Reading Beyond Extraction?: More-Than-Human Regions in Melissa Lucashenko's *Mullumbimby* (2013)

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> It is this idea that is relentlessly battered by international capital, as we are asked to forgo belonging, and to accept that any place is the same as any other, that apart from purely functional aspects, the land has no personality, no infusion of spirit. Big stories are failing us as a nation and will probably not save our natural environment (i.e. us) from the greed and stupidity and indifference that assail it. (Lucashenko, "Not Quite" n.p.)

> *I think I could turn and live with animals,*
> *They are so placid and self-contained*
> *I stand and look at them long and long . . .*
> *Not one kneels to another,*
> *Nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,*
> *Not one is respectable or industrious over the entire earth.*
> (Walt Whitman, qtd in *Mullumbimby* 5)

> Strange to think that . . . the turtles she'd watched as a kid might have stayed in the same few square miles of water for decades . . . The animals, Jo reflected, they're the ones who know the country more than any of us ever will. They have no rights and yet all the deep, deep knowledge is written in their muscles and their bones. (*Mullumbimby* 182)

We acknowledge that the reading behind this paper took place on lands where sovereignties have never been ceded. We acknowledge the Bundjalung owners, past and present, of the land in which *Mullumbimby* emanates. Here we interrogate how knowledge in and of a region is held and carried by many subject positions. Our broader work is informed by Kombumerri writer Mary Graham who defines Aboriginal relationality as the traditional foundation of the Law and expands that it "is an elaborate, complex and refined system of social, moral, spiritual and community obligations that provided an ordered universe for people" ("Aboriginal Notions of Relationality and Positionalism" 17). Graham also posits relationality as embracing "uncertainty and imprecision" (17). A relational reading process is considered by Phillips et al. in approaching Waanyi writer Alexis Wright's award-winning epic, *Carpentaria*, and involves "Country as more than setting . . . animate and powerful"; human characters as dependent on more-than-human characters; and "deeper wisdoms" guiding "social and ecological" futures (Phillips et al. 178). In thinking through these seminal ideas of relationality and relational reading, we are drawn to *Mullumbimby* as facilitating a sustainable encounter with regions. Our intent is not to appropriate or excavate Indigenous knowledges, but rather to learn from *Mullumbimby* as an opportunity to reflect on familial and relational connections within a valued matrix of inter-species interactions.

Mullumbimby tells the story of Jo Breen, a Goori single mother and cemetery grounds keeper in Mullumbimby, a village in the Byron Bay hinterland. She lives with her thirteen-year-old daughter, Ellen, her horse Athena, and Athena's son Comet, most beloved to Jo, two dogs, Daisy and Warrigal, as well as countless wild birds, reptiles, and other animals. Shortly after the novel's opening, Jo buys a farm on her own Bundjalung Country. The story plots Jo's growing experiences of the Country and community around her. It unravels her burgeoning romantic relationship with Twoboy Jackson, who is pursuing a native title claim in the region. The narrative, we argue, develops Jo's relational love for and deep entanglement with her human and more-than-human kin.

Lucashenko as a Writer of Region, Culture, and Maternity

I, Sandra, Wakka Wakka and Gooren Gooreng woman & then editor of the UQP Black Australian Writers Series, first met and worked with Lucashenko on her debut novel *Steam Pigs*. Steam pigs, an old railway worker term for square pegs not fitting into round holes, is set in a particular place of urban fringe marginality while able to be read for universal themes. Lucashenko burst onto the Australian literary scene bringing characterisations and vernacular in fast-paced narrative from standpoints too little seen and less understood in Australian literary circles. Layers of potential interpretation achieve differential revelation depending on the location of the reader and their openness to the intersubjective experience that relational reading demands.

I, Clare, first encountered *Mullumbimby*, as white, settler academic, at a regional writer's festival, chairing a panel that featured Melissa Lucashenko as a writer of place. Lucashenko quickly disabused me of some of my Leavisite reading assumptions on place as setting, focusing instead on the material specifics of that region.

Readings of Lucashenko's work have centralised regionality since *Steam Pigs*. Margaret Hendersen presents Lucashenko's outer Brisbane suburbia as a neoliberalist capitalist matrix that constricts female safety, work opportunity, and belonging, yet stages an "emerging conception of Aboriginal spatiality" (Hendersen 77). The denouement for central protagonist, Sue, is that Brisbane is, ultimately and fundamentally, Yuggera Country (Hendersen 78). Country (capitalised) is defined by Terry Widders

> as an overarching concept that reflected an understanding of Land as mother and located humans and all other species in relation to each other and in relation to Country which meant physical land but also the skies, waters, and seas. (Widders, qtd in Phillips et al. 176)

Hendersen's reading of *Steam Pigs* as centralising Country is consistent with Carole Ferrier, who, in surveying twenty years of Aboriginal Australian women's fiction, argues "planetary (see Spivak) survival" is central (Ferrier 19). In this paper we foreground *Mullumbimby*, Lucashenko's fifth novel. The work situates storytelling in and on specific regions as "planetary survival." Story is not simply imaginative fabrication; storytelling is theory and a source of knowledge production and cultural continuance. Aman Sium and Eric Ritskes argue that storytelling exists as cultural "resurgence and insurgence, as Indigenous knowledge production, and as disruptive of Eurocentric, colonial norms of 'objectivity' and knowledge" (ii). Michaela Moura-Kocoglu develops ideas of story as knowledge production. For Moura-Kocoglu, trans-Pacific Indigenous Feminist theory readings position Lucashenko's *Mullumbimby* as founded in Country, and Indigenous women as arbiters of cultural knowledge and community cohesion, despite local Indigenous factionalisms and court disputes (Moura-Kocoglu 247).

