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Review of "Speaking the Earth's Languages: A Theory for Australian-Chilean Postcolonial Poetics"

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Abstract

Critical connections between Australian and Latin American literature are few and far between. Equally rare are readings which place Aboriginal literary production in Australia alongside that of Indigenous writing from Hispanic or Lusophone America. While a number of scholars have drawn comparisons between Australian Aboriginal writing and English-language Indigenous literature from North America, Indigenous writing from South and Central America has remained an almost terra incognita for Australian scholarship. Stuart Cooke's study *Speaking the Earth's Languages: A Theory for Australian-Chilean Postcolonial Poetics* reads Aboriginal poetic works by Paddy Roe, Butcher Joe Nangan and Lionel Fogarty along with poetry by Chilean Mapuche authors Leonel Lienlaf and Paulo Huirmillá to argue for reading strategies based on 'nomadic poetics' and 'poetic transnationalism.' The connections Cooke makes across such different cultures, geographies, histories and languages not only provide intriguing insights into Indigenous writing; they also suggest that the 'sustainable poetry' of his selected writers and the 'nomadism' of their poetic practices point towards an ecopoetics that is both relevant and urgent to broader postcolonial contexts.

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Critical connections between Australian and Latin American literature are few and far between. Equally rare are readings which place Aboriginal literary production in Australia alongside that of Indigenous writing from Hispanic or Lusophone America. While a number of scholars have drawn comparisons between Australian Aboriginal writing and English-language Indigenous literature from North America, Indigenous writing from South and Central America has remained an almost *terra incognita* for Australian scholarship. Stuart Cooke's study *Speaking the Earth's Languages: A Theory for Australian-Chilean Postcolonial Poetics* reads Aboriginal poetic works by Paddy Roe, Butcher Joe Nangan and Lionel Fogarty along with poetry by Chilean Mapuche authors Leonel Lienlaf and Paulo Huirmillá to argue for reading strategies based on 'nomadic poetics' and 'poetic transnationalism.' The connections Cooke makes across such different cultures, geographies, histories and languages not only provide intriguing insights into Indigenous writing; they also suggest that the 'sustainable poetry' of his selected writers and the 'nomadism' of their poetic practices point towards an ecopoetics that is both relevant and urgent to broader postcolonial contexts.

The book's title comes from the premise which Cooke claims is common to Aboriginal and Mapuche belief: that the origin of language is the earth itself. In Aboriginal Australia, Cooke argues, 'language is country'; knowledge through language is created and re-created in movement through country. For the Mapuche, whose traditional country comprises much of southern Chile, the word for their language, 'Mapuzugun,' literally means 'language of the earth' (18). Cooke returns to this underlying principle throughout his study: that language, and particularly poetic language, 'is necessary for the synthesis of human and world' (159). In Cooke's argument, poetry for these geographically separate Indigenous peoples emerges from and contributes to sustaining one's relationship with country.

The significance of the relationship between language, poetry and country has long been recognised as crucial to an appreciation of Indigenous literatures. What is interesting and ultimately revealing and insightful in Cooke's work is his detailed application of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of nomadology and Pierre Joris's understanding of nomadic poetics, to both the Australian and Mapuche contexts. In the opening chapter, Cooke insists that the philosophical and critical concepts he draws upon are not just francophone ideas and he illustrates their connections with Aboriginal Australia by recalling his experiences walking the Lurujarri Heritage Trail in Western Australia. This choice of focus is important because, as Cooke tells his readers, 'The Lurujarri Trail travels through country that we will return to frequently in this book' (8). Both Butcher Joe Nangan and Paddy Roe were important custodians of knowledge, narrative and song relating to this part of Western Australia and Cooke's opening here with a brief personal comment on his own experience of this country is useful. He describes his walking the trail with its custodians, accompanied by other students and academics, and learning in the process something of the principles of nomadology. Central to these are not only mobility and flow and a lightness of touch but also a lightness of seeing. As opposed to the all-seeing gaze of settler-colonialism, Cooke, drawing here on Stephen Muecke's work, argues for the glimpse—the partial, momentary, intensely local view—that with repeated visits to country invites one to consider patterns and

connections that shift and change over extended time. The glimpse encourages one to reconsider these connections and alter one's approach, one's movement, one's dwelling when adaptation becomes crucial. 'Writing in glimpses,' Cooke explains,

exhibits a number of distinctive characteristics . . . For example, the writer's descriptions might be evocative and detailed—intense—but they are also relatively skeletal. Descriptions are not great verbal accumulations, piling up on a certain object or place, but are drawn out thinly over the lie of the land . . . A book of glimpses is never 'the whole picture'; rather, it needs to be returned to, reconsidered, and put down again. (10)

