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## **Fire Was in the Reptile's Mouth: Towards a Transcultural Ecological Poetics**

*Stuart Cooke (Griffith University)*

### **Part 1: Explication**

This paper will perform a reading of two creation narratives from either side of the Pacific Ocean, the relationships between which will catalyse the theorisation of a transcultural approach to ecological poetics. Such an approach recognises not only Western along with non-Western poetics, but also seeks to extend the study of poetics—of the making of language—beyond the human. The aim here is to theorise how the creative formations of other animals, plants, insects and forces can be drawn into relation with some of the discourses surrounding human art. It will become clear that there are strong relationships between transcultural ecopoetics and radical, anti-colonialist and -capitalist ideologies. Certainly, implicit in a transcultural poetics of any kind is a staunch, anti-colonialist stance, where Western ideologies of categorisation and conquest are checked in order to embrace a conceptualisation of language as multi-vocal expressions of complex location. There is potentially an infinite variety of such languages; therefore, a transcultural ecological poetics attempts to embrace the myriad ways in which an ecological system might articulate both itself and the relations between its various parts.

To be sure, connections between colonialism and environmental destruction are well established. Postcolonial writers and critics have made valuable contributions to debates about social, economic and environmental issues in many postcolonial regions of the world (Huggan and Tiffin 33). At the start of *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, however, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (2) pose an intentionally dramatic question that requires much further consideration: “Is there any way of narrowing the ecological gap between coloniser and colonised, each of them locked into their seemingly incommensurable worlds?” For Huggan and Tiffin, the environmentalism of the coloniser is always vainglorious as it is predicated upon the removal of worlds cared for and cherished by the colonised. In this paper, I argue that an attentive

reading of two indigenous peoples' creation narratives provides not only a way to usurp and question colonialist narratives of environmental domination, but also to draw into relation colonised peoples—or, those people still suffering the various effects of colonisation—without subjugating them to empirical comparison beneath discourses of Westernisation or globalisation. Another important feature of many indigenous peoples' creation narratives is that they often grant explicitly significant levels of agency and creativity to non-human creatures and forces, which alerts us to the importance of a poetics that embraces a vast spectrum of human and non-human cultures.

By way of illustrating these points, the two creation narratives that I address in this paper are from very different parts of the world, but nevertheless share intriguing features. One narrative comes from the Amazonian region of southern Venezuela, and the other from Northern Australia. They have come to us through the work of both an anthropologist and an experimental ethnographic film-maker and, as such, they might suggest a way of responding to Huggan and Tiffin's question: perhaps, I will venture here, a discussion *across* cultures, and, in the places where these cultures *wish to talk*, is a way to check any colonialist tendencies in contemporary environmental discourse.

The first of these narratives is narrated by Juan Downey in his post-ethnographic 1978 film, *The Laughing Alligator*, which was made while he and his family were living amongst the Yanomami Indians of the Northern Amazon. The story, what Downey calls "The Origin of Fire," tells of a laughing alligator from whom fire is stolen so that humans can survive. In the old days, the story goes, people only ate raw things, but some children became intrigued when they found fragments of burnt leaves and cooked worms in the alligator's vicinity. They discovered that the alligator was hiding fire in its mouth. The children decided to fool around in front of the alligator in order to make it laugh; they urinated in front of it and performed various other antics, which resulted in the alligator bursting into laughter. While it was laughing, a bird flew into the alligator's open mouth and stole the fire. As it says in the film, "The bird sat in a tree, and the tree gives us fire." Since then, the Yanomami have used sticks of wood to make fire, and, in the film, the story is followed by footage of someone's hands starting a fire with sticks (Jonsson).

The second story takes us to the floodplains that lie to the south-west of Darwin in Northern Australia. This is the country of the White Eagle people, or the MakMak clan. In a book that she co-authored with five of the senior clan women, *Country of the Heart*, Deborah Bird Rose recounts a creation story that comes from a sacred site called Djulurrk:

One part of the Djulurrk story tells how the Rainbow Snake (PuleyPuley) stole fire. The Dreamings were doing ceremony at Djulurrk, and the Rainbow Snake took the fire in his mouth and went racing away to find the sea so that he could drown the fire. He went this way and that, twisting across the land trying to reach the sea, but before he could drown the fire forever, another Dreaming—the Chickenhawk...—came chasing after him. He grabbed the firestick from PuleyPuley and flew away with it. [The Chickenhawk] saved fire for the world; without his actions, there would be no fire. As he flew with the firestick... he dropped sparks across the land... he inaugurated the use of fire in the land. (18)