Moura-Kocoglu positions *Mullumbimby*'s protagonist, Jo Breen, as facilitating balance between genders and the vitality of an integrated, harmonious community. For Moura-Kocoglu, where Twoboy offers "Darwinian" and "violent" resolution to land disputes (Moura-Kocoglu 249), Jo is an opposing signifier of balance through holistic and reciprocal approaches to "family, community, and land—for the well-being and balance of the whole" (Moura-Kocoglu 249). This reading of a competitive woman/man binary in approaching cultural revival and survival on Country may have limitations. To us it betrays a "fractional misunderstanding," the kind Lucashenko writes of within *Mullumbimby* itself. Certainly, the force of Jo's maternal love is central, yet some comments made by Therese, Jo's non-Indigenous Asian Australian close friend, complicate the notion of women's solidarity. Therese's presumption is that Twoboy is jealous of the farm:

> They'd been friends forever . . . but still Therese managed constantly to fractionally misunderstand her. She sighed.
>
> "He's not jealous—Native Title isn't about acreage. It's . . ." Jo struggled for the words to make Therese understand. "It's about honour . . . If he's recognised as a traditional owner, then he's a warrior who's made things better for his family, a tiny bit. It's about winning a war that nobody even talked about for two hundred years . . . And it's about never giving up, *never*, no matter what." (*Mullumbimby* 172)

Twoboy's approach and motivations are, then, not oppositional to Jo's but very much in complement, and in relation, to and with them. As Indigenous scholar, Phillip Morrissey suggests, Twoboy's experiences are part of Lucashenko's critique of the colonial legal apparatus and its requirements to "perform" Aboriginality (126). And, like Jo, Twoboy is protecting his family.

Granny Nurrung is another character proactively protecting her family and the future of her culture. While not known to Jo for much of the text, Granny Nurrung is an Elder and cultural knowledge holder. She is supporting her grandson, Sam Nurrung, through negotiations with settler landowner Rob Starr, to get land back for restorative justice, cultural renewal and truth telling. Driven by honour, Twoboy's approach, like Jo's, is one of care and impassioned protection. Ultimately, Moura-Kocoglu concludes, citing Aboriginal historian Jackie Huggins, and Pacific feminist theory, that the function of the text is *not* to make

> "Aboriginality intelligible to non-Aboriginals" (Huggins, "Always Was" 61), [but rather] Lucashenko . . . require[s] non-Aboriginal readers to engage with culture-specific understandings (Mikaere) of Indigenous women's practices, philosophies, and storytelling to better comprehend literary articulations of Aboriginality and Indigenous subject positions. (Moura-Kocoglu 253)

In framing "better comprehension" as cognition that does not make something "intelligible," Moura-Kocoglu inadvertently reveals a central problem facing us all. Moura-Kocoglu seems to share a goal with us, to avoid extractivism in reading, that is, avoid the idea that Indigenous-authored books can be *mined* for uncomplicated, bite-sized objective knowledge take-aways. Here we seek to use notions of relationality to hone some questions of reading practice and learning beyond the readerly attempt to extract a fixed Aboriginal cultural essence from the text.

Jo as a figure of cultural balance is developed in theorisation of the work as an emblem of matriarchal power. Victoria Brookman offers insights into *Mullumbimby* through a matricentric feminist lens. Brookman argues that Lucashenko's characters "integrate their . . .

maternal practice with their essential resistance to hostile external forces and cultures" (145). Brookman links the maternal to cultural strength, positioning maternity as an educational praxis, a vehicle to "rebuild culture" (152). Of Jo's search for answers about her daughter Ellen's hand markings—markings which replicate topographical maps of the *Mullumbimby* region, Brookman suggests:

> Cultural learning is a deliberate part of . . . [her] maternal practice, a means of strengthening . . . [to] give them context so that they can thrive as Indigenous children in mainstream contemporary Australian society. (152)

Like Moura-Kocoglu, Brookman positions Jo's quest beyond the resonances of a romance plot, and similarly, Brookman critiques Twoboy's land claim quest as individualist, in binary opposition to Jo's more collective, maternal impulses. We agree that the novel relays a sense that "[c]onnection with traditional Indigenous culture is not only necessary for . . . children's survival but also a profound statement of maternal and anticolonial resistance" (Brookman 155). Yet, we all exist within familial and cultural matrixes that require recognition, reflection and participation, a healthy positioning within belonging for the thriving of the child. The focus on knowing Indigenous culture, experience or subjectivity is likely not the intended goal of the writer. As Julianne Lamond has argued, using both Lucashenko's "Writing as a Sovereign Act" and Aileen Moreton-Robinson's *The White Possessive*, such writing can more productively allow readers paradigms for addressing myths in white settler literature (Lamond 52). Indigenous authored literature does not act as medium for knowing Indigenous culture and experience.

