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## Critically Imagining a Decolonised Vision in Australian Poetry

*Cassandra Julie O'Loughlin (University of Newcastle, Australia)*

Critically imagining a new aesthetic for a decolonised vision in Australian poetry, one that overrides the notion of Western supremacy and requires a shift from an anthropocentric position to one that is ecocentric, may provide our best hope of sustaining a positive social role for poetics in this country. Locating the self towards nature and realising a profound sense of immanence in all natural things, will hopefully lead to a humble and more ethical attitude. This article identifies Western decolonised poetry in Australia and finds a correlation, or an aesthetic and conceptual interface, between it and Aboriginal aural and literary representations of Country.

Humility is the key to the type of poetry envisioned here: it is a way of understanding, of interpreting, and of speaking about this country that accepts our vulnerabilities and connectivities to life and death processes. Decolonised poetry relates ethically to cultural differences and to the other-than-human world. It promotes moral accountability by avoiding racist and bigoted language. It claims a deeply felt kinship with the land. The type of poetry identified here accepts that all humanity is subject to ecological relationships and biological processes, and ensures that one culture or life form is not privileged above another.

This article acknowledges a significant Indigenous cultural heritage of communicative engagement with Country. Country in this sense is traditional land with its embedded cultural values related to Dreamtime. Peter Minter reminds us of the classic definitions of Country written by scholars such as Deborah Bird Rose, Peter Read, Peter Sutton and others who speak about “reciprocity, kinship, equivalence, autonomy and balance” (“Writing Country” 4). In his article, however, Minter focuses on what he terms Country’s “poetical *muthologos* as a law/lore-full entity; indeed, its Dreaming” (4). He quotes the

anthropologist William Stanner: Dreaming is the “poetic key to reality” (4). He concludes his article with: “Country has always been a ‘legal’ person, and has always made poesis without the aid of the extractive aesthetics of the capitalist romantic sublime” (6). Readings of country are diverse, and, according to Krim Bentrack *et al.*, “the country does not offer up the fullness of its meaning to the receptive individual as some romantics and spiritualists would have us believe” (*Reading the Country* 76). In the type of poetry encouraged here, there is acceptance that the entire richness of meaning in the natural world for the observer may not be available.

Anti-pastoral/oppositional poetry, such as that written by John Kinsella, for instance, could be considered as having a decolonising purpose. His work has the capacity to be politically persuasive, but one must question how it presents us with a vision of how to live sustainably with the land or as a poetics of place that can be thought of as nurturing. In one of his poems in “Codex for a Protest” in *Redstart*, for example, it is as if the poet randomly plucks nature (in the form of a wedge-tailed eagle) out of the air and thrusts it into a confusing, chaotic and menacing cultural landscape. The bird appears amidst “punked-out headjob, smack dealers and submachine guns / shooting up their own night clubs” (Gander 27). Kinsella does, however, have an instinctive sense of connection to place and is acutely aware of the inequity between the colonist and the “Other” due to unsustainable engagement with the resources of human progress.

A particular type of post-pastoral poetry, as identified below, has a more sustainable and positive outlook for decolonised poetry in Australia. In his attempt to identify post-pastoral poetry, Terry Gifford, claims, among other things, that there should be “a deep sense of the immanence in all natural things” (*Pastoral* 152). In a later article, “Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral, and Post-Pastoral”, he updates his conceptualisation and raises several questions, one of which is: “Can awe in the face of natural phenomena, such as landscapes, lead to humility in our species?” (27). Being aware of the wonders of the natural world of which we are a part could mean we understand and accept that it pervades and sustains all things, including humanity. In this sense, the type of

post-pastoral poetry that is “best used to describe works that successfully suggest a collapse of the human/nature divide while being aware of the problematics involved”, which Gifford clarifies (“Pastoral, Anti-Pastoral, and Post-Pastoral” 26), recognises the primacy of the natural world and the relatedness of thriving and resilient life processes outside of human control or comprehension.

