament, it is a force mobilised in an effort to animate non-human forms with human language, and to return to them something of the polis that industrial, twentieth century humans have destroyed.

Animal Colonies

Often, however, the poet’s search for the voice of an animal can indicate a more subtle movement towards the edge of the colonial frontier, where the limits of one knowledge system need to be exchanged for the requirements of another. In the English language, some of the great examples of this can be found in Les Murray’s oeuvre. Perhaps Murray’s most remarkable collection, *Translations from the Natural World* (1992) forgoes the geo-political contextualisation of a book like Yang’s *Aquarium* to explore new possibilities for syntax and grammar as a method of articulating a variety of highly distinct animal worlds. The book could seem like an innocent, if mesmerising, bestiary of various Australian native and agrarian flora and fauna, were it not part of a larger body of work that includes poems like ‘The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle’ (from *Ethnic Radio*, 1977). The most famous of all Murray’s poems, the “Song Cycle” maps a topography of Eastern Australia according to the syntactical and mythological echoes of [an English translation of] a Wonguri-Mandjikai song cycle from North East Arnhem Land.

In Spanish, on the other hand, José Emilio Pacheco’s *Álbum de zoología* (1985, published in English as *An Ark for the Next Millenium*, 1993) is a major example of a search for the non-human in which the animal cannot be separated from – is bound to – the human. As Analise DeGrave points out, many of the animals in the *Álbum* “are not presented in their original, ‘untouched’ state” but, instead, their existence is defined by the negative effects of humans on the non-human world:[xxxv]

Born here in this cage, the first lesson
I, the baboon, learned was that
in every direction I look this world is
bars and more bars.
Everything I see is striped
like the bars of a tiger's pelt.[\[xxxvi\]](#)

Rather than conflating human-urban and animal-natural worlds in an a-historical moment of ecological crisis, however, Pachecho's work is actually founded on a keen appreciation of the historical symbiosis of urban development and environmental destruction. From an earlier collection, for example, the poem "Los vigesémicos" makes reference to *The Anonymous Manuscript of Tlateloco*, an indigenous testimony of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. For DeGrave, such references underscore the point that, for Pachecho, the legacy of environmental destruction did not begin in the twentieth century, "but rather with the Conquest [of the Americas]".[\[xxxvii\]](#)

In large measure, what books like these exemplify is something of a nomadic transgression from one ontological field to another. The poet leaves behind "the inscriptions of a settled people", to paraphrase W. S. Merwin, in search for the "words on a journey".[\[xxxviii\]](#) A poet who migrates in this manner, according to Aaron Moe, is the poet "who is willing to learn new steps".[\[xxxix\]](#) Walking across the earth is no simple solution, however, but instead might be, in the words of Paul Carter, "a system for translating the country into a blank page, a facsimile ready for the imperial imprint".[\[xl\]](#) Still, one-sided or otherwise, such nomadic experiments with "new steps" indicate a partial dissolution of the colonial frontier, of the frontier between imperial reason and progress, on the one side, and dumb, animal land on the other. In the case of poets like Murray and Pachecho, then, the search for an animal's language is also tied to a form of decolonialism, or an "unlearning" of a different, inherited set of poetics brought from far across an ocean.

But at what cost, such a "partial dissolution"? In Moe's fascinating account of how Whitman's poetic forms "reach toward" other creatures, for example, we must be mindful of how such "reaching" was also part of Whitman's fantasies about nationalist unification, in which *all parts*, human or otherwise, were to form a new, English-language nation state.[\[xli\]](#) In contemporary English-language literature, the archetypal narrative of opening towards the non-human at the edges of a colonised landscape could be David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* (1993), where the prototypical poet-in-exile, Ovid, seeks to develop a lexicon for the strange, new worlds surrounding Tomis, an outpost of the Roman Empire. In seeking a harmonious relation with these unknown lands, however, colonial histories of frontier violence are seemingly obscured by a reconciliation which enables and seeks to complete the colonial project.[\[xlii\]](#) The case of Les Murray, and in particular his problematic adaptation of R. M. Berndt's translation of "Song Cycle of the Moon Bone" for "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle", is much-discussed and I won't add to it here, suffice to say that any internet search for the original Wonguri-Mandjikai cycle will result in a

barrage of entries about its relationship to Murray's work: in this case, for whatever motives the poet might have had, Murray's poem has consumed and all but over-ridden the Arnhem Land sequence.