Repositioning what text facilitates access to may present new situated and iterative reading positions, which offer anticolonial questions while resisting an assumed white reader (Dane 2) vicariously absorbing Aboriginal experience. Here we propose some reading processes, not arrivals or conclusions, on *Mullumbimby.* Can *Mullumbimby* constitute knowledge, a path to read material Country, Country we are all responsible for?

Knowledge and Reading

The reading that continues in Australian educational and literary cultures draws on a liberal humanist tradition, an individual, detached process, extracting meaning and signifiers. Reading as extraction is central to the postcritique forms of interpretation championed by Rita Felski. Felski describes the risks in some close reading as "scrutinizing, scanning, searching, surveying, observing, gazing, examining. This looking is not a yielding gaze of pleasure, absorption, or entrancement but a sharp-eyed and diligent hunt" (Felski 37–38). Instead, Felski offers a process embracing affect, enchantment, and recognition. A relational reading shares the movement away from excavating hidden ideologies or power dynamics, but it is far less individualistic. In acknowledging the recognition, the reader may find within the work and their other life and textual experiences, there is a need for care. The different speaking positions that come to Indigenous text are loaded differently. The form of attentiveness to living, material Country modelled in *Mullumbimby* necessitates practices of relationality for all readers. Developing the above, relational reading draws on Graham's understanding of an ontology where all material entities are connected. Phillips et al. have defined relational reading as requiring

> a decentring, an unlearning, and a new trust of the Indigenous narrator and storyteller. These guided acts of reading become active dimensions of an imaginative re-making of the world beyond human-induced crisis. Indigenous

> and non-Indigenous readers alike are brought together in contemplation of the regenerative power of Country. (182)

This is reading beyond the text, into the material Country itself. It requires a rethinking of what texts might be used for, situated in a critical consciousness of [readers'] own readerly standpoint (Phillips and Archer-Lean 27). A centralising of Country and women's knowledge is important but can be repositioned beyond a reader's extractable theme. Relationality means that the reader must consider their own location, their own body and mind in relation to the world built in the literature and in relation to the subject positions evoked through characters and interplays. Extracting symbols can flatten out the complexities of the works' applications, inadvertently re-establishing gendered binaries. *Mullumbimby* is a complex web of conflicting human positions and relational human and more-than-human subject positions in the material world. There are ways of reading Country in the work and, for the narrow purposes of this paper, knowledge on the systems of relations between human and more-than-human. A considering of purpose and vocabulary lead, as Ann Brewster has theorised in relation to Larissa Behrendt's insights on ongoing Indigenous sovereignty, to a vexing of "whiteness as the default setting" (Brewster 93). In imaginatively normalising Indigeneity, the work "concomitantly 'others' Australian whiteness" (Brewster 93).

Lucashenko's writing often contains indications of forms of knowledge and world reading praxis. By this we mean that the narrative is both a narrative and an epistemological guide. As such, *Mullumbimby* makes fluid the lines between theory and literature. *Mullumbimby* is guided by the principal of dadirri. Dadirri is defined by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Bauman as an "Aboriginal concept which refers to a deep contemplative process of 'listening to one another' in reciprocal relationships" (Ungunmerr-Bauman et al.). Dadirri is also defined in *Mullumbimby* through the focalised narrative of protagonist Jo:

> This is the world you live in, Jo told herself, so look at it. Sit, and look, and listen to them things that lie at the heart of being proper blackfella. Dadirri. Sit still long enough and you see, everything clear, bub, Aunty Barb had promised, a fishing line welded to her aged hand. Sit until the superficial bullshit falls away. (12)

Careful and deep listening is valued in several characters, for example Ellen's strength and intelligence are admired by her mother because "she spoke around half as much as a white child her age. Learn by watching and listening, using your mil and binung, was a centuries old habit, and not by asking bloody silly questions all the time" (*Mullumbimby* 17).