The task of decolonised poetry is to promote ethics that acknowledge the claims of others, not only that of the non-human, but especially in this instance for the Indigenous peoples. Rose suggests what she calls a “recuperative” decolonised vision (*Reports from a Wild Country* 11-33). In contemplating the potential of ethical action concerning decolonisation, she signifies “the unmaking of the regimes of violence that promote the disconnection of moral accountability from time and place” (*Reports* 214). Post-pastoral poetry of the type encouraged here disempowers racist and prejudiced points of view and questions all hierarchical systems that basically privilege the concept of colonial superiority *and* human domination over all other lifeforms.

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett proposes to resituate humans in the world rather than outside of it. This is her attempt to censure her illusion of human mastery, to “highlight the common materiality of all that is, expose a wider distribution of agency, and reshape the self and its interests” (122). To counter “the narcissism of humans in charge of the world” and to emphasise the vitality of non-human bodies, forces, and forms, she suggests cultivating “anthropomorphism” (xvi, 122). Anthropomorphising the non-human and suggesting that “human agency has some echoes in non-human nature”, as she does, could be interpreted, however, as compromising the decolonising task by having the non-human accommodate our needs – another form of colonial control. This perpetuates the colonising refusal to recognise the prior presence and agency of non-humans.

Some Western ecocentric theorists have in recent decades developed approaches that set their theories apart from other main issues of modern environmentalism. Among other things, they look to the sciences for answers concerning human embeddedness in ecological relationships and biological

processes that could help to re-theorise Australian decolonised poetry. In *Environmentalism and Political Theory*, Robyn Eckersley, for example, claims that “ecocentric theorists [. . .] often *enlist* [her emphasis] science to help undermine deeply ingrained anthropocentric assumptions that have found their way into many branches of social sciences and humanities, including modern political theory” (51). Anthropocentric assumptions such as “the confident belief that with further scientific research we can rationally manage (i.e., predict, manipulate, and control) all the negative unintentional consequences of large-scale human interventions in nature” (Eckersley 51). For Karen Barad, who is known for her theory of “agential realism”, “the nature of the production of bodily boundaries is not merely experiential, or merely epistemological, but ontological” – the nature of reality (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 160). Barad, whose work is inspired by the physicist Niels Bohr, one of the founders of quantum physics, introduces the term “intra-action” in acknowledgment of the ontological inseparability of entities, which, according to Barad, is consistent with recent experimental and theoretical developments in quantum physics (128). Serpil Oppermann claims quantum physics “has predicted a new field of reality where everything is inextricably interconnected”, thus providing a means by which the ontological divide between nature and culture can be closed (“Ecocentric Postmodern Theory” 234). The principle of interconnectedness as it is characterised by ecological quantum principles, according to Oppermann, “is a key feature on which there seems to be a general agreement among physicists” (235). Concerning what she calls the “interrelational nature of reality”, she quotes Werner Heisenberg, one of the major pioneers of quantum mechanics, who says: “The world thus appears as a complicated tissue of events, in which connections of different kinds alternate or overlap or combine and thereby determine the texture of the whole” (235). With these insights we could conclude that we are not only made up of non-human biota and other elements but we influence and are influenced by them. Under this scenario, the claims and pretensions of colonial domination and anthropocentric notions are debunked.

Science alone, however, does not address all aspects of our being. The integral theorist, Michael Zimmerman, in “Quantum Theory, Intrinsic Value, and Panentheism”, for instance, suggests that “scientific understanding alone cannot produce the needed change of consciousness” (5). When questioning whether quantum theory can lead us towards a more inclusive, less dualistic mode of consciousness, he states that “To move beyond this dualistic mode, an experiential insight is required that is not available from quantum theory” (12). His main reason for this latter statement is that the practitioners of quantum physics continue to experience themselves dualistically: their everyday “experience” of the world is inconsistent with their theoretical findings because the everyday experience is not influenced by those insights.