The relationships between the above two accounts are by no means isolated examples of some rare archetype. Rather, it is probable that similar versions of a story involving a large reptile, a mischievous bird, fire and humans could also be found in other indigenous communities in places as disparate as Taiwan and Southern Chile. What interests me about all such variations, and about these two versions in particular, is how they might constitute differentiations of a kind of multi-local, ecological ethics. The ethics are housed in traditions of language art, however; Yanomami and MakMak ethics are instances of *poetics*. While there are clear similarities between each account, there is not an essential, inflexible spine common to each: that is to say, it is not as if each story can be reduced to the same narrative structure. After all, the origin of the fire in the Yanomami story is in the mouth of the alligator, whereas fire was already present before the Rainbow Snake stole it in the MakMak story. So each story gives a startlingly similar, but not an identical, account of the origins of fire in the human world.

Instead, it is the rhizomatic nature of the relations between specific elements of each story that produce the synchronicities. The stories are forming what we could term an “assemblage” of an ethics, in which we cannot find any central code, and in which various parts assume levels of importance in correspondence to their time and place. In Deleuzian theory, an assemblage constitutes a process of improvisation. It is composed of various routines that are at once establishing themselves, and at once being “deterritorialized” by, or merged with, other routines. There is not a centre to an assemblage, just as there is not an overriding destination or determinate quantity of ingredients.<sup>1</sup> That is how, for thinkers like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, creation is possible: if things can become other things, then it is impossible to predict what things they will end up becoming. Indeed, *inherent* in things is the potential for them to become other things; we could almost say that things already *are* other things. In these two narratives, the protagonist of each is constantly changing; there is not a main character that we follow through the entire story, who guides us to its moral or ontological heart. Instead, these stories are more like relay races or series of differentiations than Homeric Odysseys: the various actors are consumed by the metamorphoses of a trans-corporeal force or narrative impetus. In each case there is not a particular creature that has risen to dominate or take focus from the others. Furthermore, the fact of fire, and of its centrality to human civilization, is almost a coincidence, and hardly an instance of the human’s manifest destiny.

In order to get a clearer sense of the webs that link particular segments from each narrative, as well as the webs within each narrative itself, I will now turn to examine in more detail some of the components of the transcultural assemblage that these stories produce. The first, and perhaps the most obvious, connection between each account is that in both Northern Australia and the Northern Amazon it is a large, snake(-like) reptile (where an alligator is like a big snake with legs) that steals or hides the primordial fire in its mouth. Of course, the instances do not mirror one another: beyond the snake/alligator distinction, I have already mentioned the fact that the alligator’s mouth is the *origin* of the fire in the Yanomami story, while PuleyPuley stole it. Nevertheless, in each account it is a big reptile who wants to extinguish, or prevent the distribution of, fire forever. It is a reptile, in other words, who wants to spoil things for humans. For the Yanomami and the MakMak alike, we might say, a big, cold

blooded creature is antagonistic to the heat and light at the heart of human community. But, at the same time, this is not to *separate* the reptile from the assemblage of which the human world is also a part: to be antagonistic to human culture does not mean that the reptile needs to be excluded from it. Instead, in the process-driven interrelations of the ecological assemblage, the large, grumpy reptile is an integral part of more-than-human *and* human poiesis.

The next connection of significance is the fact that in both cases it is a bird that steals the fire from the big reptile's mouth. While some human children are part of the conspiracy in the Yanomami account, it is still up to the bird to perform the most dangerous act and fly into the mouth of the beast. In the MakMak account, the Chickenhawk "saved fire for the world;" he is a Dreaming version of Robin Hood. In each case, the bird does not greedily hold on to the fire but leaves it in places where humans can get to it. In other words, it is the bird who grants the human heat, light and, therefore, their civilisation. If the world of the bird bridges the land and the sky, and its song the path between pre-semantic sounds and language, then it also draws the line between cold, reptilian darkness and the light within which humans gather. Interestingly, the bird-as-messiah has a history in the West, too: in the late 1800s, naturalist Bradford Torrey proposed that the birds' "habit of saluting the rise and setting sun might be the first glimmerings of original religion" (Rothenberg 45).

