

# Writing Country: Composition, Law and Indigenous Ecopoetics

PETER MINTER

University of Sydney

## *De La Madre Tierra*

The people of Bolivia recently composed and made into law one of the most revolutionary environmental bills in modern history: ‘Ley De Derechos De La Madre Tierra’, or the *Law of the Rights of Mother Earth*. Amidst the late twentieth century reawakening of many Latin American Indigenous cultures, this law springs from the Bolivian Indigenous peoples’ re-centring of non-Western, non-capitalist approaches to the formation of local and national polities, a process that can be appreciated as part of a deeper historical unfolding of political, economic and cultural decolonisation. Essentially, the *Law of the Rights of Mother Earth* gives nature a distinct legal personality or legal personhood. This breakthrough has occurred one hundred and twenty five years after the US Supreme Court ruled in *Santa Clara County vs. Southern Pacific Railroad* (1886) that corporations were to be considered legal persons entitled to the enjoyment of precisely the same rights afforded to natural persons by the US Bill of Rights. As Jane Gleeson-White recently pointed out in her recent *Overland* essay “Extreme Weather and Mother Earth: Nature gets legal rights in Bolivia”, ‘[t]oday corporations are legal people in most jurisdictions of the world and dominate the planet. It seems only fair that the planet be granted similar rights in its fight to survive the ravages of corporate profit seeking.’

Perhaps uncannily, just as the people of Bolivia were publishing the ground-breaking but long in coming law giving legal personhood to the Earth, the University of California Press published *The H.D. Book*, the long awaited masterpiece by the American poet Robert Duncan. For the last half century *The H.D. Book* has only been known in tantalising chapters photocopied from obscure out-of-print journals and passed from hand to hand or in-box to in-box. Duncan began writing the manuscript in 1959 as a homage to Hilda Doolittle, one of the many women central to the emergence of Western literary modernism. H.D. was also one of Duncan’s significant early literary mentors and, it might be emphasised, mother figures. Not unlike ‘Ley De Derechos De La Madre Tierra’, Duncan’s vision in *The H.D. Book* is built upon a complex relationship with the maternal. Early on in the volume he declares that

I found my life in poetry through the agency of certain women and ... had then perhaps a special estimation not only of the masters of that art but of its mistresses, so that certain women writers came to be central in importance for me.  
(69)

The correlation between a maternal mythos and ‘that art’, the art of poetry, is central to *The H.D. Book* and Duncan’s various counter-modernisms. Emerging from the agency of ‘certain women’ and their semiotic figuring of psycho-linguistic permission, Duncan’s aesthetic philosophy is predicated on an intrinsically compositional ontology from whose laws (‘the mistresses’) a nurturing aesthetic cosmos coheres.

In both the *Law of the Rights of Mother Earth* and Robert Duncan's *The H.D. Book*, the cosmos, understood politically and aesthetically, is composed of a system of law. In the first case, the system of law is an expression of the will of the Bolivian people, a legislative articulation of the people's collective stance toward reality. In the second case, Duncan's literary will is underpinned by an aesthetic mode in which a compositional *logos* and the *cosmos* are synthesised in the work of art. Duncan's stance is an exemplary moment in the literary aesthetics of the Black Mountain School, the key mid-twentieth century movement of avant-garde writers, artists, composers and theorists associated with the progressive Black Mountain College of North Carolina in the United States. Together with his peer and mentor at Black Mountain, the formidable Charles Olson, Duncan developed the theory of 'composition by field', a compositional ontology and practice that remains central to counter-modern modes of literary innovation. Indeed, as this paper aims to show, 'composition by field' constitutes a foundational aesthetic category in theorising potential correspondences between western and Indigenous modes of decolonised literary embodiment. Olson first used the term in his breakthrough essay 'Projective Verse', where he rejects traditional 'closed form' compositional scaffolds such as metre and rhyme in favour of, for instance, the in-situ 'open form' energy and scales of the body and the breath:

First, some simplicities that a man learns, if he works in the OPEN, or what can also be called COMPOSITION BY FIELD ... it is my impression that all parts of speech suddenly, in composition by field, are fresh for both sound and percussive use, spring up like unknown, unnamed vegetables in the patch, when you work it, come spring. (239, 244)