Elsewhere I have discussed the problematic, colonialist implications of some of Judith Wright's work, too.^[xliii] Wright, a keen critic of some of Murray's views^[xliv] is much more wary about colonial appropriation than Murray, but her poetic imagination, nevertheless, often extends well beyond the limits of the colonial frontier. For example, one of her most famous poems, "Bora Ring" (from *The Moving Image*, 1946), is premised on the very process of cultural erosion that we might argue has occurred in the wake of Murray's song cycle. That is, the Aboriginal cultures to which it refers have vanished into the earth, and their "song is gone". The poem leaves us, as I have written elsewhere, "with the haunting sense of this inevitability, which is to say it ignores those who did not die ...".^[xlv] Again, however, as for Murray and Pachecho, Wright's excavation of indigenous presence – this time in the form of a Bora Ring, as opposed to a song-cycle or an anonymous manuscript – comes as part of an oeuvre of which much is also devoted to the detailed study and observation of Australian animals and plants, particularly birds. But just as Wright was more wary of straying into Aboriginal cultural realms than Murray, so too does she steer clear of entering into the fabulous, non-human semantics that Murray explores in *Translations from the Natural World*. Instead, poems like "Lyrebirds" (from *Birds*, 1962), are almost possessed by a fear of touching the Other, so adamantly do they make clear their inability to see it. A magnificent, Orphic "master", bearing "like a crest the symbol of his art", the lyrebird nevertheless "ought to be left secret, alone".^[xlvi]

Regardless of the particularities of Wright's or Murray's poetics, in each case it seems that the purported source of energy for the poems – be it native fauna or an Indigenous cultural form – is obscured for the sake of a particular kind of decolonial aesthetic. This poetic is premised on the adoption of forms that are sourced from the new territory, yet at the very same time it needs to assume the death, or invisibility, of such forms in order to be successful. In these poems, the step towards "newness" – be it anthropological or zoological – also involves stepping *on* this newness. Indeed, this partial, conditional dissolution of the colonial frontier, of the barrier between territories of colonial, printed languages and unusual zoologies, continues to manifest in various ways in even the most recent poetry publications. Although Australian poetry might have become much more cosmopolitan since the 1980s and 90s, certain colonialist preoccupations are still common, particularly in relation to the representation of animals. In some recent collections in which bestiaries play significant parts, the recurrence of dominant, local themes, to do with how animals must deal with an uninspiring, almost lifeless Australian environment, suggests that the imagination of these animals is also the imagination of their destitution.

Again, we can find revealing correlations in an investigation of Latin American poetics. In *Canto general* (1950), Pablo Neruda assumes the premature disappearance of Andean peoples in "Las alturas de Machu Picchu" *after* he has established, in elaborate detail, a vast, Latin American cornucopia of plants and animals.^[xlvii] In turn, DeGrave identifies "indigenous" or "native" utopias in Ernesto Cardenal's work, where Native American cultures represent those societies that are "lost, tarnished or threatened":

One feature that repeats in Cardenal's treatment of these utopias is a connection between the tribe, land and nature. [...] one finds a pattern. The poet first describes the tribe's beliefs [about] the relationship between humans and the natural world. At some point in the poems, Cardenal then details their destruction and loss.^[xlvi]

In instances like these, what is important is not simply to repeat the point that indigenous people are grouped together with a larger body of indigenous fauna near extinction. Rather, my point here is that in many cases of post-colonial poetics, the opening in the space of the poem towards the voice of the non-human, the apparent search for a language beyond the alphabet, those important instances of "zoopoetics" that are of interest to scholars like Aaron Moe, can actually signify broader, darker themes of colonial appropriation. In such cases, the search for the animal correlates with a search for alterity: the journey is to the other side of the frontier. Crucially, however, what the poet finds there is rarely able to speak for him or herself, but is instead silenced in the coffin of the English or Spanish poem.

