The Ecological Poetics of Deborah Bird Rose:
Analysis and Application

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In the essay that follows I outline and then respond to the poetic qualities of Deborah Bird Rose's thinking. Trained as an anthropologist, Rose was a highly original scholar. She pioneered ecological ethnography by focusing on the links between social and ecological justice, in particular with the Yarralin and Lingarra communities in the Northern Territory, and she is a founding figure in the environmental humanities, multispecies studies and extinction studies. Her sustained interest in poetry and the poetic imagination made her ever aware of the power of 'deep stories'; Rose wanted always to be close to 'the cadences of the[ir] poetry' (*Wild Dog* 16). Unlike many scholars in the humanities, for whom writing and reading are dominated by genres of prose, references to poetry and to contemporary poets are common in Rose's work, and her writing regularly gestures towards the poetic. Rose's work is vital for ecological criticism that attempts to grapple with the drastic cultural and climactic changes of this century, particularly for criticism with decolonising ambitions.

Rose has influenced generations of Australian poets, including Bonny Cassidy, Michael Farrell, Luke Fischer and Peter Minter, and her relationships with contemporaries such as Judith Beveridge and Martin Harrison have resulted in a variety of important essays and poems. Most recently, Peter Boyle dedicated his extraordinary collection, *Enfolded in the Wings of a Great Darkness*, to her. Rose's sensitivity to poetry relates directly to her broader interests in ecological flux, oscillation and pattern. Because ecology and ecological writing are inextricable for her—'ecological writing does in the text what life does in ecological connectivity' (Harrison and Rose 1)—she is interested in multiple, complex correspondences across all manner of scales, a poetics which, if successful, binds 'time, species, place and culture' (4). The poem is particularly important in this context because it has the potential to operate as a 'nexus' of scales that reach 'outside our ordinary frames': whatever time it might take to read or to write, the poem's cultural and material histories are infinitely longer (4).

Rose's interest in poetics derives from five broad themes in her work, which together constitute a powerful, ethical model of ecological poetics: an insistence on location and context; an understanding, derived from her Aboriginal teachers, of how to privilege [Dreaming] space over temporal sequence; an interest in open-ended, plural and perpetually unsettled forms; an appreciation of mystery, and the humility required to recognise it; and finally, a proto-ecological understanding of dance as both ceremonial or celebratory, and as a practice inherent to ecological function and its experience. Taken together, these themes

underscore the irreducible singularity of places, which are imbued with musical, rhythmic structures that, with the right education and initiation, can become the basis for song and dance. In other words, through place we encounter rhythmic, musical expression, or *poetry*. Furthermore, Rose encourages her readers to take seriously the sensuous, embodied qualities of language acts, or the ways that they are inextricable from the times, places and bodies in which they occur. This is a poetics which recognises that a text is open and porous, and thoroughly entangled with the community in which it was composed. Accordingly, in the second half of this essay I will use Rose's work to perform a reading of a story each from Indigenous Australia and North America. When considered in the terms of Rose's poetics, these stories unfurl into complex, poetic events of multiple, sometimes contradictory directions, which remain resolutely tied to the grounded particularities of their production.

Towards Poetics

Before I elaborate on Rose's poetics in any detail, I will briefly describe what I mean, exactly, by 'poetry'. I don't, for example, want to equate poetry with certain formal properties that are traditional to the Western canon, such as rhyme and meter. Similarly, I don't mean to imply that prose can't be poetic, or that all poems are equally poetic. Rather, poetry is an approach, or a form of thinking, which might very well have manifested most frequently in verse with rhyme and meter over the course of human history, but it exceeds such features, and can be found in many other forms.[1] In this essay I approach poetry in its broadest possible sense, a sense in which—to quote Gerald Bruns—'anything, under certain conditions, may be made to count as a poem' (4). The task, then, is to spell out these conditions. This is complicated by the fact that poetry is necessarily larger than readers' awareness of it; Rose would say the same of any complex system. 'What we take poetry to be,' writes Bruns, 'cannot be exhausted by examples, because examples are always in excess of our experience and understanding.' Evoking the same principles of unpredictable, dynamic becoming that are of interest to Rose, Bruns argues that in poetry '[a]nything goes, even if not everything is possible at once' (5).