Olson's 'composition by field' presents a compositional *ontos* in which the proprioceptive apprehension of nature and the *logos* of speech are fused in a state of *mythopoiesis*. Indeed, as we shall see below, Olson augments the synthetic *ontos* of 'composition by field' with a theory of the *muthulogos*, a discursive composite of 'mythos' and 'logos' in which nature and the imagination are brought together. In *The H.D. Book*, Duncan similarly refers to the 'symposium of the whole', an imagined modernist corollary of Plato's Symposium in which all forms, both human and natural, would be lawfully afforded substantive, non-hierarchic 'rights' to expressive being:

... our ideal of vital being, rises not in our identification in a hierarchy of higher forms but in our identification with the universe. To compose such a symposium of the whole, such a totality, all the old excluded orders must be included. The female, the proletariat, the foreign; the animal and vegetative; the unconscious and the unknown; the criminal and failure—all that has been outcast and vagabond must return to be admitted in the creation of what we consider we are. (Duncan 154)

In the 'symposium of the whole', natural objects and the earth itself are admitted as authorities whose voices contribute to the compositional conversation of being. Nature is given an aesthetic personality which corresponds to the legal personality granted to it in 'Ley De Derechos De La Madre Tierra'.

It is this correspondence that forms the heart of this paper. I am keen to advance the proposition, both here and in my ongoing scholarship in Aboriginal (and Australian) poetics, that new and innovative frameworks for exegetical readings are urgently required to renovate our theorisation of the literature and its cultural, political and philosophical milieux. Very

little recent work has been done to adequately theorise Australian Aboriginal poetics and its various modernist and postmodernist conditions and contexts. For instance, drawing on contemporary ecocritical theory, a compelling disciplinary development can be found in theorising Aboriginal literary representations of Country and their eco-poetic terrain and potential. Such a study is part of a broader critical discourse that I wish to designate *transcultural eco-poetics*, and this paper is put forward as an exploratory ‘opening of the field.’ By commencing with the figuration of a parallaxic relation between two critical ‘objects’—nature’s ‘legal’ personality on one hand, and its ‘aesthetic’ personality on the other—I wish to generate a wide-ranging set of expository issues. Hereafter I do not return to the trope of the maternal, besides confirming its function, in a neo-Lacanian sense, as the enabling backdrop for the codification of a compositional symbolic order. Nor will I further address the straightforward socio-political or economic effects of the Bolivian Law or indeed Duncan’s sense of the ‘symposium of the whole’. My principal goal is to observe the productive symmetry between ‘composition by field’ aesthetics, as it is represented in the work of Duncan and Olson, and the eco-philosophical *gestalt* of Indigenous representations of nature as they appear in poems and dreamings about Country. This paper posits that the *ontos* of ‘composition by field’ is symmetrical with the compositional ethos of Country, a compatibility that can be closely observed in their corporealisation of nature amidst cultural imperatives of custodial and aesthetic law/lore.

### Composition By Field

The correlation between the compositional *ontos* of ‘composition by field’ and the compositional ethos of Country can be discerned across a small but significant set of categories. The first category to be defined is the displacement of the capitalist-romantic ego. The displacement of the corporate personality enacted in the *Law of the Rights of Mother Earth* correlates with the displacement of the romantic ego that is central to the aesthetics of ‘composition by field’, and, in its displacement of a distinctly capitalist-colonial formation, to a transcultural eco-poetics of Country. Just as the *Law of the Rights of Mother Earth* pushes aside the precedence of the legal personality of the corporation, ‘composition by field’ aesthetics pushes aside the centrality of the ‘egotistical sublime’ which has been at the heart of modern Anglo-American poetry since at least Wordsworth. There is an historical and dialectical correlation between the late-Enlightenment emergence of the legal personality of the corporation and the emergence of the Romantic imagination. Following Charles Altieri, they are both ‘secondary creations’ in the Kantian sense (607). The first is a function of the incorporation of a collective will before economic or judicial audiences, while the second posits the autonomy of an imagination which appeals to the meditative faculties of an abstract readership.