Jessica Gildersleeve has argued that Lucashenko's novels are less interested in presenting women characters telling their own story—what Muecke terms the burden of "reconstruction of selfhood" (qtd in Huggan 32)—than in privileging listening to the story (Gildersleeve 76). The novel pivots on the trope of observing and listening. One of the many narrative crescendos occurs when Jo hears a talga (Bundjalung for music), deep in the scrub, after falling from her horse:

> Ancient human voices.
> Chanting.
> The hills were singing to her. (*Mullumbimby* 97)

Despite Jo's fears of an ancestral power beyond her immediate reckoning, she is open and listens deeply, repeatedly responding to messaging from animal guides that lead her to and beyond the talga. These moments of listening to Country constitute a thread of responsiveness that runs through all other events. Jo reflects on the relentless work care for the farm presents:

> It'll be worth it, one day, when the place looks like somebody loves it. When the land knows somebody loves it, she corrected herself. Ya caring for your jagan girl, it's gotta be more than just words. (47)

As Cherokee scholar Sandra Muse Isaacs argues, such textual interactions with Country present a guide to the reader on how to read (*Reading Country Symposium*). We suggest Lucashenko interweaves dadirri not as a mechanism to "know" Indigenous experience, but as an attentiveness with which to allow oneself, as a reader, to be moved by specific Country and all beings within that Country. The "use of Bundjalung, Yugambeh, and Australian Aboriginal English language in daily speech and thought" along with the paratextual language glossary allow the "reader to engage with a (re)learning" of these cultures (Brookman 283; Willis 69), yes. But, perhaps more than this, the language and observation might prompt readers to experience Country in sustainable and relational terms. Bundjalung and Yugambeh in *Mullumbimby*, as exemplified by Jo, are always patterned through careful and slow noticing, naming, and greeting of non-human subjects. While gently satirising her sister-in-law Caroline's sense of place as Narnia, Jo simultaneously watches a blue heron she has "christened Bluey" (51). Jo considers the heron's motivations and placement in space. Out of Caroline's earshot Jo says "jingawahlu mulinyin" (51). For the reader not proficient in Bundjalung, the focalised narration of Jo's communique requires a pausing, a turning to the paratextual glossary at the end of the novel. There, through consideration translation can be composed: "Greetings Heron." Reading then is made up of pauses and reflections on how to engage with both text and Country, how to notice and acknowledge the subjectivity of more-than-human kin. The work is an act of dadirri, a modelling of stewardship which refutes, in Graham's terms, reader and learner as detached "observers rather than custodians of the world" ("Some Thoughts" n. p.). This means attempts to read characters as only human, setting as backdrop, or to trace a single plot climax will be thwarted.

More-Than-Human Subjects in the Family and in Families

Mullumbimby's central character Jo often does not know what is happening or why. The novel revolves around several mysteries. One is a talga, or song, sung in language, heard only by Jo and unsourced until Granny Nurrurg helps Jo understand the role of the lyrebirds in keeping pre-Invasion culture alive. Another, a map of the region on Jo's daughter Ellen's hands, is a source of distress for Ellen until Granny Nurrung explains to Ellen her crucial cultural function. There is also an emotive climax when Jo undergoes the traumatic shock of her young colt's death. These multiple narrative climaxes are all realised through an attending to more-than-human presences: Jo hears the talga the first time on the fire trail due to a fall from her horse. When Jo hears the talga the second time and discovers Rob Starr and Sam Nurrung on the crest at dawn, the prominence of animal and bird presences as sign givers prompts recognition of interspecies and intergenerational responsibility alongside a disquieting lack of certitude for Jo. More-than-human entities including mammals, birds, reptiles, and fish are characters and continually observed and appreciated by the protagonist and others. All these textual moments present relational exchanges across species. Conventionally, in literature and the modernist realist novels of the west and global north, animals are metaphorical and allegorical. As literary animal theorist Philip Armstrong has seminally clarified, animals in anglophone, capitalist modernity are both a "resource for thought and knowledge," a site to define humanity and reason against, and simultaneously a material resource to exploit (Armstrong 2). The exploitation of animals is echoed in literature which uses "animals as screens for the projection

of human interests" (Armstrong 2). *Mullumbimby*'s representational structures offer a site to refuse exploitation.

Mullumbimby might be further understood within critical literary animal studies in terms of Lori Gruen's "entangled empathy" which itself sits within an "ethics of care" (11–12). Entangled empathy is a process of cross species interaction that recognises humans are already always entangled with other animals, that those relations (in the west and global north) are conventionally often harmful to other species. An entangled empathy philosophy instead fosters "emotion and cognition" to attend to the "needs, interests, desires" of other beings (Gruen 12). Gruen compels interspecies engagement as an ethical process that does not allow for moral detachment or a utilitarian logic of least harm (18). Further, Morrissey uses the ecofeminist ideas of Val Plumwood and Debra Bird Rose to open *Mullumbimby* to analyses that recognise sympathies beyond boundaries of gender, ethnicity, and species (128). Jo compassionately attends to the individual sensitivities and life worlds of the many more-than-human individuals in an entangled empathetic way. The novel critiques the exploitation of animals and the separation of them from human life, challenging anthropocentric norms. But it is vital to first locate a reading practice within Indigenous ways of knowing. Beyond the mutual bestowing of empathy, animals are culture bearers, both their own and through an interspecies relationality with Aboriginal culture. Further, as opposed to colonial and speciesist animal categorisation, there is a significant lack of distinction between native and non-native creatures; all are caring and cared for. In *Mullumbimby*, the more-than-human realm is populated by relational, cultural material subjects that require acknowledgement in moments of dadirri that Jo practises throughout the novel. The work proffers systems of species relations to imaginatively co-constitute new worlds. We extend this notion of careful listening to story and traditions to appreciate a relationally connected earth.