Consideration of experiential insight and the fundamental ecological intuition that we are in a real sense connected with the earth, along with the rationality of quantum principles, goes partway to appropriately addressing the multifaceted complexity of societal and ecological reality. The surfacing of scientific theories that speak of internal relatedness might however propel the development of a more inclusive consciousness in relation to our sense of embeddedness in ecological relationships in this country and inspire the much needed change in colonial consciousness concerning our relationship with each other and with the natural environment.

Specific examples of Indigenous and non-Indigenous poetry are presented here for consideration. They range historically from a translation of a secular version of a sacred Indigenous song, “A ‘WŌnguri- ‘Mandzikai Song Cycle of the Moon-Bone” in 1948 to the present day, including the work of Indigenous poets Lionel Fogarty, Lisa Bellear, Hyllus Maris, and the late Bill Neidjie (1920-2002). The work of Judith Wright and Robert Gray are included primarily to demonstrate the seemingly problematic transition from pastoral poetry to a decolonised poetic vision in this country for Western writers. It is argued that the poems written by Bonny Cassidy, Peter Minter and Martin Harrison included in this article have achieved the desired outcome. The concepts of interdependency and embeddedness in ecological relationships are

approached differently by the individual poets generally, regardless of culture, race, or ethnic background.

### **Feeling an attachment to earth from an Indigenous perspective**

Mary Graham, an Indigenous Elder and a Kombumerri person through her father's heritage and affiliated with Wakka Wakka through her mother's people, states that "every Aboriginal person has a part of the essence of one of the original creative spirits who formed the Australian landscape" and "each human bears a creative and spiritual identity which still resides in the land itself" ("Some Thoughts about the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews" 183). In Graham's opinion, "each person has a charter of custodianship empowering them and making them responsible for renewing that part of the flora and its fauna" (183). She goes on to say that "Aboriginal Law is grounded in the perception of a psychic level of natural behaviour, the behaviour of natural entities" (187). Connectivity with the land is implicit in her statements, but ideological and cultural homogeneity should not be assumed. Although there are various creative mediums that portray attachment entailed in Indigenous perceptions of Country that involve connectivities, the focus here is on poetics.

To reach further towards an Indigenous understanding of communicative engagement and physical enmeshment with nature it is necessary to research the work of others who have made advances in this area of study. The anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt studied and recorded Aboriginal life in Western Australia and translated "A 'WŊnguri-'Mandzikai Song Cycle of the Moon-Bone". The following short excerpt shows how Indigenous aural poetry opens to a sense of a cultural embeddedness in the environment and in a spiritual otherness.

#### *Song I.*

*Synopsis.*—People of the 'WŊnguri-'Mandzikai make their camp in the country associated with the Dugong and Moon People. They are preparing for the coming of the First Rains, which will herald the Wet

Season ; and they store their clubs in readiness for battle, for it was here that extensive fighting took place in the Dreaming Period. They construct their shade with great care, for it is the camp of important headmen who are themselves related to the great Beings of the past (sic).  
(22)

Part of the general translation is:

. . . for this is the camp of the Morning-Pigeon man, /  
And of the Middle-of-the-Camp man ; of the Mangrove-Fish man ; of  
two  
other / head-men,  
And of the Clay-pan man ; of the '*Baijini*-Anchor man, and of the  
Arnhem Bay / country man ;  
Of the Whale man and of another head-man ; of the Arnhem Bay Creek  
man ;  
Of the Scales-of-the-Rock-Cod man ; of the Rock Cod man, and of the  
Place-of-the-Water man (sic). (24)

As Berndt explains:

These people are of the '*jiritfa* moiety, and the dialect of the songs is '*Wonguri*' *mata*. Their culture conforms to the general pattern of what is known locally as the Wulamba tribe. Although this country is associated with a wealth of mythology, it is outstandingly related to the Moon, his death and his subsequent rebirth. The cycle itself is called *The Moon-Bone* ('*wirmu*-' *manikai*, moon-bone song), for the Moon, then a man, lived near the clay pan of the Moonlight at the place of the Dugong by Arnhem Bay, and when he died he went down to the sea, where his bones became the nautilus shell. Ever since this mythological event took place, the Moon repeats his death, with the casting away of his bone, and is reborn. (19)