To pause for a moment, I would like to venture that the legal personality of the corporation and the Romantic imagination both be considered as *extractive* technologies, the corporate personality extracting economic value, or capital, from the earth and labour, and the romantic egotistical sublime deploying an *extractive aesthetic* that extracts aesthetic value, otherwise known as beauty, from nature.<sup>1</sup> Against the edifice of extractive capital and beauty stand the *ontos* of ‘composition by field’ aesthetics and the compositional ethos of Country. A second area of inquiry therefore follows as a critical description of what is meant by these terms—the compositional *ontos* and the compositional ethos. It is necessary to ask what it is that is displacing the corporate personality and the egotistical sublime, what it is that can simultaneously advance the emergence of decolonised nature and its aesthetic corollaries in a

transcultural eco-poiesis. How do we get from the corporatisation of nature to the corporealisation of nature?

There are two principal factors in this second sphere of inquiry. The first, as discussed above, is the emphasis on a compositional rather than extractive aesthetic ontology. Here, composition means not only the writerly or literary aspects of *poiesis*, but also the material, bio-chemical and semiotic forces and processes in which it emerges. Rather than *extracting* aesthetic value from objects or relations, the compositional onto-ethos emerges in what might be described as a *composting* or compositional *logos* that tropes, for instance, principles and processes of recycling, reciprocity and renewal. Assuming, then, an intrinsically compositional framework, the second factor is, following Olson, a *muthologic* discourse in which physical and organic natural processes are aligned with the narratorial devices of the human imagination. Corresponding to the symmetry between ‘composition by field’ and Country, a *compositional muthologos* adheres to both a non-extractive compositional practice founded in an aesthetics of biochemical-semiotics, a fecund composting aesthetic, and secondly the principle of the *muthologos* proposed by Charles Olson in various mid-twentieth-century texts.

### Composition by Law

Olson’s concept of *muthologos* is central to a proposed correlation between ‘composition by field’ and a deep poetics of Country. The *muthologos* is a neologism of *muthos* and *logos*, which, in the loosest sense, can be respectively defined as mythological and rational discourse. Put very simply, ‘composition by field’ attempts to recast the division between these two discursive modes which, he argued in essays such as ‘History’, ‘It Was. But It Ain’t’ and the poem ‘Letter 23’ of the *Maximus* poems, has distorted Western *poiesis* due to an artificial distinction placed between them since at least Plato and Pindar. Drawing directly upon James Thomson’s 1935 volume *The Art of the Logos: On the traditional stories of the ancient Greeks*, Olson posited that, in their more ancient senses, *logos* and *muthos* were interchangeable, that in Homer, Heroditus and Heraclitus, for instance, they could *both* be considered as ‘fictional’ or ‘mythological’ depending on the mode of the discourse itself. Thomson writes that ‘a Muthos was a Logos, and a Logos a Muthos. They were two names for the same thing’ (19). Thomson’s point has been more recently emphasised by Alexander J. Beecroft, who writes that

[w]e would do well to remember that *muthos* and *logos* are in flux, not only within the diachronic evolution of the Greek language, but also within Platonic dialogue, and especially within the *Phaedrus*. In *Khôra*, Derrida shows how a subtle and careful reading of the *Timaeus*, and particularly of *khôra* within that dialogue, demonstrates the internal falsity of the dichotomy between *muthos* and *logos*. (52 n.11)

Rather than ‘reason’, the root meaning of *logos* is closer to ‘what is said’. As English scholar Laurent Milesi suggests, *muthos* and *logos*

were ... two complementary activities, usually attuned to each other ‘in accordance with nature’ in order to express ... myth. If logopoeia came to designate, as it were, an artistic ‘speech act’ which could be directly reflective of nature, the *muthos* or thing spoken, uttered or ‘acted’ by the mouth, had its ... correspondence in the thing done or enacted. (223-224)