More-than-human subjects are present on every page of *Mullumbimby*. Plant life, mountains, rivers, ocean, are all family and connected. There are yarraman (horses), warrigal (dogs), various fish (including flathead, tailor, sting rays and prawns), leeches and ticks, cows (steers, Brahmin, and mother cows and calves), a myriad of birds (blue herons, fairy-wrens, lyrebirds, turkeys, whipbirds, pigeons, crows, water hens, chickens, wedge-tailed eagles, seagulls, kingfishers, and a spangled drongo), wallabies, bats, lizards, brown snakes, echidna, goanna, dolphins, a whale, and a cockatoo in a cage in town. So rich is the animalian presence that a cataloguing of every interspecies encounter, greeting and mutual observation is almost untenable.

The relational interactions between species presents readers with provocations to reconsider their own material or "real world" interactions with other species and the destructive categories they may accept as unquestioned. Mojave / Akimei O'odham poet, Natalie Diaz's "The First Water Is the Body" opens with "I carry a river. It is who I am: Aha Makav. This is not a metaphor." Diaz's statement is resonant with Tuck and Yang's call to meaningful, anti-colonial repatriation of land and life, that "decolonization is not a metaphor" (Tuck and Yang 1). English reading is often the search for substitutions, for a decoding of how one thing (*thing* being the operative word) stands for another. To understand the significance of material actuality, to read for more-than-human presence and human / more-than-human relations in and for themselves is to decentre substitution, abstraction, and use. So doing can result in a reading with a responsibility for the actual experiences of more-than-human others and for our actions in the material world during and after reading. The metaphorical use of animals in English language is meaningless to Jo, and to a relational coexistence on the regionally specific Country *Mullumbimby* evokes. As Jo reflects, there are many substitutive phrases that mean nothing to "a Goorie woman living on her country at the bottom of the southern hemisphere" (206), including phrases like "two shakes of a lamb's tail . . . [or words metaphorically involving] a duck, or a june bug" (206). The mismatch of colonial language and Country and

the abstraction of more-than-human referents for uses arbitrary to and reductive of animal lives is clear.

Mullumbimby presents a critique of anthropocentric, cartesian divisions of human and more-than-human through its entwining of more-than-human lives into human families. Kathryn Yusoff, Professor of Inhuman Geography at Queen Mary University, London, centralises the importance of reading Country beyond geo/bio divisions, to understand the possibility of "a rock in the family" (*Reading Climate Symposium*). Similarly, Country as family is articulated by Lucashenko in another context, when she defines true geography as

> land, systems connected to land. It means the way the earth meanders under your feet as you make your way over it. It means the taste of the soil and the nature of the trees and plants that grow there . . . It means knowing these things as personally as you know your own family, and imbuing them with feeling in the same way that people are alive with emotion. ("Gender, Genre and Geography" 50)

One of the multiple plot climaxes in the novel is the discovery that Jo's daughter Ellen carries a topographic map of the Mullumbimby region on her palms. For Jo, this prompts a confronting and awing realisation that she has "given birth to the valley" (246). While this moment is initially so terrifying to Ellen it prompts self-harm, Granny Nurrung is later able to assist Jo and Ellen to see the markings as clarifying Ellen's role in her community. Ellen is key to healing ceremony in and on Country to ensure sustainable stewardship. Many other characters develop relationships with the more-than-human world that exist in contradiction to settler assumptions about animals' purpose and function. Jo flinches when local farmers joke about the best way to check for life in a fallen cow is to kick it (24). Rob Starr's threat to shoot any dog found on his property as a "wild dog" is characteristic of pastoralist attitudes to animals "out of place" in colonial rhetoric and is defined by Jo as an "[a]ssassinating wavelength" of "dugai histrionics" (24). Dugai is a Murri and Koori word widely used to denote a white person (Lucashenko, *Mullumbimby* glossary). These "dugai histrionics" (24) are paralleled in neighbouring farmer, Darren Ferrier's sense of animals and land as mere possessions.

The novel proffers reflection on an alternative relational interaction with more-than-human kin. Uncle Freddy Humbug is a local Elder, a Bundjalung man who lives in an unregistered van in Brunswick Park. He is described as

> the self-appointed manager, groundskeeper and caretaker of the Bruns park and all the wildlife in it. Most particularly, Humbug was the custodian of and brother to Slim, an enormous carpet python which lived a charmed life beneath the old bronze bridge. (55)

The familial relationship between the python Slim, and Humbug is overt. Jo also sees herself as situated relationally with more-than-human kin. Jo refutes her sister-in-law Caro's suggestion she is lonely on the farm:

> The dogs lay blissfully in the morning sun, watching them work, Warrigal still scratching like it was his mission in life to wear out his skin. . . . Fairy wrens twittered like manic high-pitched machine guns in the neighbouring lantana bushes. The cold wasn't worrying them; they chittered like they were onto their fifth strong espresso. Jo smiled. She loved those little birds. . . . [T]he resident kingfisher flashed past on its way to its nest. A blurred blue rocket with something long wriggling in its mouth. . . .