Indigenous poetry and songs such as this can help others to appreciate their profound connection with a traditional past, their living in harmony with the natural environment and their sense of embeddedness within habitats. The



stories, poetry and songs of some Indigenous people also bring into perspective the Eternal Dreamtime. “A ‘WŊnguri-’ Mandzikai Song Cycle of the Moon-Bone” shows that the people are identified by a physical place that is encompassed within the dynamic tension of the creative-destructive elemental forces. The parts of nature belong to a functioning whole in which each is granted active participation. These people are not observers of nature only but are committed participants with it. When referring to Indigenous understanding of living in harmony with their traditional land with its embedded cultural values related to the Dreamtime, Rose states in *Nourishing Terrains*: “There is no place without a history; there is no place that has not been imaginatively grasped through song, dance and design, no place where traditional owners cannot see the imprint of sacred creation” (18).

In *Story About Feeling*, published in 1989, the late Bill Neidjie, a senior Indigenous Elder who was born into the Bunitj clan of the Gagudju people of northern Kakadu, gives us examples of poetic expression concerning attachment to the Country:

This story e can listen careful  
and how you want to feel on your feeling.  
This story e coming through your body  
e go right down foot and head  
fingernail and blood . . . through the heart  
and e can feel it because e’ll come right through. (1)

This poem expresses how the phenomenological experience makes him feel, but, as is the case with all poetry that appeals to the senses, it also generates feelings in the reader. In their proximity, we can also learn that living, non-human entities are not unreceptive objects of human perception and exploitation; they too present through experiencing bodily sensory existence. To be sensitive to the needs of others, and to create meaning-filled words, the poet is required to be present intellectually, spiritually and sensorially. Being present means to give one’s whole self to the lived moment. Proximity with the natural world allows for particular places, humans, and the other-than-human

to share in one another's existence, to affect and be affected by each other. It also helps us remember our carnal inherence in a milieu of sensations and sensibilities. Indigenous people, such as Neidjie, believe their experience is of embeddedness with earth; there is a *feeling* of attachment to earth. As expressed by Neidjie:

Earth . . . exactly like your father or brother or mother  
because you got to go to earth,  
you got to be come to earth,  
your bone . . . because your blood in this earth here. (22)

Neidjie insists that his story/poem comes from the body and through the body: plainly through the heart. As expressed by Michael Farrell in "The Geopoetics of Affect: Bill Neidjie's Story About Feeling": "The story is itself felt, is (told with) feeling. Feeling is the telling and the listening, feeling is the state of reception" (7). It is a story about "feeling" an attachment to Country. There is validity ascribed to the notion of voice in this case as an explicit expression of Aboriginal feeling by an Indigenous person.

By comparison, the direct transcription and metered adaptation of the Indigenous song "A 'Wŋguri-' Mandʒikai Song Cycle of the Moon-Bone" published in *Oceania* in 1948, presents the problem of translation. According to Ronald and Catherine Berndt in *The Speaking Land*, "No story goes through that process completely unchanged. Something happens to it in the course of transmission" (415). According to them, the problem is primarily due to lack of aspects such as body movements that accompany speech as well as the differences between languages and even dialects (414). There is a risk of imperial dominance of thought when locating and producing an accurate transcription of something that is typically sung or spoken.

The use of Indigenous style and subject matter by settler cultures can be seen as acts of cultural appropriation. It could be argued that Les Murray's "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle", which is modelled on the style and metre of Berndt's translation of the Moon-Bone song, could be labelled as such. Martin Leer, however, argues that it

is in a very precise sense not an act of cultural appropriation, but an embodiment in toponymic art of the temporo-spatial differences between cultures in that creative cognitive mapping, whereby the world – and especially the home world – is known, perceived and committed to memory [...] (“This Country Is My Mind” 33).