As I mentioned, humans were not *given* fire in either account; there is no sense in which fire is their divine right or an innate part of their sociobiology. Human technology is not an essential part of human being, but rather is a gift from another creature (who itself cannot claim ownership of the technology, either). If fire is not a simple extension of the human, if it is not a product of human ingenuity, then it is a manifestation of broader ecological inclinations or forces. If the birds provided humans with the inspiration for worship, as Torrey suggests, then their vocalisations, and the links of vocalisations to earthly events, might also be the inspiration for *language* itself. After all, the renowned ornithologist W. H. Thorpe famously noted that "however great the gulf which divides animal from human language, there is no single characteristic which can be used as an infallible criterion for distinguishing bird from human language" (qtd. in Rothenberg 66). Musicologist David Rothenberg speculates that "in ancient times, we could understand what the birds were saying"

(67). The salient points here are that humanity's reliance on fire links it to birds and, just as human and bird once shared fire, with us the birds also shared language.

Writing of another large reptile in his "Note on Negro Poetry," Tristan Tzara said that "[t]he crocodile hatches the future life" (16). In these narratives it is also important to remember that each bird steals the fire from the *mouth* of the reptile. That is, the mouth, or the use of it, is directly implicated in the generation of existence. By the time it has become part of a story in a tradition, and by the time it has been passed on enough times for someone like Downey or Rose to record it, the fire has passed through the mouths of many different creatures. In this sense, the fire in these stories functions like a free indirect discourse, or a non-subject-oriented system of expression that manifests in different ways in different bodies and, in doing so, determines the structures within which things will relate to one another. If language is as free and "indirected" as fire, then, it is hard to assign anything other than a rigorously material function to it: as I will elaborate further on, an ecological conception of language does not place it in an order "above" reality (from where it can "represent" reality) but, like fire, it is a phenomenon that is fuelled by and entirely dependent upon reality, and affects just as many productive and destructive changes. In Peter Minter's explanation of Aboriginal poetics, language acquires corporeality in its trajectory towards the socio-biological sphere known as "Country" and, in turn, "Country composes language" (7). This composition is very closely tied to the mouths of different creatures, most of which are not human.

The *composition* of language in Country is the driving force behind this transcultural comparison. By acknowledging the complex assemblages of more-than-only-human actors in these two indigenous ontologies, we accept that "language," in so far as Country composes it, is more than a semiotic system of representation; instead, it is the conductive medium through which the relations that produce a world are established. For Minter, "Country is [...] the lawful spaciousness for the emergence of corporeality" (7), which is to say that Country provides the conditions by which the apprehension of the world becomes possible. Then, as a "poetic key to reality" (here Minter uses William Stanner's phrase) the Dreaming itself is "a perpetually spoken, sung and reiterated discourse" (5) that *initiates* the emergence of the systems that compose Country in the first place. To reiterate, "a perpetually spoken, sung and

reiterated discourse” positions the Dreaming as a form of poesis, a self-sustaining, looping “onto-language” that binds reality together. More than anything else, perhaps, the creation stories of the MakMak and the Yanomami tell us that linguistic composition-by-Country is a vital, heated and undoubtedly *noisy* procedure. Language, and meaning, is not only produced when humans want to use it; the world is perpetually recreating itself according to reiterations of all kinds of noisy codes.

Part of the value of grouping such stories together, I feel, is that it responds to an urgent need to conceptualise a globally transversal imagination, one that recognises cultural and ecological differences without organising them beneath delocalised or generalised planes of reference. Rather than being easily compartmentalised with relation to global systems of power, these narratives encourage a global environmental ethics predicated on dialogical processes of telling stories, listening and comparing. Here, “comparing” doesn’t involve distinguishing “true” from “false” accounts, or any such deductive variants. Instead, comparing relies on its Latin root of *comparāre*—to place *together*. Comparison is the act of bringing ideas into *company* with others. A transcultural ecopoetics, therefore, could be the initiation of a conversation between disparate instances of ecological organisation, where these instances are actually narratives of myriad materials that find translation, at some point, into human poetry and story.