Ironically, perhaps, the productive value of such poetry is enormous because, if we are aware of its problems, the work prompts us to look elsewhere for alternatives. A particularly poignant example of this situation is a celebrated Argentinian tango lyric from the late 1930s. Edmundo Bianchi's "Ya no cantas, chingolo" was recorded in 1928 with music by Antonio Scatasso, and has subsequently been collected in a major collection of tango lyrics that spans much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.^[xli] The song tells of the disappearance of a small, South American sparrow known as the *Chingolo* or *chingolito* (the Rufous-Collared Sparrow; *Zonotrichia capensis*) and – importantly – explicitly sources its musical heritage in the bird's song. The opening verse recalls a time now passed, when this little bird of the pampas "sung a song / so sad, it was as if / a heart was crying". This "wild bird", the song continues, was scared away by the arrival of the steam engine, so that now "his peerless song / is heard no longer". The stanza ends with an impassioned lament:

Poor little gaucho bird!
Where have you gone to die?

The rest of the lyric builds upon this lament. The chingolo, we learn, is most likely "crying" his song in solitude. By fusing an instrument of the folk tradition with the landscape, the bird becomes the "guitar of the countryside", a gaucho-like minstrel who has taken with him "all the tradition". Bird and guitar are separated again somewhat in the following stanza, primarily to make the point that, just like the gaucho himself, the chingolo's song rose into the sky where it glimmered at night like "the divine Southern Cross". But now the song has been silenced, and both gaucho and chingolo have fled, because the pampas have been invaded by "jazz, gringos and Ford". The conflation of the gaucho's music with the chingolo's, and of a folk [tango] tradition with an indigenous fauna, is cemented in the closing lines of the song:

Guitar of the countryside,
voice of loneliness,
since you left
we've forgotten how to sing.

What is also important here is the fact that the bird's name, "chingolo", comes from the Quechua, *ch'ekkóllo*.^[1] A very complicated set of inter-cultural relationships is at work in the lyric, therefore: while the bird's name signifies the translation of a South American language into a colonial one, and with it the way in which Indigenous South American cultures are important stores of ecological knowledge, the name has subsequently been fully appropriated by colonial European-Argentinian culture in order to pose a resistance against further colonisation. That is, the bird's perilous population status can now be correlated with the perilous status of *colonial* culture in the face of waves of neo-colonialism from the north, while its status as a symbol of displacements that have *already* occurred is all but completely forgotten.

It's no casual association, either, that of the chingolo with the gaucho. The link is an explicitly anti-imperial one, where imperialism refers to North American and European powers. After all, in what many consider to be Argentina's national epic, *Martín Fierro* by José Hernández (1872-79), the gaucho becomes a famous symbol not only of Argentine tradition, but also of resistance against Europeanisation. Somewhat more problematically, however, Hernández's gaucho was enlisted to fight at the frontier against the "invasions" of Native American peoples. In "Ya no me cantas", therefore, the necessary link between the destruction of habitat and the destruction of indigenous peoples' cultures is elided in favour of a nascent sense of Argentinian nationalism, implicit in which is a darkly racist, and even genocidal, undercurrent. This manifests not only in the staunch rejection of all "foreign" cultural forms (jazz, for example), but in the severing of the link between chingolo, frontier and Quechua cultures.

Much of this is brought into stark relief by the editor's notes on the song. The bird, writes José Gobello, along with the ombu tree (*el ombú*) in which it is often found, could be a symbol of the destruction of both Argentinian cultural and biological diversity. He continues:

Due to ignorance, development or commercial interests, animal and plant species were introduced into our territory that displaced and, in some cases, replaced the indigenous flora and fauna.

The chingolo's natural habitat was gradually taken over by a European immigrant, the sparrow (*el gorrión*), which spread rapidly and became a veritable plague.