Richard Martin puts forward a similar argument. He says that: “such texts offer intriguing insights into the politics of voice in Australia and the broader intercultural zone within which cultural difference is produced” (“The Politics of Voice” 10).

The sense of connection to the natural world in Murray’s song cycle is temporary and unstable: the people identify with place and are part of a recurrent, rhythmical pattern but one that is tied to a Western cultural perspective; they do not function as an integrated whole with the happenings of the other-than-human world. There is no impression of permeability or reciprocal interaction. As Leer suggests, “From the outset ‘The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle’ works by tension, antithesis and reconnection, whereas the ‘Moon-Bone’ cycle is cumulative, enacting a complex pattern of accretion” (33).

Indigenous people inculcate belief systems through myths, stories, dance and design. It is worth noting here the extreme burden placed upon some Indigenous people, those whose natural expression is via an oral tradition in their own language, some not having a formal education in Western language. Kinsella briefly discusses the problematics of language and the creative impulse in *Spatial Relations* (16-19).

Lionel Fogarty (of the Murri people and born in 1958 at Barambah, now the Cherbourg Aboriginal Reserve in Queensland) is a leading spokesman for Indigenous rights in Australia. According to Kinsella, Fogarty uses the problem of language to his advantage (*Spatial Relations*). In Kinsella’s opinion, “Fogarty has de-hybridized his own language by hybridizing English with his people’s language” (191). Not only does this appear to strengthen his political argument concerning the wrongs done to his people, but his poetry stands up against the expectations of the language of the colonists. Kinsella adds: “While reacting to

the colonizing of his Murri tongue by English, he in effect colonizes *English*, rendering it subservient to his inheritance, to his spatiality (time/space)" (191). Fogarty's poem in *Kargun*, "Wake up Black Population – Mapoon is Awake", serves to identify his defiant deconstruction of English language as well as his sense of enmeshment with the natural world:

*Black population*

*I'm sad to say*

*You don't see Mapoon people*

*are near the sea.*

*Black people you must not forget the reasons*

*Mapoon revived respect.*

*Amongst mangrove swamp*

*around bush land*

*Mapoon blacks re-lived different cooking methods*

*Kangaroo    Birds            Fish*

*gave living life*

*in needs of spiritual love.*

*Nature*

*Culture*

*Mapoon people know this well.*

*It's no new news to Mapoon people.*

*Black people*

*Mapoon people need no mining*

*Mapoon people have their minds and bodies*

*that's why the lands aflow*

*streams, seas, soil, rocks,*

*wells, swamps, lagoons, vegetables*

*rivers, animals –*

*ALL .....*

*BROTHERS AND SISTERS. (9)*

This poem, and that of Neidjie, seem not far removed from the aural poems that perpetuate anciently practiced themes and embrace not only the idea of communicative exchange with nature, but also that of the permeability of all things.

The idea of the permeability of all things is perpetuated by another contemporary Indigenous poet, Lisa Bellear, a Goernpil woman of the Noonuccal people. She wrote the poem “Beautiful Yuroke River Gum”. It can serve as an example of the sense of ancestral presence in the clay:

Sometimes the red river gums rustled  
in the beginning of colonisation when  
Wurundjeri,  
Bunnerong,  
Wathauring  
and other Kulin nations  
Sang and danced  
and  
laughed  
aloud

Not too long and there are  
fewer red river gums, the  
Yarra Yarra tribe’s blood becomes  
the river’s rich red clay  
[. . .] (41)

In this poem there is a sense that the red river gums have witnessed generations of people coming and going within her ancestral land. Populations of people and trees have lived and died together; the life force of past generations is laid down in the clay. This is a reminder of what Rose says about the “third life” as “the one we bequeath to others”; the other two lives, she argues, are “the given” and “the lived” (“what if the angel of history were a dog?” 74). In Indigenous understanding, the body is given back to the earth as a gift for others.