## **Part 2: Implications**

The two stories I have just discussed venture beyond the borders of a single place. As much as they invite comparison with other mythologies distributed across massive distances, the narratives themselves thread through various regions: for example, the chickenhawk across country, or the hidden, “other” places that the alligator can retreat to, or that are beyond the reach of other creatures. Indeed, the Yanomami story dovetails with a much broader discourse about the Amazon rainforest as a locus of both local and global environmentalist concern:

Given its prominent role in international environmental controversies, it is no surprise that writers and artists have chosen the Amazon rainforest as a setting in which to explore the connections between local and global ecology, as well as

between local, national and international politics and economy  
[...] the local specificity of the rainforest turns out to be a sort of  
optical illusion that dissolves when the forest's global  
connectedness is gradually revealed. (Heise 92)

While both stories illustrate the potential for “global connectedness” in the sense that Ursula Heise is using it here, I would like to turn to focus on the ways in which the stories might [re]conceptualise such “connectedness” in terms of connections not only between different peoples, but also between other-than-human communities. To begin, I will join others like Minter in arguing for the centrality of indigenous peoples' thought in a transcultural ecopoetics.

Like many others in the Environmental Humanities, Huggan and Tiffin assert that much Western writing about the non-human world is beset by a Cartesian dualism, where animals and other non-human forms are little more than objects for scientific study, or for symbolic contemplation of human concerns. Inextricably connected to representations of “the animal” has been what they term a “triple lack” of “language, consciousness and mind,” which “is best interrogated by the kind of imaginative writing that questions, through the ways in which it represents animals, the dominant science paradigms whose contrasting generic approaches deliberately foreclose knowledge other than their own (Huggan and Tiffin 160). Here I propose that indigenous literatures are ideal sites for radically unsettling “imaginative writing.” Indigenous thought provides a map for ecological relation that can exist alongside and in concert with scientific paradigms. Essentially, this is because for many indigenous peoples—Australian Aboriginal people, for example—language, culture and art are *part* of country, having come *from* it. In other words, from an Aboriginal perspective, language is not an imposition *upon* “the real world,” so the question of which language (economic, poetic, scientific, etc.) is “best” suited to describing the world is irrelevant. For the Yanyuwa people of the Northern Territory, for example, John Bradley writes that it is *breath* that links “singer, song, being, homeland.” As the ceremonies become yet more sacred, “there is only the rhythm of the breath,” without any melody or lyrics; breath accompanies “the pulse of country.” Breath, like the Ancestors of the Dreaming, is primordial; proper use of it creates the sonic “matrix” of their *kujika*, the songpoetry which represents the ecological coherence and unity of the Law (Bradley with

Yanyuwa families 245). We return to Minter's key claim, then, that as language is realised within and in response to Country, it is Country that composes language (7). Language, therefore, is part of Country's creative composition. In Aboriginal poetics, as in many models of indigenous South American poetics (Cooke, "What's an Ecologically Sensitive Poetics?"), we find the possibility for ecological relation in the attention to the breath 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 so that it may elaborate upon the templates that were created by Dreaming Ancestors (or, becoming more metaphorical, as the bird steals fire from the mouth of a large reptile so that new creations can occur). After all, to channel the Dreaming in poetry is to channel ecological poiesis itself (Minter 5-6).

For Philip Mead, indigenous poetics form part of a multi-cultural aesthetic that enacts "linguistic resistance and adaptation." Various centralised institutions, governmental and otherwise, "seek to repress [...] the lexical unconscious, the potentiality of language's coercion by dominant ideologies to be exposed, to erupt, to unsettle." Indigenous poetics, however, have the capacity to contest political ideas of nation and identity because of the poets' general unease with such terms and conditions, and with their distance from colonial traditions of language and literature (Mead 28). Mead sees in contemporary Aboriginal poets such as Lionel Fogarty evidence for the ways that "language persists as a site of political contestation and continually emergent realities in contemporary Australian life." In this light, Aboriginal poetry can be "a complex sign of how the apparent settledness of language in contemporary Australia is maintained at a cost, the cost of interdicting, for example, the self- and cultural formation of Aboriginal and migrant Australians" (Mead 421). The radical potential of indigenous poetry and poetics, therefore, is its capacity to "imagine through, and in, language as an alternative polis, a poetic space where the diversities of politics and identity are to be articulated." If such political "diversities" extend ecologically across the biosphere, then the alternative polis of indigenous poetics could remedy not only "the linguistic disorders that the Australian settlement suffers from" (Mead 454), but also its multiple failures of ecological relation. In these contexts, an indigenous poetics, with its roots in oral and performative modes, in mythological and contemporary concerns, and in traditions of

protest and of care for Country, verges towards the “productive poetry” theorised 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. (199)