But something else was needed to make our small friend really feel like he had been *invaded*.

The growth of the cities, the cacophony of the steam engines and the highways, and especially the disappearance of green, virgin spaces, forced him to nest in weedy shrubs, and now he is on the way towards extinction.

Will the chingolo's song, just like the gaucho's, remain in the void, where lie those things that have vanished forever?^[1]

The prior impact of all indigenous civilisations is erased with the evocation of “green, virgin spaces”. Not only is the complicated historical relationship between indigenous and frontier interests neglected here in order to affirm the transcendental supremacy of the nation state (those vast spaces have become “our territory”), but this nation state includes “indigenous flora and fauna” that need to be protected from “a European immigrant”. That European immigrant, however, does not refer to the vast majority of human Argentinians who claim such heritage, but to a *non*-human. In other words, there is a common, late-colonial double-play at work, correlates of which we can find in numerous instances of Australian and North American literature as well: indigenous humans are excluded (because they threaten the nation state) while indigenous non-humans are included, and indeed are happily incorporated into the culture of the nation state; on the other hand, non-indigenous humans – provided they share the European heritage of the nation state – are included, while non-human, non-indigenous animals are scorned, with the exception of a few species. In sum, indigenous peoples and non-indigenous animals lose out (see Figure 1). However, and most importantly, just as indigenous people have been consigned to countless dead ‘voids’ of their own in much colonialist poetry, the chingolo, beloved and acceptable as it may be, is also irretrievable.

Figure 1: Colonialist inclusions and exclusions in “*Ya no cantas, chingolo*”

	Non-human animal	Human animal
Indigenous	INCLUDED	EXCLUDED
Non-indigenous	EXCLUDED	INCLUDED*

* Non-indigenous humans are granted a form of indigeneity by virtue of their being members of the colonialist nation state.

The Chingolo's Response to ‘*Ya no me cantas, chingolo*’

After centuries of writing *about* the experiences of indigenous peoples, and of confining scholarly discussion of their arts to the realms of archaeology and classical anthropology, recognition and appreciation of indigenous cultural expression has grown exponentially in the past half-century. We are well-aware of the immense value of their burgeoning

contemporary publishing cultures in Australia, North America and a range of Latin American countries – in part because of their sophistication and complexity, and in part because they are such powerful means of resistance against imperialism.[liii] But what of the *other* creatures whose lives and cultures have been altered irrevocably by the arrival of Europeans? After all, if we are to accept that indigenous peoples are indeed the First Nations of continents like Australia, part of this acceptance must involve a serious recognition of indigenous cosmologies. Invariably in such cosmologies, non-human animals are as integral to conceptualisations of “land”, “country” and “culture” as the people themselves. What happens if, following developments in critical animal studies and ethology, literary critics acknowledge that many of these creatures *also* have their own rich traditions of poetics? Just as Indigenous American and Australian cultures have been profoundly impacted by European colonisation and oppression, and just as these cultures have fought hard to resist and adapt to such forces, it is possible to see how many other-than-human Australians and Americans have also fought to maintain their creative traditions.

As arguments for recognition of the constitutional status of non-human flora and fauna develop, and are formalised in nations like Bolivia and Ecuador,[liiii] and as our exploding population brings us into ever-closer proximity with populations of other species, the question of where studies in the Humanities are to begin and end is becoming increasingly pressing. Indeed, much animal studies scholarship of recent years has attended to the “new animal geography”, which takes into account, firstly, the agencies of animals themselves, along with the ways such animals transgress anthropocentric orders and, finally, the ways that animals *resist* such orders.[liv] With the line between human and non-human cultures now blurred, it is imperative that cultural critics and scholars take seriously non-humanistic creativity. Human members of colonised territories have used poetry, song and narrative to such powerful, anti-colonial effect. In turn, I propose here that the same space left for reply in a poem like Wright’s “Bora Ring” (which we might follow with Oodgeroo’s Noonuccal’s “We Are Going”), might also be located in “Ya no cantas, chingolo”. One way to look for this reply is to search the ethological record for the chingolo’s song.