Before illustrating this and other aspects of nomadic poetics, however, Cooke turns to the poetry of two canonical non-Indigenous writers—Judith Wright and Pablo Neruda—whose work he analyses as a foil to that of the Indigenous poets. Cooke's argument here is provocative. Both Wright and Neruda are much loved and admired poets: Wright, nationally, for her sensitively nuanced poetry exploring Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations; Neruda, internationally, for his lifelong commitment as a champion poet of the poor and downtrodden, particularly in Latin America. To claim that their work perpetuates 'colonialist poetics' (40) is an enormous gambit, one that might put off a few of Cooke's readers. He does acknowledge, with regard to Wright, that his perspective on her work is 'only one of many' and he admits: 'it serves the purposes of my argument but does not paint a complete portrait of the poet' (70). Nevertheless, through readings of poems such as 'Bora Ring,' 'The Garden' and 'Nigger's Leap: New England,' Cooke argues that Wright's poetry moves too quickly from the specifics of the local to the abstract, the universal and the transcendent. In the case of Neruda, as well, he reads a poetics in which too often 'an ethic of place is forgotten in the drive towards a more global, placeless modernity' (89). Cooke relates this both to Neruda's commitment to international communism and his desire for transcendence. Indeed, he reads a tension throughout Neruda's oeuvre with regard to immanence versus transcendence. Cooke's detailed reading of 'Las Alturas de Macchu Picchu,' from *Canto General* illustrates this. He explains that the poet's ascent to the heights of Macchu Picchu is marked by deaths innumerable—that of 'every event, every person, and every creature that he imagines might have once inhabited the place'—and that these deaths 'are necessary so that the poet can rise up, free of attachments, reborn, above the future of Latin America' (103). Elsewhere, Cooke points out the 'god-like' persona created in the poems, despite Neruda's avowed atheism (97). While Wright might not be accused of such grandiose movements or postures in her work, Cooke argues that both these modernist poets at times were implicated in the tendency to speak for the Indigenous people of their continent. In 'Las Alturas de Macchu Picchu,' Cooke quotes Neruda: 'Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta / I come to speak for your dead mouths' (107) and then makes the point that 'in the mid-twentieth century, at the time "Macchu Picchu" was written, over a million Americans indigenous to the area around Macchu Picchu were very much alive in the Andean region. Their mouths were hardly dead' (108). It is, however, not the argument over representation and the assumed authority to speak for another that is the most useful aspect of this section of the book. What is useful is the illustration, through close reading of well-known poems by canonical writers from Australia and Chile, that poems by Wright and Neruda tend towards abstraction and elevation and favour a 'high-modernist optic' (24) over the partial, fragmentary and provisional perspectives to be found in the nomadic poetics practiced by the Indigenous poets to which Cooke then turns.

In a poetics of immanence, ‘everything—language, spirit, and law—is to be found in the ground beneath our feet,’ Cooke writes (115). In his chapter on Indigenous poetry from the West Kimberley, he focuses primarily on transcribed poetic works of Butcher Joe Nangan. While perhaps not well-known to literary critics, Butcher Joe’s performances of song-poetry, transcribed by Ray Keogh, are significant works and, for Cooke’s thesis, serve as a powerful point of entry to Indigenous country. An important element in his analysis is Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the collective assemblage. When understood as part of an assemblage, the song-poem becomes ‘a moment in a chain of dialogue between a great network of speakers—human, spirit, animal, and otherwise’ (124). Cooke gives the example of a performance of a *nurlu* series in country outside of Broome which ‘involves the progression, song by song, along a particular track’ (125) and in which a chorus or accompanying singers repeat the verses of the main singer, the voices of each rising and falling in contrapuntal engagement; thus, the focus is dispersed from the individual voice to the voices of the assemblage. Cooke also makes the point that song-poems’ connections with country are accessible only to those with intricate knowledge of that country and, in most cases, with degrees of initiation into culture (126). The fact that the texts upon which Cooke draws in this chapter have been transcribed and translated is also incorporated into this concept of the assemblage, with the published or produced text understood as not static, fixed representation, but as iteration, as performance, one among many.

In his commentary on this aspect of Indigenous poetics—transcription and the perceived opacity of Indigenous song-poems, especially for non-Indigenous readers—Cooke connects this with one’s willingness to accept the glimpse, to acknowledge limits, and to give up the desire for an all-seeing, all-knowing perspective. This is beautifully illustrated with an extract from one such performance by Butcher Joe in which ambiguity exists because of linguistic similarity between the word for white ochre and water snake. Not only is Keogh the transcriber unsure, but so are Aboriginal commentators Paddy Roe and George Dyunggayan; the song-poem might be about collecting ochre and it might be about the journey of a water snake and the associated water snake myth. The fact that meaning is multiple, contextual, and participatory is what distinguishes the work as nomadic, and its translation, Cooke insists, ‘must be as nomadic as the nomad poem: glimpsing, moving, evading’ (153).