It is at this juncture that the correlation between ‘composition by field’ and an Aboriginal poetics of Country is most visible. In a moment I will discuss those elements of Country that can be most usefully applied in this context, but I should pause for a moment to consider what textures and associations the argument has so far revealed. Most importantly, in my discussion of ‘composition by field’ can be observed the emergence of a mode of *poiesis* in which, as was noted with reference to the work of Robert Duncan, *mythos*, *logos* (as speech and breath) and the *cosmos* are synthesised in the work of art. We can now correlate Duncan’s ‘symposium of the whole’ with, as Milesi writes, its accordance with nature in the expression of a *muthological* poetic substance. Further, and as the quotation from Milesi implies, the accordance between *poiesis* and nature follows the *logos* of ritual and procedure, in short, the articulation of aesthetic and ontological law. This accordance, which underpins a symmetry between the aesthetic law of ‘composition by field’ and the compositional ethos of Country, is fundamental to the substantiation of the *cosmos* as a ‘lawful’ poetic subject on its own terms and, as was earlier proposed to be a primary goal of this paper, the displacement of the extractive poetics of the capitalist romantic ego.

### Writing Country

This paper will now conclude by addressing those aspects of a poetics of Country which most closely adhere to the delineation of a *muthologic* predicate to an aesthetics of ‘composition by field’. There is no need to reiterate the now classic definitions of Country which have emerged in the work of significant scholars such as Deborah Bird Rose, Peter Read, Peter Sutton and others, which include principles such as reciprocity, kinship, equivalence, autonomy and balance. Instead, I should like to briefly focus on an aspect of Country which essentially functions as a pre-philosophical or pre-poetic condition for these principles, an aspect which has already been addressed throughout this paper, and that is the lawfulness of Country, its *logos* or, indeed, its poetical *muthologos* as a law/lore-full entity; indeed, its Dreaming. An insight into this framework can be had in a close reading of a specific section of Deborah Bird Rose’s *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in Australian Aboriginal Culture* (1992). Addressing the work of anthropologist William Stanner, Rose elaborates on the *muthologos* of the Aboriginal concept of ‘Dreaming’. She writes that:

[d]reaming can be understood as a particular kind of map. Stanner’s proposition ... that the Dreaming constitutes ‘a kind of logos or principle of order’ best expresses the abstract and enduring qualities of Dreaming as map. ... Stanner’s definition ... of Dreaming as a ‘poetic key to Reality’ hints at the dynamism of Dreaming in the present ... Dreaming beings generate the Law by which life is sustained. Law is about relationships ... what may best be termed meta-rules: rules about relationships. (44)

Here, a critical synthesis occurs between Stanner and Rose’s conceptualisations of the *making* or *poiesis* of Dreaming and, by extension, of Country. The address moves from ‘map’ to ‘logos or principle of order’ to a ‘poetic key to reality’ to ‘Law’ and finally to ‘meta-rule’. The essential equation is that Dreaming makes Law, not simply as one might make a decree or statute, but rather, if we assert the aesthetics of ‘law’ and *logos* that has underpinned this paper, as a function of *poiesis*. In Stanner’s exact and very useful phrase, Dreaming is the ‘poetic key to reality’, a perpetually spoken, sung and reiterated discourse which opens the ground for the emergence of systems of relation within which a naturally occurring *poiesis* condenses as perpetually recurring *mythos* and *logos*, or, in other words, a *compositional*

*muthulogos* which constantly iterates and reiterates the lore-full and lawful language of Country.

A remarkable contemporary example of *compositional muthulogos* can be found in *meenamatta lena narla puellakanny* (Meenamatta Water Country Discussion), a writing and painting collaboration between Tasmanian Aboriginal (Plangermairreener) poet and senior cultural man Pura-lia Meenamatta (Jim Everett) and Tasmanian painter Jonathon Kimberley. A suite of twelve paintings and thirteen poems exhibited at Bett Gallery Hobart in 2006 and Devonport Gallery in 2007, *meenamatta lena narla puellakanny* can still be experienced via the exhibition catalogue, which can be downloaded from:

[http://www.devonportgallery.com/uploadFiles/documents/meenamatta\\_lena\\_narla\\_puellakanny\\_catalogue.pdf](http://www.devonportgallery.com/uploadFiles/documents/meenamatta_lena_narla_puellakanny_catalogue.pdf)