A chingolo song lasts one to two seconds, with frequencies between 2 and 7 kHz/sec. The song’s structure consists of two primary parts. The first part consists of one to four notes, while the second, also known as a “trailing part”, is composed of a series of more similar notes. This second part is crucial because, depending on the length of the note and the separation between each in the series, it could sound like a trill, or like a series of emphatic, distinct whistles. Indeed, without a clearly discernible trill it can seem like the song is only composed of one part.[lv] Of particular relevance to this discussion, however, is how the song of the chingolo varies considerably across the different bioregions of Argentina. Chingolos from different regions exhibit extremely different note- and trill-types, tempos and melodic contours. Within an ecologically homogeneous area, however, these characteristics tend to remain very stable, and this has resulted in a variety of Chingolo dialects. For example, it has been observed that songs from both higher altitudes and from “open”, natural vegetation areas (eg. grasslands and deserts) tend to be lower in frequency, and the trills shorter, than songs from lower altitudes and “closed” vegetation

areas (eg. forest and woodland).^[lvi] Paul Handford also suggests that the birds' trills might be influenced by other avian locals, pointing towards a localised, cross-cultural exchange between bird species.^[lvii]

Fundamentally, however, research suggests that these variations are much more closely related to the chingolo's *original* vegetation than to their contemporary habitats (which might be a mixture of native and imported flora, or composed of very little flora at all).^[lviii] In other words, the profound impacts of European colonisation and industrialisation on chingolo song culture have been long-lasting and very hard to adjust to. On the basis of more recent research, it appears to be the case that a number of chingolo song styles have *changed* in response to dramatic conversions of particular habitats. The "acoustic pressures" that emerge in a habitat that was once "closed" but, in the space of a few years, has been "opened" by deforestation, or a once-"open" habitat that is "closed" by human development, are tremendous. As a result, the song styles of those birds in the most severely-modified habitats appear to have significantly lower frequencies and narrower bandwidths than anywhere else,^[lix] as if the birds of those cultures most traumatised are searching for radically alternative forms of expression. What took place in "Ya no cantas", that attempt to strengthen national Argentinian culture by sourcing a tango song in the chingolo's, is here drastically complicated, therefore: while the lyric sends the bird prematurely to a silent void, the ethological records tells a different story. Colonisation and industrial development have had profound impacts upon chingolos and their poetics, but the continued evolution of their music suggests very strongly that they are struggling to adapt to these changing conditions, and to find new forms of expression within them.

"Much like other cultures that have refused to be absorbed by colonialism", writes G. A. Bradshaw, "elephants are struggling to survive as an intact society, to retain their elephant-ness, and to resist what modern humanity has tried to make them—passive objects in zoos [and poems] ..."^[lx] In turn, we might say of the chingolo that it too, despite the ongoing onslaught of invasion and colonisation, is doing its best to preserve its chingolo-ness, and to resist representations in which it has vanished, and taken with it all further possibility for song. No doubt Bianchi's motivations as a lyricist were in some sense "honourable", but imaginations of absence like these can nevertheless serve to conclude the project of colonisation in much the same way as a poem like "Bora Ring", however unwittingly. The chingolos survive, and keep singing, and it is our ethical responsibility as poets and scholars to listen to them. The irreducible value of work like "Ya no cantas, chingolo" is therefore in its ability to suggest entry into these more-than-human fields; while the poems themselves might stay clear of them, their language nevertheless rests upon them, is made possible by them. It is not as if the essence of the chingolo or the lyrebird "lives on" in the poems – it would be absurd to suggest or hope that a poem might translate the complexity of an entire species – but that the poem cannot exist, its language cannot function, if its referents are not at least traceable. By following those traces, we enter other worlds.