Bruns isolates various postulates of poetry which are of value here. Firstly, 'poetry is made of words but not of what we use words to produce' (7). That is, poetry exceeds the functions of regular language. Thus, poetry cannot be adequately conceptualised or understood when in the service of discursive practices that are indicated by terms such as 'communication', 'transparency' and 'narrative' (7). Consequently, poetry might manifest as what I will later call a 'live event', or a form of performance (like dance, for example, which I will come to later on), where body, language and voice are vehicles for a particular kind of energy that we might call art. In all, the point of poetry is 'to expand our beliefs as to what is meaningful and to develop new ways of experiencing meaning' (8). 'Meaning', however, needs unpacking: 'For most of us

meaning just means familiarity or things belonging to a context. Meaning is what fits. But I think poetry exists to contest these routine textbook conceptions or stereotypes of meaning' (8).

Bruns asks us instead to imagine 'a poem of pure extension,' or one that doesn't purport to 'mirror the world' in some kind of facile, representationalist way, 'but contacts it, as if language were a mode of touching and not just saying.' Here he turns to Emmanuel Levinas, in another move that aligns with Rose's theoretical territory. For Levinas, language is not a mode of representation but 'of proximity, sensibility, or contact, as if language were corporeal like skin' (9). While the proximity of other people constitutes Levinas's ethics (which, as Rose points out, are flawed by their failure to include non-human others), 'The proximity of things,' Levinas says, 'is poetry' (9). With this formulation, Bruns argues that 'poetry is as objective, and thus as resistant to interpretation, as any event of nature' (9). So, in what is an ideal segue into our exploration of Rose's poetics, Bruns urges us to take heed of an 'anthropological moral' when we think about poems: poetry that seems most unusual and disconcerting in its apparent indifference to our systems of meaning and understanding must be approached 'with the kind of openness and responsibility that anthropologists bring to the strangeness of alien cultures' (11).

Rose's poetics emerges from a resistance to what she has called—following Alf Hornborg—the 'decontextualising cosmology' of modernity (Rose 'Slowly' 3). For Rose, as for Hornborg, modernity 'disembeds that which is embedded, aiming to decontextualise, and to transcend and encompass the local' (3). Living systems are replaced with 'disarticulated fragments,' which themselves become the basis for a dulled ethical imagination that can no longer attend to complex ecologies of human and non-human agencies (3). Rose's antidote to such conceptual violence is thus to resist any move to decontextualise or disembed: to remain embedded within these rich, shared ecologies, 'we cannot develop prescriptions that hold true across contexts' (5). Accordingly, the local and particular have an undeniable iridescence in Rose's work. Yet what distinguishes Rose's theory of place is its grounding in the Indigenous traditions of the Australian continent; it thus signals a pathway towards a decolonial perspective that we might call, after Peter Minter, a 'nourishing transcultural ecopoetics' (in press). After all, as Rose argues, 'the genius of Aboriginal Australians finds its greatest expression in a theory and practice of place' ('Dialogue' 320). Her education in this theory and practice manifests both in her determined advocacy of locale, and a wariness of overarching ecological frameworks or substance monism:

> Consubstantiality with country is not generalized as earth and humanity, but is pre-eminently local. Rather than substance monism posited as a cosmology, Aboriginal thought and practice rests on a plurality of consubstantialities: this country, this group of people, these Dreamings. (320)

Next to these localities of consubstantiality we find an equally important assertion: there are (at least) two kinds of narrative mode in Indigenous Australia, and only one of them is interested in temporal sequence. Firstly, there is 'ordinary time', a period of about one hundred years. The features of ordinary time are roughly analogous to the structure of time in linear narration. Here, time is 'marked by changes which do not endure,' along with linear sequence and 'the obliteration of the ephemeral' ('Ned Died' 180). In linear narration, too, stories function by rendering any situation unstable; without instability and the change it produces, story cannot occur. Ordinary time is but the sands on the edges of 'a great sea of endurance', a second order of time also known as Dreaming (180). Sweeping over the obliterated ephemera of ordinary time, Rose conceptualises Dreaming 'as a synchronous set of images, those things which endure' (180). In Dreaming structures, the only significant temporal coordinates are major disjunctions of form, such as dramatic environmental or geological changes. But within the periods defined by these changes, 'synchrony prevails' (181). Time, then, becomes entirely contingent upon the spatial locus of whoever's speaking; otherwise, geography, and the tracks through it, remain fixed (181). This is the world of poetry, where the composition of an image structure, for example, might be entirely contingent on the perspective of the speaker. Here, time is the predominant ephemera: it emerges briefly in the performance of song [poetry], but the landscape in which it occurs persists (it need not dissolve beneath the imperative for narration progression). Consequently, the result is a form of narration in which 'events are organised by content and by space, but not predominantly by temporal sequence' (182). Such narration is common to poetry.