Cooke’s reading of the work of Mapuche poets from Chile sustains this application of the Deleuzian concepts of nomadism and assemblages. In his discussion of the poetry of Lionel Lienlaf, he again dwells on the issue of translation. Lienlaf writes in both Mapuzugun and Spanish, and his books are published in bilingual format. His poetry is deeply connected with *üil*, traditional Mapuche song-poetry, and Cooke makes the point that his poetry ‘consists largely of transcription onto the page of *üil* structures, while at the same time trying to place these structures in a wider context of Mapuche colonization and subjugation’ (164). Cooke also draws attention to *winka*, or non-Indigenous, involvement in the production of some of Lienlaf’s texts—just as the song-poems of Butcher Joe, or the poetic narratives of Paddy Roe, in the Australian context arrive on the page through the involvement of non-Aboriginal interlocutors and editors. Again, the concept of the assemblage is useful here with poetry moving across linguistic codes through the involvement of multiple participants, among which Cooke positions himself, as he translates portions of the poems from their Spanish versions into English.

The second Mapuche poet considered in this study is Paulo Huirimilla, whose work Cooke reads along with that of Aboriginal poet Lionel Fogarty in a single chapter to demonstrate ‘a trans-Pacific postcolonial poetics’ (231). At the outset of this review, I made the claim that

literary connections between Australia and Latin America are few. In this chapter, Cooke points to two of those precedents: Bridie McCarthy's 2006 PhD study of Australian and Latin American poetry, and a bilingual English/Spanish collection of poetry by Mapuche and Australian Aboriginal poets titled *Earth Mirror* (2008). Huirimilla was one of the contributing poets to this anthology. And while Fogarty's work was not represented in *Earth Mirror*, he has written a poem titled 'Mapuche "Campesinos"' in which he stakes a connection of solidarity with the Indigenous people of Chile. Cooke's reading of Huirimilla focuses on the 2005 collection *Palimpsesto* which, like Lienlaf's poetry, references *ül* structures, while it also incorporates Western poetics to express a *mestizaje* or hybrid identity. Huirimilla identifies as Mapuche and Huilliche (the Mapuche from the far south of Chile) and much of his poetry expresses an urban indigeneity concerned with dislocations as well as cultural continuities. Cooke argues that this hybridity 'is central to the performative, nomadic poetics of both Huirimilla and Fogarty' (251). He makes a strong case for reading the two as nomad poets whose contest with language, the coloniser's language, leads eventually (quoting Joris) 'to the realization that all languages are foreign' (253). The extract Cooke provides and translates from the poem 'Warrior Song' expresses exactly this:

I hunter-gatherer
 urbanite of jacket and leather
 Combed with hair gel
 born in shit
 From Pedro Eriazo
 With a harmonica
 between my teeth
 I stammer for the deaths
 of my ancestors
 With a split scowl
 Few words
 I have lost
 My identity card . . . (253)

How, then, is this stammering the language of the earth? The fragmented, provisional, and improvised quality of the poetry discussed makes it clear that the nomad poet's language(s), while coming from the earth—from country—also emerges from and engages with the socio-historical contexts of colonisation. Cooke writes:

Many nomad poets write with this very propensity to stammer. Roe is always stammering, laughing, asking—ever interrupting the narrative with extra-narrative punctuation. Fogarty's language seems to tumble from the left-hand margin, often tripping over itself before gathering a momentum which is then chopped into repeated staccato fragments. Lienlaf's brief translations of songs and dreams—all ephemeral things, written with hesitation—are never complete. We see this ephemera translated into those minimalist, breathing lines on the page; the language creates smaller clearings that share existence with a jostling group of ancestral and contemporary voices. His music is communal, forming part of the larger palimpsest of human and non-human languages. (271)

The phrasing used here by Cooke is typical of his analysis throughout the book; the ecological allusions are central to his argument that this nomadic poetics can move readers towards new understandings of, for example, 'the mineral and vegetable composition of our cities, of the

bodies which build and inhabit them, and of the bodies which lie beneath them. In doing so,' Cook writes, 'we might recover our places within intricate ecological networks and follow the pathways that extend from cities into the lands that sustain them' (295). Such understanding is at the heart of the poetry read here, providing its readers with glimpses of sustainable relationships between country, its inhabitants and their languages. The relationships that Cooke's study has established between Indigenous poetry from Australia and Chile provide insights that readers may apply in multiple contexts, in multiple languages, and its trans-Pacific connections, in particular, open Australian literature in directions that other scholars will, one hopes, be encouraged to follow.

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