Appendix A: "Ya no cantas, chingolo" (Chingolito)

1928

Lyrics: Edmundo Bianchi; Music: Antonio Scatasso

Hubo en la pampa una vez

un pajarito cantor
que sobre un yuyo paráu
entonaba una canción
tan triste, que parecía
el llorar de un corazón.
A ese pájaro bagual
lo espantó el ferrocarril
y su canción sin igual
no se podrá más oír...
¡Pobre pajarito gaucho!
¡Dónde habrá ido a morir!
¡Ya no cantas chingolo!...
¿Dónde fuiste a parar?
En algún lado, muy solo,
tu canción llorarás.
Guitarrita del campo,
pájaro payador,
te llevaste contigo
toda la tradición.
Como el ave, el payador,
sentado junto al ombú,
también antes, su canción
elevaba hacia el azul,
donde brillaba, de noche
la divina Cruz del Sur.
Ahora se calló el cantar
y el ave y el payador
fueron lejos a ocultar

su voz llena de emoción,
pues ya invadieron la pampa
¡el jazz, el gringo y el Ford!
¡Ya no cantas chingolo!...
¿Dónde fuiste a parar?
¿En algún lao, muy solo,
despacito llorás?...
Guitarra del campo,
voz de la soledad,
desde que tú te fuiste
no sabemos cantar.

Notes

[i] Kate Rigby, "Animal Calls", in *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology*, ed. Stephen D. Moore (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), p. 117

[ii] Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 99

[iii] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 109

[iv] Vicky Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 15

[v] Timothy Morton, "Ecology as Text, Text as Ecology", *The Oxford Literary Review* 32.1 (2010), p. 1

[vi] Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies*, p. 48

[vii] *Ibid.*, p. 41

[viii] Morton, "Ecology as Text, Text as Ecology", p. 2

[ix] *Ibid.*, p. 4

[x] Angela Hume, "Imagining Eco-poetics: An Interview with Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Evelyn Reilly, and Jonathan Skinner," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19.4 (2012), p. 754

[xi] "Elegy", in Tomas Tranströmer, *Selected Poems: 1954-1986* (Hopewell: Ecco Press, 1987), pp. 16-19

[xii] "A Few Minutes", in *ibid.*, p. 94

[xiii] Eugenio Montejó, *The Trees: Selected Poems 1967-2004*, trans. Peter Boyle (Applecross: Salt, 2004), pp. 3

[xiv] *Ibid.*, p. 11

[xv] Kirby, *Quantum Anthropologies*, p. 47

[xvi] From “The Earthdom of a Bird”, in Montejó, *The Trees*, p. 19

[xvii] Miguel Gomes, “Eugenio Montejó’s Earthdom”, trans. Peter Boyle, in Montejó, *The Trees*, p. xix

[xviii] Montejó, *The Trees*, p. 19

[xix] Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 51

[xx] Stephen Philip Pain, “Inner Representations and Signs in Animals”, *Introduction to Biosemiotics: The New Biological Synthesis*, ed. Marcello Barbieri (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), p. 448

[xxi] Snyder discusses how his “moral compass” expanded to include more-than-human creatures in an interview with Lew Sitzer here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlsyGmnHDy8>

[xxii] “From March ’79”, in Tranströmer, *Selected Poems*, p. 159

[xxiii] Montejó, *The Trees.*, p. 119

[xxiv] Gomes, “Eugenio Montejó’s Earthdom”, pp. xxi-xxii

[xxv] *Ibid.*, pp. xxii

[xxvi] *Ibid.*, p. xxii. A common feature of Latin American politics, “neocaudillismo” refers to the adoration of strong, charismatic leaders, who often assume dictatorial proportions.

[xxvii] “Dios se desnuda en la lluvia”, in Horacio Armani, ed., *Antología Esencial De Poesía Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Aguilar, 1981), p. 111 (my translation)

[xxviii] “No era necesario”, in *ibid.*, p. 112 (my translation)

[xxix] Norma Pérez Martín, “El Espacio En La Obra Poética De Juan L. Ortiz”, *Los Espacios De La Literatura*, ed. Nélica Salvador and Elisa Rey (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Academia del Sur, 2001), p. 109

[xxx] Gomes, “Eugenio Montejó’s Earthdom”, p. xix

[xxxi] See Martín, “El Espacio En La Obra Poética De Juan L. Ortiz”, pp. 106, 108-9