Hyllus Maris, a Yorta Yorta woman from Echuca, reveals in the poem “Spiritual Song of the Aborigine”, that the essence of being, or existence, enters into the subjectivity of the world; the feeling within the person links them to the inside of country:

I am a child of the Dreamtime People  
Part of this land. Like the gnarled gumtree  
I am the river, softly singing  
Chanting our songs on my way to the sea  
[. . .]  
I am this land  
And this land is me  
I am Australia. (60)

Indigenous poets such as Neidjie, Fogarty, Belleair and Maris experience the earth’s poetic responsiveness. They have grasped sacred creation through song. Given added insights from the scholars such as Mary Graham and Deborah Bird Rose, we can better understand Indigenous poetry and its expression of human interconnectedness with the earth.

### **A Western decolonised poetic vision in Australia**

Minter reminds us that “the decolonisation of Australian poetry and poetics [. . .] has been underway since at least the time of the Jindyworobaks”, (an Australian literary movement of the 1930s and 1940s) (“Archipelagos 158-9). He argues for “An archipelagic model” that he claims “upsets normative ideas about nation, cultural and ideological homogeneity” (160) in order to develop a decolonised poetic in Australia. The mode of thought presented in this article, however, is one of understanding an inclusive and intimate connection with the earth as a means of proposing new and decolonising poetic vision that go beyond aesthetics that are restricted by English Romanticism or Euro-American modernism.

Judith Wright, whose heritage is of colonial pastoralism, presents a sense of human integration with the earth albeit tentatively. The narrator in her poem “The Forest Path”, for example, is drawn into a sense of oneness with the earth,

a union that is, however, contingent upon death. She says: “We were afraid, straining in the bond of earth” (111-2). Putting the fear of death aside, however, generates positive affirmations that are “familiar as though remembered before birth / or expected dumbly after death”; “underfoot the quiet corpse and seed / each strive to their own invisible consummation” (112). Animal, vegetable and mineral marry. Nature, in all its forms, human and non-human, exists in its own perpetuity. Only after the narrator realises “the loss of self” (maybe the anthropocentric self) does she begin the process of becoming one with the earth (111).

Robert Gray’s poetry is predominantly consistent with pastoral elements; his narrators usually stand as if outside of nature, as observers of the natural world. In his poem “A Garden Shed”, however, we are drawn to a deeper level of meaning that is akin, perhaps, to the philosophy of integration:

[. . .]

In the secret noise of such turmoil  
and spray, I was somehow looking back—

or being looked through, about to be lost—  
to my grandfather and I, who were only  
bubbles of a moment, amid this whirling  
away. I first recognized the frankness  
of nature’s appropriations there:

that it’s all effectiveness, inter-response;  
all mutuality and possibilities;  
just things happening among themselves,  
things creating each other. And we  
are only the expressions of circumstance,

of its tensions. Nothing belongs to any  
separate thing. [. . .] (164-5)

In this poem the human is relegated to the background in relation to the natural world. Nature is self-regulating and creative: “things happening among themselves.” There is the vague suggestion of integration with nature, “amid this whirling / away” of our being, but as with Wright’s poem, the tone still asserts anthropocentric assumptions and lacks the decolonising vision.

Some contemporary Australian poets who are influenced by Western philosophies are more in concert with the idea of unwrapping cultural decolonisation. Minter’s poems in *Bluegrass* offer some examples. In part v of his poem “is it is”, for instance, the narrator says: “Cumuli hoist and the sky leans / fast, traces over countries / Loded deep with marrow, crescent spines / & ruins made fecund” (39). Presumably humans are part of this process. Likewise, in Bonny Cassidy’s long poem *Final Theory*, the narrator claims:

If we lay  
beneath that rubble  
we’d see how we were built for ruin  
like sand for glass.