Art critic Helen Vivian describes how this extraordinary collaboration began in Meenamatta country (Blue Tier, North East Tasmania) when Everett came across Kimberley painting on an island in the middle of a remote river (67). Everett immediately understood Kimberley's desire to refigure western landscape painting traditions and open them to the lawfulness of Country, saying '...it's a bit like our Rosetta Stone ... it's like a deciphering of the country, providing a framework for the discussion which allows it to be understood' (70). Here, Everett's allusion to the Rosetta Stone uncannily echoes Stanner's 'poetic key to reality' and the logopoiesis that imbues the writing and constitution of Country. Kimberley's refiguring is founded on a scepticism of the European landscape tradition and its 'continuing neo-colonial preoccupations' (70). He instead offers a compelling poethics of 'Unlandscape', a gentle turning away from imperialist modes of landscape representation in favour of 'a more reciprocal and meaningful discussion with Country' (67).

Kimberley's 'unlandscape' deserves further critical attention, but for now we will read more closely the poetry of Jim Everett, whose poems begin from the 'fact-reality' of Country (Vivian 70). The poem 'turbuna' is representative of Everett's key themes and is short enough to be quoted here in full:

*turbuna*

water flows through all arteries and veins  
 with my clans people being in touch across  
 space of being with other life through water  
 that is the circuitry of our original families  
 across meenamatta in turbuna and all neminah  
 as the lore of our lands are laid down for all  
 timelessness and spaciousness of blood country  
 of us who belong here forever home with family  
 to hold the law of our lands in respect and trust  
 for it is who we are that is meenamatta blood  
 as it is meenamatta that is us clans of old  
 today and tomorrow and forever in bloody-country  
 in recognition of being plangermairreener  
 with plindermairhemener blood-water  
 joining tonenerweenerlarmenne in family  
 in all-life relationship yet us as people

known as with and of meenamatta blood-country  
(Everett and Kimberley 24)

Everett's poem is paired with Kimberley's painting *weetapoona turbuna mookener rialangana: the moon is risen, mount ben lomond water dance*. *turbuna* is known by most as the mountain Ben Lomond, but as Trawulwuy writer and scholar Greg Lehman suggests in his exhibition essay, '... instead of encountering the familiar (a reference to some far away Scottish tor), we meet with a marker of sacred country – standing as an eternal sentinel to the ceremony of men and women in meenamatta land'. In 'turbuna' we bear witness to a considerable *compositional muthulogos* that expresses the lawfulness, and poetic lore-fulness, of Country. Everett's poem demonstrates the integration of modes of corporeality and natural substantiation ('arteries and veins', 'the circuitry of our original families', 'meenamatta blood') with systems of law, lore, kinship, reciprocity and planetary consciousness. The central figure is expressed in 'meenamatta blood-country', a 'poetic key' to the corporeal and compositional *logos* of Country. Everett's syntax provides both a method and demonstration: 'meenamatta' is an Aboriginal lexical property naming and expressing Country as an incorporated body of relation, being and kinship, which is then 'blood', itself correlated with 'blood-water' and 'all-life', which is then 'blood-country'. Language (*mythos/logos*) becomes corporeal in becoming Country, and Country composes language. Country is an expression of a compositional *muthulogos*, and the lawful spaciousness for the emergence of corporeality, the 'original families' and the circuitry of living. In the phenomenal long poem 'planegarrartoothenar' (paired with the equally extraordinary painting *drakurringer legana tagarilia: breathe my family water*) Everett writes that

prignarpanar and maytyenner, pooreretenner and teemee, and  
planegarrartoothenar are always here on meenamatta country ... .. this place is  
our home, our roots that connect with the all-life of country. (16)

There are numerous other examples throughout contemporary and classical Aboriginal literature of the creative lawfulness of Country and its compositional *muthulogos*—the momentous opening pages of Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*; the eco-political poetry of Lionel Fogarty; the song-poems and Dreaming stories that have come to us from anthropologists and ethnographers. Everett's *meenamatta* poems, alongside the profoundly innovative paintings of Jonathon Kimberley, offer very special opportunities for the appreciation of Country and both its legal and aesthetic personalities.