That indigenous poetics might align so well with some of the concerns of contemporary poets and theorists is no coincidence, either. Many of the traditions fundamental to various indigenous oral and written poetics in both Australia and South America (such as the common reluctance to attribute sole authorship to a work, or the freedom to manipulate the precise text of a work within certain received structures, or the capacity for a work to be continuously recomposed or re-situated as new situations require) align with contemporary situations in experimental poetics. Described by Kenneth Goldsmith as “Uncreative Writing,” contemporary conceptual poetics responds to an online environment of proliferating quantities of text, in which the author need no longer “write” his or her own material, but can instead “make” his or her text from what is available already on the Internet. The author becomes like an artist of bricolage, sifting through heaps of data in order to forge new connections between fragments of syntax. In the case of the bricoleur as of the indigenous songpoet, “mimesis and replication doesn’t eradicate authorship” (Goldsmith 10) but rather expands the role of “the author” to something of a transversal framer or collator of material from many disparate worlds. Such a conceptualisation might also radically critique a poetics of colonisation, where the One Truth, One Language and One Culture of the Sole Poet suppresses the cultures of Others. Where the classically Western poet might, in Heidegger’s sense of the term, “dwell,” or clear or free a place for settlement and habitation and, more precisely, to conquer and colonise land (Noland 402), a transcultural poetics of indigenous and more-than-human participants actively erodes such impositions.

Thus, concomitant with the centrality of indigenous thought in new theorisations of ecological poetics is the *decentrality* of human-only conceptions of “the poetic,” of art, or of creativity in general. Because of the key role of a bird in each

of the above narratives, in this space I will turn to focus on approaching bird song as an example of a non-human poetics. However, while bird song has received much scholarly attention from multiple disciplines, it should by no means be the only counterpoint to human poetics. “Poetics” in its broadest sense can involve many kinds of making from many kinds of animals (see, for example, Moe). Nevertheless, bird song is a compelling instance of cross-species poetical relation, one which is inaugurated by another creation narrative, this time from the paleontological record. Here, bird song is the spectral ancestor for *all* song (and music, and poetry):

Nearly a hundred million years ago songbirds emanated across the globe from Gondwanaland, with a generalized superbird like the lyrebird a probable ancestor [...] His leaping silhouette at dawn resembles the famed archaeopteryx who is the link between dinosaur and bird, the singing ghost of a transitory past living on into our time. (Rothenberg 227)

Indeed, in terms of certain aspects of brain structure, humans are closer to songbirds than to the great apes because each shares “the ability to learn to sing, something no ape can do” (Rothenberg 146). By forming alternative, rhizomatic relations across two distinct “strata” of evolution, an intriguing familial relationship emerges between birds and humans.

As poetry is key to the structuring of the Dreaming, so too might it be key to conceptualising non-human creativity. For Rothenberg, the limits to which poetry takes language—limits that are reached in order to produce the maximum possible affective potency—“is best at revealing the immediacy and necessity of bird sounds.” Musical and scientific paradigms are important as well, of course, but it is in the poem, as a written piece of melodic epistemology, that we can produce the most tangible fusion of both. Rothenberg shows that many attempts to reach bird song with standard musical notation have resulted in the musician being “driven into poetry at the sheer magnificence of the sound of a bird.” This, he says, is because “[b]ird song *makes* its most attentive human listeners surge into poetry” (Rothenberg 54). Yet by the same token, when we talk of “poetry” in this sense we need to figure language as a collection of primarily gestural, more-than-semantic materials, for semantics tell us little about bird song:

When it comes to birds, ‘there is no equivalent distinction between language-like [clusters of sound in meaningful structures] and speech-like [the production of sound itself] properties. One word, “song,” represents both production of learned sounds and their sequencing’. *Information is not the most salient quality encoded in bird song*. There is form and purpose in birds’ sounds, but no message to be extracted from the sound that makes any sense without the sound’s original shape [...] The song many birds sing is more akin to music than language because... the syllables change gradually from one form to another. They are not usually as distinct as the sounds of language [emphasis added]. (Jarvis qtd. in Rothenberg 157–58)