> [N]o, she didn't feel alone, what with Ellen and the yarraman and the magpies singing and the mulanyin flying around and the fairy-wrens talking a mile a minute bossing everyone around with their little chittering instructions. (49–51)

Thus, Jo has a strong sense of her entangled embeddedness within a more-than-human community. *Mullumbimby* suggests a regional spatiality where constant observation of who we are cohabiting with is imperative. This goes beyond a stewardship responsible to immediate property and vicinity and out into the Country of her region. Sitting on Mullumbimby bridge preparing to fish Jo observes a "*family* of stingrays," her toes nibbled by an "omnivorous cloud of translucent prawns," and the ibis framing the playground (63, emphasis ours). Animals' discrete and meaningful familial lives are respected. Animals are frequently introduced through the grouping "family." Like the stingrays, four wallabies bounding by and making Comet rear, on Jo's first ride up the fire track, exist in family (94), as do the "family of waterhens" forced to scatter from the road verge as Jo and Twoboy speed away from Nimbin after an altercation with Twoboy's ex (144). Comet and Athena's mother–son relationship is constantly valued as deeply and authentically familial and Jo's deepest misgivings are about her containment and training of Comet, separating him from his mother. As discussed, critics have highlighted the strength of maternity and connection to the Country in *Mullumbimby.* Reflective, relational reading may prompt reflection on the links between these two readings. Cartesian dualisms are explicitly revoked through Jo's deep love for yarraman Athena, dog companions Warrigal and Daisy and especially Comet, the young colt. There are productive readings of Jo and Comet's relationship as a commentary on Jo and Ellen's relationship as one of closeness and threatened loss (Gildersleeve 82). Reading Athena and Comet's relationship as *only* metaphorical, however, may inadvertently invoke an anthropocentricity that the novel repudiates. As has been argued, speciesist spatial lines are explicitly elided at many points. The boundaries between human and more-than-human are even subject to ludic play, for example when Jo invites Comet into the house:

> [W]ith the normal curiosity of any young animal, he nosed to the door again. Amused by his cheek, Joe stepped over to the sink, and rattled the pots and pans soaking there. The horse whickered in approval . . . well at least you talk to me, Jo thought. My beautiful boy. We'll have a little ride when I've done these spuds. (69)

Such moments of profound human/horse intimacy mean that the experience of Comet's death presents the reader with a grieving for a family member not usually permitted within dominant discourses.

The notion of Comet as family is reinforced when his death is foretold by Ellen, who has second sight. During the storm the night before Jo finds Comet drowned in a flooded stream, barbed wire tangled around his neck, Ellen knows someone in the family is in trouble but not who (*Mullumbimby* 107). Jo checks in with all close friends and family and finds that all are safe, and she is left repeatedly questioning "then who, who, who" (111). The personal interrogative "who" reinforces Comet's existence as a subject in and for himself. Jo frequently interprets the thoughts of the animals around her. Her attribution of thoughts sometimes has humorous inference: "[I]n the park across the road, the Ibis were muttering to each other in Bundjalung, green with envy for Humbug's accomplishments" (66). This is a pattern continued in Lucashenko's Miles Franklin Award winning novel, *Too Much Lip.* Critiques of anthropomorphic projection are muddied by the deep respect relayed through Jo's imaginative understanding of animals' connections with each other and their world. Further, imaginative

anthropomorphism allows empathic reading of the more-than-human subjects we share the world with. For example, Athena's repeated calls to her son after his disappearance and death (93, 70), and the terms used to describe Athena's distress are telling: they are "keening" and then "lacerating" calls, giving weight to the actuality of animal grief (123, 129).

Animal and human grief for animal death are vital in realising interspecies relationality in *Mullumbimby.* Derrida suggests that "metaphor always carries its death within itself"; reading animals only as metaphor, then, contributes to the cultural erasure of living animals (Derrida 271). Dead animals as metaphor, then, doubly erase the living animal. Australian fiction is coloured with metaphorical animal deaths, tropes of hunting, poisoning, drought, or fly blown livestock and roadkill (Boyde 120). Metaphorical animals can reinforce anthropocentric logic; animal deaths are only significant as far as they signify human concerns (McHugh; Boyde 119). By contrast, Jo's discovery of Comet's corpse is arguably one of the most moving descriptions of human response to animal death in Australian fiction, an explicit critique of anthropocentric logic. The realisation that Comet has died is arrived at through more than a page of stream of conscious debate between Jo's brain and Jo's eyes, emphasising the trauma and disassociation of the moment. Comet's subjectivity is reinforced through the position of the wire around his neck as "murdering"—murder not usually a word used for animal death. Comet is grieved as a once living breathing, intimate subject. Jo is