### **Country has always been a 'legal' person**

Much has been written about the 'nourishing terrains' of Country, its positive expression of an ecologically balanced and culturally rich foundation for life. In closing, what should be emphasised, from the perspective of literary aesthetics and a theoretical inquiry into the contours of a thoroughly decolonised Australian eco-poetics, is the manner in which an ontology of Country localises systems of natural law which are simultaneously systems of natural *poiesis*. Dreaming stories lawfully 'make' or compose being in Country. Hence a poetics of Country can be said to correlate with a principle of *muthulogos* and, therefore, with the poetics of 'composition by field'. A poetics of Country can be thought of as nurturing, in Duncan's words, a 'symposium of the whole.' Another paper can be written on how such a correlation is representative of the aesthetic and ideological interfaces between Aboriginal

Australia and Western modernity, perhaps as a mode of counter-modernity which also echoes the counter-modernism of Olson's Open Field. For now we can adjourn with a brief return to where we started out. This paper began by addressing the recent passing into Bolivian law of 'Ley De Derechos De La Madre Tierra', the *Law of the Rights of Mother Earth*, a law which has displaced the legal personhood of the capitalist corporation by granting legal personhood to nature. One of the principal goals of this law is to empower the protection of nature against the considerable power of extractive economies and industries. We now end by emphasising a final, overarching symmetry between the *Law of the Rights of Mother Earth* and the poetics of Country and its compositional *muthologos*: Country has always been a 'legal' person, and has always made *poiesis* without the aid of the extractive aesthetics of the capitalist romantic sublime.

## WORKS CITED

- Altieri, Charles. 'From Symbolist Thought to Immanence: The Ground of Postmodern American Poetics.' *boundary 2* 1.3 (1973): 605-42.
- Beecroft, Alexander J. "'This is not a true story': Stesichorus's Palinode and the Revenge of the Epichoric.' *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 136.1 (2006): 47-70.
- Duncan, Robert. *The H.D. Book*. The Collected Writings of Robert Duncan. Eds. Michael Boughn and Victor Coleman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.
- Gleeson-White, Jane. 'Extreme Weather and Mother Earth: Nature gets Legal Rights in Bolivia.' *Overland* (2011). 17 June 2011 <http://overland.org.au/blogs/red-herring/2011/06/extreme-weather-and-mother-earth-nature-gets-legal-rights-in-bolivia/>.
- Legislative Assembly of the Plurinational State of Bolivia. 'Ley De Derechos De La Madre Tierra.' [*Law of the Rights of Mother Earth*], *Ley 071 (21- Diciembre-2010)* La Paz, 2010.
- Lehman, Greg. 'shared journeys to meenamatta land.' October 2006. 10 June 2012 <http://www.bettgallery.com.au/artists/kimberley/oct06/essay.htm.Meenamatta>,
- Pura-lia (Jim Everett) and Jonathon Kimberley. *meenamatta lena narla puellakanny: Meenamatta Water Country Discussion. A Writing and Painting Collaboration*. Hobart: Bett Gallery; Devonport: Devonport Regional Gallery, 2006.
- Milesi, Laurent. 'From Logos to Muthos: the Philosophy of Pound's and Olson's Mythopoetics.' *Avant-Post: The Avant-Garde Under 'Post-' Conditions*. Ed. Louis Armand. Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006. 215-38.
- Olson, Charles. *Collected Prose*. Eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Freidlander. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997.
- . *The Maximus Poems*. Ed. George F. Butterick. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.
- Rose, Deborah Bird. *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Aboriginal Australian Culture*. Cambridge; Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific R. Co.* U.S. Supreme Court. 118 U.S. 394, 1886.
- Stanner, W. E. H. *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays 1938-1973*. Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1979.
- Thomson, J. A. K. *The Art of the Logos. [On the traditional stories of the ancient Greeks]*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1935.

Vivian, Helen. 'An Unlandscape of Words and Paintings: From Meenamatta to Paradise.' *Artlink* 29.2 (2009): 66-70.

Wright, Alexis. *Carpentaria*. Artarmon, N.S.W.: Giramondo, 2006.

<sup>1</sup> Further work on *extractive aesthetics* is in preparation.