For this reason, Rothenberg writes, “[t]he quality of the poem matters less than the need to go there: we want to *stretch* language beyond its ability to explain, into its chance to *evoke* [emphasis added]” (54). The drive to poetic expression in the face of bird song is a drive to the more-than-human power of affect. Writers like Rothenberg are arguing for what the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea already know, that:

[h]uman songs are bird songs, and the words of a song are called ‘bird sound words’. They [...] are comprehensible but unlike anything in the spoken language, words that have a meaning underneath, *on the other side* [emphasis added]. (Weinberger 58)

Nevertheless, an obstacle to transcultural ecopoetics might be a concern about the thinking subject’s ability to interpret “meaning” in diverse varieties of ecological expression. Inherent in such a concern, however, is an assumption that expression is defined by intelligible semantic content, as opposed to the relations it assumes with contextual particularities. At the level of human language, we know that much of our expression depends greatly on when and how it is used—both in terms of the position of a phrase with relation to other phrases, and in terms of the way a phrase is articulated and its relationship to non-linguistic hand and facial expressions, not to mention its relationship to the physical arrangement of the space it occurs within. At the same time, in many kinds of oral and avant-garde poetics, words need not have any meaning in themselves, but provide other sonic or graphic textures. Similarly, at

the most fundamental levels of biology, we find that some DNA is “junk DNA,” or “a free-riding, harmless parasite that doesn't get ‘expressed’ in a phenotype at all.” Furthermore, writes Morton, “there is no life-flavoured DNA.” This is to say that at the basis of “life” there is no associated strand of DNA that necessarily signifies its production, meaning that:

‘Life’ is a word for some self-replicating macro-molecules and their transport systems. But for ‘life’ to start, there had to be a ‘pre-living life’: otherwise, there would be an infinite regress or sudden creation from nothing. The movement that commences ‘life’ is to be found *within* matter itself. (Morton 66–7)

As “life” (or: the coherent replication of DNA strands and their meaningful communication), emerges from “non-living” matter, so too does linguistic communication proceed from evolved combinations of non-semantic (“non-living”) sounds. “Language—an accumulation of words in a particular system—like all living creatures, lives and dies by the transformational laws of evolution...” (Magi 275). In partnership with other sounds and with grammatical and syntactical frameworks, non-semantic sounds can contribute to intelligible structures. Such intelligible, “living” structures are not *inherently* different than those which are apparently nonsensical. Thus, words need not be attended to purely for their anthropocentric semantic value, just as the apparent absence of semantic content in non-human expression need not be reason for its exclusion from an ecopoetics. “We may widen the realm of art,” writes David Rothenberg, “just as we expand ethics to include the environment...” (11).

Rather than two separate tasks, of translation between indigenous and non-indigenous poetics, and then of human and non-human poetics, I am arguing here that in a sense there is only *one* task, to translate between the humanist tradition of the West and everything else. Such translation, however, unsettles much of the prevailing orthodoxies in contemporary literary theory and philosophy. As David Brooks (57) writes:

Is it any accident that some of the most dominant ideas concerning literature's relation to the world are in fact ideas of *disconnection*, *inaccessibility* and *non-relation*? Whose or what

purposes does it really serve to believe that we are trapped in a prison-house of language? Whose or what purposes does it serve to believe that there is no inherent connection between word and thing?

Brooks argues that twentieth-century literary theory has led us to conceive of a linguistic prison-house, in which the human mind is isolated entirely from everything else. He then proposes “an alternate route,” one motivated by priorities of care and connection rather than division and exploitation (it is easier to exploit that which we are not connected to). Following such a route might lead us “to emphasise that sense in which language itself is stimulated by our need *for* and relationship *with* the world, rather than as something which emblematises the world’s absence” (Brooks 58–9). The problem for Brooks, as for many ecocritical theorists, is that human cognition and culture have become transcendent realms, outside of which little has meaning and/or value.

How to respond to this situation is a central preoccupation of contemporary eco-poetics. In Evelyn Reilly’s (257) terms, this is:

a search for language that coheres with evolution, with our destiny as animals among other plants and animals. A search for a poetry that is firmly attached to earthly being and that is thus *dis-enchanted*, in the sense of being free from the mesmerizing spell of the transcendent. For eco-poetics reflects yet another in a series of human decenterings, as from an ecological perspective, the self dissolves into the gene pool and the species into the ecosystem [...] In fact, eco-poetics requires the abandonment of the idea of a center for a position in an infinitely extensive net of relations...