> wetly defeated, sheltering Comet's young body from the horror of the world with hers, feeling the chill and stillness of his flank, the chill and stillness of death where she had only ever before known a hotly breathing, living yarraman, a yarraman that walked and cantered and neighed and shied and bucked, a yarraman who daily knew the world through all his myriad senses. Joe fell still and silent. (120)

Mullumbimby further exposes the way dominant human / nonhuman distinctions silence grief over animal death as untellable. For Jo's sister Kym, among others, animals are not quite family (103). Such human judgements force Jo to silence her own grief. After Comet's death, Jo is convinced by her friend Theresa to attend a hinterland meditation retreat with the hope that it will facilitate the release of the "untellable things":

> Because nobody knew. Nobody else knew what it was like to wake in the night and be unable to get the picture of Comet drowning out of her mind, to endlessly imagine him being held underwater by the bloodied wire while the brown Creek filled his nostrils, his throat, his lungs. Nobody knew, because Jo absolutely refused to risk hearing the words: but he was only a horse. (154).

Grief continues to define the centre of the novel, a grief that facilitates a reflection on a colonised Country wrapped in fences. The only way through grief, for Jo, is through a relational understanding of events and material. At the retreat Jo finds a tiny nest made of branches, vines, leaves, and remnants of barbed wire. Her epiphany is "this beautiful nest and the fence that had killed Comet were made of the same stuff" (173).

There are some empathic responses to animal death in Australian fiction, especially writing for children and young adults. But such empathy often privileges one species. In *Mullumbimby* all species are observed and treated with respect, in a dynamic, relational appreciation of the value of all as individual subjects. For example, Jo refuses to bait the rats in the storeroom at the cemetery due to her knowledge of the suffering this would entail, and of who would then eat the rats (frogs) and who would eat the frogs (birds) (148–49). Similarly, Jo quietly attends to the animal deaths around her from industrial farming. This is not through

a vegan sensibility, of course. Bats are referenced as food as are goanna and echidna, fish are caught, and sausages are consumed. However, an explicit understanding of animal suffering in industrialised farming is repeatedly communicated—that of the cows, and when negotiating traffic: "a sunny brand truck filled with doomed chickens" (169). This valuing of animal life and reflecting on the profound material actuality and ensuing grief resulting from animal death can be reflected on: dadirri as critique. We are called upon to witness a catalogue of the speciesist violences and silences occurring in our everyday world.

Animal Cultures

Part of the important work in this dadirri is the appreciation that animals have cultures of their own and are intricately aware of and connected to Indigenous cultures through shared belonging to Country. Why animals do what they do and how they look is a constant preoccupation in *Mullumbimby.* Jo uses her knowledge of horses to imagine how Athena and Comet may interpret her interactions with them through their own horse culture. When looking for missing Comet, she is "lashed" with guilt for the practices of containment used on Comet to further his training, and feels she should have "simply left him in the Big Paddock as he should have been, with his mother" (116). This reflection leads Jo to an intersectional theorising on the links between interspecies and colonial power: horse training and "the bloody missionaries" (116). But, in most other instances, Jo attempts to understand the more-than-human through their own life worlds, what Jacob von Uexküll calls "umwelt," a term which unifies the species-specific "perceptions of a subject" and the "effects of that subject in the world" and with others (von Uexküll 42). The horse's sense of smell, movement, space are all focalised through Jo's imagination. She knows that she cannot bend Comet and Athena to her will. Instead, Jo must allow Comet and Athena to understand her as "herd leader, the Boss Mare," a zoomorphic process that involves leadership not domination, facilitated by a mutual "listening intently" (*Mullumbimby* 14). While still "boss," Jo's approach is jettisoning tired conceptions of an animal kingdom made up of violent and domineering alpha males, a biological rendering now disputed as requiring far more nuance (Snowden 228). Further, Jo brings various epistemes to the animals around her. A brush turkey's

> brilliant red, black and yellow colouring always struck Jo as unnecessarily lairy, the bird constantly dressed for a land rights demo. There was some purpose to it, she supposed, some natural selection that meant bright primary colours were the order of the day. What was the proper word for turkey? Kalwan. No, that was a lyrebird. It was something like that though. Jo stood and puzzled for the missing word a few moments longer before admitting defeat. Fuck it.
>
> Jingawalu turkey.
>
> *Things could have more than one name. Things could have lots of names*.
>
> (*Mullumbimby* 159, emphasis ours)

The remembered word for lyrebirds here foreshadows the source for the chanted Bundjalung talga from the hills. The anthropomorphic suggestion of a turkey as land rights demonstrator, interpolated with natural selection reasons, reinforces the more-than-human as having complex cultures that speak to and through layers of human knowledge. Yet, the moment also refuses the textual close reading drive to decoding the correct meaning, the search for metaphor, and substitution. The novel subjects some of Jo's search for "signs" to subtle irony. For example, a wedgetail eagle appears overhead when Jo first moves on to her farm:

> Transfixed, she let her arms drop and watched the bird watching her. The sun had made it right over the top of the Pines now, and as the dew on the grass dried and her feet lost their chill, Jo realised that she was being ringed by two distinct but joined circles: that of the bird in the air, and the one its shadow was making on the earth below. An unfamiliar sense of great peace descended upon her as she remembered:
>
> Circles protect you if you let them, girl. But you gotta let em. Gotta not get in their way . . . one of those odd and striking visitations of nature . . . the feeling of having been seen by the eagle stayed with her. Her arrival on the farm had been witnessed, Jo felt. (22–23)

The reciprocity of observation in contradistinction to anthropocentric emplacement is enough. There are other, quite different, and humorous moment of interspecies communications.