[xxxii] From “Parrotfish”, in Jeffrey Yang, *An Aquarium* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2008), p. 34

[xxxiii] *Ibid.*, p. 63

[xxxiv] *Ibid.*, p. 65

[xxxv] Analisa DeGrave, “Ecoliterature and Dystopia: Gardens and Topos in Modern Latin American Poetry”, *Confluencia* 22.2 (2007), p. 96

[xxxvi] From “Baboon Babble [Monólogo del mono]”, in José Emilio Pacheco, *An Ark for the Next Millennium* [“Álbum de zoología”], trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (Austin: University of Texas Press 1993), pp. 68-9

[xxxvii] *Ibid.*, 95

[xxxviii] Quoted in Aaron M. Moe, *Zoopoetics: Animals and the Making of Poetry* (Plymouth: Lexington 2014), pp. 109-10

[xxxix] *Ibid.*, p. 110

[xl] “The Anxiety of Clearings”, in John Wolseley, *Patagonia to Tasmania: Origin, Movement, Species; Tracing the Southern Continents* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 1996), p. 7

[xli] See Moe, *Zoopoetics*, ch. 2.

[xlii] For further discussion about *An Imaginary Life*, see Hasti Abbasi, “The Ideology of Exile in *An Imaginary Life*”, *Antipodes: a global journal of Australian/New Zealand Literature* (in press).

[xliii] See Stuart Cooke, *Speaking the Earth’s Languages: A Theory for Australian-Chilean Postcolonial Poetics* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2013), ch. 2.

[xliv] See Les Murray and Judith Wright, “Correspondence”, *Southerly* 63.1 (2003).

[xlv] Cooke, *Speaking the Earth’s Languages*, p. 43-4

[xlvi] For a more detailed discussion, see Stuart Cooke, “Unsettling Sight: Judith Wright’s Journey into History and Ecology on Mt. Tamborine,” *Queensland Review* (in press).

[xlvii] For further discussion of *Canto general*, including a comparison to Wright’s work, see Cooke, *Speaking the Earth’s Languages*, ch 3.

[xlviii] DeGrave, “Ecoliterature and Dystopia”, p. 94

[xlix] Edmundo Bianchi, “Ya No Cantas, Chingolo”, *Letras De Tango: Selección (1897-1981)*, ed. José Gobello (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Centro Editor S.A., 1997). The full song-text is provided in Appendix A. All translations are mine.

[l] *Ibid.* (Editor’s notes)

[li] *Ibid.*

[lii] See Cooke, *Speaking the Earth’s Languages*.

[liii] See, for example, Eugenio Raúl Zaffaroni, *La Pachamama Y El Humano* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Madres de Plaza de Mayo, 2013).

[liv] Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert, "Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: An Introduction", in *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Human-Animal Relations*, ed. Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 5-15

[lv] Fernando Nottebohm, "The Song of the Chingolo, *Zonotrichia Capensis*, in Argentina: Description and Evaluation of a System of Dialects", *The Condor* 71.3 (1969), pp. 301-2

[lvi] Paul Handford and Stephen C. Loughheed, "Variation in Duration and Frequency Characters in the Song of the Rufous-Collared Sparrow, *Zonotrichia Capensis*, with Respect to Habitat, Trill Dialects and Body Size", *The Condor* 93.3 (1991), p. 652

[lvii] Paul Handford, "Vegetational Correlates of Variation in the Song of *Zonotrichia Capensis*", *Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology*, 8.3 (1981), p. 206

[lviii] Handford and Loughheed, "Variation in Duration and Frequency", p. 652; see also Darío A. Lijtmaer and Pablo L. Tubaro, "A Reversed Pattern of Association between Song Dialects and Habitat in the Rufous-Collared Sparrow", *The Condor* 109.3 (2007).

[lix] Lijtmaer and Tubaro, "A Reversed Pattern of Association", p. 664

[lx] Quoted in Moe, *Zoopoetics*, p. 117

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