For in some future ocean our beloved proteins will  
roll, perhaps finding one another, linked  
by a theoretical wave  
like voices sent through cans and string. (18)

This is to do with the realisation that we are subject to the cyclical patterns of bodily existence that are not only influenced by local weather and geography but also the creative and destructive elements of the universe. It questions hierarchical systems that basically privilege the concept of domination.

Martin Harrison’s poem “White Flowers”, in his book *Happiness*, is, arguably, one of the best examples of a poem that not only projects his personae beyond the periphery of the self into the environment but they appear to become part of the flesh of the world, as if immersed and in harmony with it. There is a sense of a metaphysical otherness that draws the imagination outside of the self. In this poem nature is identified with its own breathtaking



interactive dynamics, particularly between the sideways swerving crimson rosellas in “cascades of down-hanging white flowers”, “where humanness itself is flowering light / ecstatic with joy in the act of love” (3). The narrator expresses an intense, “invisible, unthought” awareness and “naked revealedness” of the present moment, not just in a temporal sense but also in a spatial relationship to the world and its objects and inhabitants. Rose’s comments reinforce the relevance of this statement:

The 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. (*Reports* 213)

This feeling of presence, one of the challenges for decolonising poetry, is akin to realising the “connectivities of flourishing and resilient life processes” (Rose *Reports* 214).

When discussing what he terms the “presence phenomena” and his analysis of the present cultural situation in the West, Hans Gumbrecht says: “on a primary level, presence effects have so completely vanished that they now come back in the form of an intense desire for presence—one reinforced or even triggered by many of our contemporary communication media” (*Production of Presence* 20). Perhaps if we consider our bodies to be part of the cosmos we might identify with the Indigenous people of which Gumbrecht speaks when he refers to them as being “presence” cultures (80). He contrasts them with “meaning” cultures of which the West is a part (79-86).

In Harrison’s poem, the theme of love is significant. Perhaps *love* and respect for each other and for the natural world is fundamental for imagining a decolonised Australian poetics. As would be expected in decolonised poetics, exploitation of fellow beings and other entities is absent in Harrison’s poem. The entities in the nonhuman world are, as Eckersley might ascertain:

no longer posited simply as the background or means to the self-determination of individuals or political communities [. . .]. Rather, the

different members of the nonhuman community are appreciated as important in their own terms, as having their own (varying degrees of) relative autonomy and their own modes of being. (*Environmentalism and Political Theory* 55).

Perhaps we might recognize what we *feel* during the event of sensorially experiencing the natural world as being the revelation of the presence of what William Rueckert in "Literature and Ecology" speaks about as energy pathways. He says: "A poem is stored energy, a formal turbulence, a living thing, a swirl in the flow" (108) and, in another place, "the stored energy of poetry can be released to carry on its work of creation and community" (111). If this is so, then contributors are not merely external observers of the natural world but active participants with it. Western decolonising aesthetics, mindfully present in the world and having primitive collusions with it, illustrate a terrain against domination, affirms relationality and asserts committed, humble receptiveness in the present.

### **Conclusion**

Respecting the earth and its inhabitants, its functions and integrity, and accepting human embeddedness in ecological relationships presents an ethical mode of decolonised poetry for Australia. The type of poetics suggested here is informed by the philosophical premise of ecocentrism, which argues for humbleness and benevolence in our dealings with others of our species, and of the non-human world. On this basis there is a turning away from cultural imperialism and colonial romantic ego (as found in pastoral poetry, for instance), and a denial of hubristic and anthropocentric notions. Patterns of colonial appropriation of Indigenous knowledge, belief systems, motifs and languages are undesirable and unjustifiable. Decolonised poetry acknowledges and respects a rich Indigenous cultural heritage of communicative engagement with Country.

An earth-centred consciousness decolonises the aesthetics of how we perceive Australia, heralding an aesthetic renewal following a history of colonial domination, manipulation and dispossession. A renewed ethical and aesthetic

decolonising vision in Australian poetry has the potential to set Australia's poetic output apart in its uniqueness.

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