The abandonment of the “idea of the center” takes us into an explicitly transcultural environment, or, in Marcella Durand’s words “seeks an equality of value between all living and unliving things, [and] explores multiple perspectives as an attempt to subvert the dominant paradigms of mono-perception, consumption and hierarchy...” (118). With its postmodernist inflections, Durand’s language is functional as feminist, postcolonial and ecological theorisation. But now the subversion of “dominant

paradigms” extends to the previously transcendent realms of human cognition and culture as well.

However, this subversion cannot occur only at the level of lived experience, or only through the phenomenological unit of the human body. As each creation narrative from Part 1 of this essay travels beyond the limits of any single actor, so too does the climate crisis demand a more integrated, global imagination of ecological complexity. As Heise argues in her seminal *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, “one of the crucial challenges for artists and writers, and beyond them, for all those engaged with environmentalist thought, is the creation of a vision of the global that integrates allegory [...] into a more complex formal framework able to accommodate social and cultural multiplicity” (21). The two creation narratives that I have discussed here might indeed share relationships to the allegorical mode; furthermore, their capacities for internal, allegorical complexity—where a particular narrative might engender multiple possible allegorical configurations—and cross-continental relation with other narratives allows them to form rhizomatic linkages with other regions, thereby gesturing towards a framework of the complexity that Heise proposes. It is also important that each narrative belongs to an indigenous group in a territory colonised by a foreign power, firstly because each group maintains commitments to the custodianship of a particular territory (i.e., not to a transcendent or global sense of “The Earth”), and secondly because each narrative is an instance of a theory of language that differs markedly from the Western tradition and its exploitative tendencies. By *linking* these two localities, we might establish a local-global framework of eco-poethical relation.

Consequently, the challenge posed by globalisation for the environmental movement is, in Heise’s words “to envision how ecologically based advocacy on behalf of the nonhuman world as well as on behalf of greater socioenvironmental justice might be formulated in terms that are premised no longer primarily on ties to local places but on territories and systems that are understood to encompass the planet as a whole” (10). Of course, what is equally important is that this planetary environmentalism does not come at the *expense* of attention to local ecologies and, in particular, localised indigenous ecological knowledges and custodial rights. Otherwise, a “global” sense of the environment risks replicating older and more familiar kinds of

colonisation. As I have argued elsewhere, it is crucial that regional ecologies are understood in a global sense without subsuming their particular differences beneath delocalised languages that are less sensitive to their regional particularities (Cooke, *Speaking* 263). 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" (Heise 114).

In this essay, I have suggested that indigenous ecological knowledges—invariably developed over millennia—are capable of discriminating between "inherently dynamic evolution" and "disruptive change." Crucially, just as the MakMak and Yanomami creation narratives describe worlds of many important human and non-human participants, their comparison results in ethical principles that cross not only between cultures, but also between *species*. Such an interconnected, interspecies poetics requires that our forms of address—both our notions of *who* we are as speakers, and *to whom* we are speaking—must change radically. Since "we are made of others," to quote Morton, our selves must be rethought as multiple, necessarily altruistic ones. To live in such a state of deeply enmeshed ecological connectedness means we "must justify action by more than appeals to ourselves or to our immediate kin" (Morton 119). Since we are operating in systems that are far more complex than our understandings of them, consequentialist reasoning based on outcomes for certain individuals will always be hopelessly overwhelmed by myriad other factors. In Aldo Leopold's famous words, "[e]cology is the science of communities and the ecological consciousness is therefore the ethics of community life" (qtd. in Reilly 260). Ultimately, this means that the initial region of a transcultural poetical investigation will actually take us towards another one entirely. The aesthetic attention to narratives

of creation and poetic instantiation translates to *ethical* commitments to ecosystemic arrangements of species. In other words, from the aesthetic appeal of a cross-species poetics comes an ethical responsibility to maintain these poetics: an ecological poetics is also an ecological ethics.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the useful definition provided by Claire Colebrook: "There is no finality, end or order that would govern the assemblage as a whole; the law of any assemblage is created from its connections" (xx).

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