Interspecies communication and more-than-human culture is further explored in a textual point reminiscent of the irreverent, prophesying cockatoo, Pirate, in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*, and the collective wild cockatoos who fly over town screaming "What are you doing youse bastards?" (Wright 104). In *Mullumbimby*, Jo attempts to teach a caged cockatoo, in a local pet store, a phrase. Jo is ultimately successful because as they walk away:

> Jo saw, the cockatoo observed them weaving their way through the parked vehicles, and perhaps a new unnameable feeling rose up in the bird's breast, for its yellow crest bounced fully forward with fresh vitality and it spread its white wings wide—
>
> "Let me outta here, you cunts!" The bird screeched, bringing the shop attendant at a dead run. (202)

While at first blush, a merely comedic and profane moment, the cry speaks to the way animals, like the cockatoos in *Carpentaria,* can perceive themselves and human animals as subjects out of place. As emplaced, and often dispossessed, more-than-human subjects, animals witness and replicate human cultures and have their own cultures, desires, and subjectivities. Animal visitants recur in *Mullumbimby*, but they are not simply metaphors of cultural continuance or explained away through rational explanation. They are reminders of animals' material lives and of their entwinement with human cultures in regions. The fairy-wrens are agitated just before Ellen's self-harm incident and seem to lead Jo to her witnessing of Sam Nurrung and Rob Starr's ceremony on the ridge at dawn. Bluey, the heron, appears to guide Jo to her first and second hearing of the talga (100, 212). Spiritual components are present but numinous and unknowable. And ultimately the talga, carried and relayed by the lyrebirds, exceeds any metaphoric frame of reference. We know this because Jo's initial sense that the lyrebirds explain away the talga is corrected by Granny Nurrung. Granny Nurrung helps Jo understand that it was the old people who taught the song to the lyrebirds: the birds were now passing it down culturally, over generations. Jo then knows that the talga will continue unless whites, the dugai, accelerate environmental destruction and species extinction, "unless they went so far in their savagery and their madness, then the talga would always be sung in the nooks and crannies of the bush where it seemed like nobody at all was listening" (278). That the talga is in language and music on Country is further significant in that Jo is a singer but has suppressed that side of her subjectivity due to the compelling demands of economic survival and the pressures of her past marriage. Yet, the talga shows all song will continue if we listen to Country's actual material presence. Music's imprint on Country across time challenges readers to consider all peoples' treatment of Country:

> Everything changes, Jo thought, as the current carried her mentally upriver to the freshwater, but not at random. There's a deep system, an order to it, because everything is forever turning into its own opposite. Swimming fish becoming flying hawk. Swift hawk dying and decaying into solid earth. Earth reaching skyward as trees, turning to fruits and honey and flowers, falling back down again as leaves. Everything in the world was shape shifting around her, every moment of every day. Nothing remained as it was. (261)

Morrissey suggests that Ellen's hands, like the talga, are not an index of cultural continuity but an embodiment, a repository: "an undefinable importance for Bundjulung and Bundjulung country" (130). We argue, then, that *Mullumbimby* compels all readers to reconsider a drive to metaphoric reading and resolved denouement and instead asks us to look out, to see what is occurring in the material world, how it is relationally interwoven and what that can teach us about sustainable living on and with Country.

Conclusion

This paper considers diverse animal (including human) relationality as part of Country, extending readings of the sentience of Country in the work and previous foci on maternity. We want to be very clear that here we have reflected on some of the material realities the work prompts, but this cannot involve appropriating Indigenous knowledge systems. What we aim for in this paper is a provocation for the discipline to consider a reading of the text beyond unreflective and unsituated (in terms of reader) location of Aboriginality. Aboriginality as locatable may lead settler readers to what they think they already know. Instead, if the text is placed within a network of sociable relations (readers, book, and world) it may be a source to reconsider problems external to the text. Animals are knowledge keepers, messengers, witnesses; the lines between domestic and wild, human places and animal places are vexed. Like the Phillips et al. reading of *Carpentaria*, this reading of *Mullumbimby* has sought to centralise relationality, to allow a reading that refuses a separation of reader, materiality, and what is read. Such relational reading connects, as Kathryn Yusoff (*Reading Climate Symposium) s*uggests, regional geographical locations with biological life forces, and calls readers to our responsibility to observe, value, and sustain Country and those who dwell on Country; humans and the more-than-human are already entangled, relational, interspecies subjects.

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