Rose's thought is so dynamic because, having privileged the value of the local and contextual, she then refuses any tendency for this to become an exclusive, divisive or segregated experiential unit. This ensures she avoids the pitfalls of place-based environmentalism critiqued by Val Plumwood, for example ('Shadow Places'). Instead, Rose asks us to both *contract* our focus to its very source and *expand* our thought to allow for all manner of porosity and unsettlement. This double movement finds striking, material form in her description of women's bodies. Critical of 'idealised images of the atomistic embodied subject,' Rose contrasts the female body with the cleanly demarcated male body of Western liberalism. She describes women's bodies as 'excruciatingly transgressive' ('Dialogue' 312); in particular, the wet 'leakiness' of menstrual blood tests the requirement that a body be 'clean and proper' (312). A permeable body causes problems for the West, which wants these spaces kept hidden; insistence on impermeability produces the disconnection between self and world that is so central to post-Enlightenment culture. Yet Rose points out that porosity 'haunts our thinking, and pervades the language of belonging to place' (313). Alongside her anthropological analysis, it seems to me that Rose is also talking about two different practices of reading and writing. On the one hand, there is the regime of clarity and order—most commonly manifest as prose—in which the body of the

text should be self-contained, requiring minimal cognitive effort on the part of the reader. In turn, the text should be controlled and reasonable, and consist of sequences of logically organised propositions. That this is a repressive regime should come as no surprise: consider, for example, the regimentation of normative formatting of texts like this essay, where linguistic idiosyncrasies are flattened by page after page of rectangular paragraphs, the white margins like electric fences on every side.

In contrast to this very contained space, we have the transgressive, leaky and permeable space of the poetic. At times, the language slides out across the page or out of reach; the poem need not stay put, or be self-contained. It may be full of both 'holes' and nodes that 'leak' with stunning intensity. And, even if everything appears obvious enough, there could be deeper, symbolic resonances, or the poem might require some kind of kinship—it might need to be read aloud, or it might direct readers to a place. For Rose, 'the language of kinship' is inextricable from 'a language of emplacement;' to reach out is to open your heart to your surrounds. To be poetic is to be permeable: 'the dust [of a poem] gets up your nose and into the crevices of your skin' ('Dialogue' 313); the poem might require more of you than you're accustomed to give; its fragments might linger in the mind like the images of a winding river or a stand of ghost gums. This permeability rests on what I think is one of Rose's most brilliant insights: her metaphysics of boundaries. Boundaries might function primarily as exclusionary mechanisms, but Rose is much more interested in a different modality, where they 'exist to connect difference, and thus to facilitate interdependence' ('Dialogue' 322). These two types of boundaries can be applied to the developing terms of my own discussion. Firstly, there is prose, with lines and lines like housing developments going all the way to the horizon. Within its firm borders we expect to encounter events which require little more of our bodies than a focused attention and an understanding of the alphabet. There is only one entry (at the start of a paragraph) and one exit (at the end). Poetry, however, is contoured like an irregular topography—it might surround us, depart from us, it might bleed into the terrain. There are multiple points of entry and exit, especially in poems of the open field, where phrasal units might comingle on the page without the restraints of grammar, punctuation or stanzaic organisation.[2]

Of course, such texts can be overwhelming at first. It might be hard to say what they 'are', or what they 'mean'. But this is also part and parcel of an expanded, ecological ontology, in which the self is 'an unfinished project' that requires our vulnerability and 'considerations of mutual care' (Rose 'Dialogue' 322). To read and write this way, we need to pursue a 'kinship of becoming', forgoing the easy pleasures of telos and controlled, sequential narration. Rose urges us to remember that 'there is no predetermined essence or destiny'— that a text does not need to *go* somewhere, that the language act need not be *resolved*—for 'we are a work in progress' (*Wild Dog* 44). What she offers instead is a way into 'the rich plenitude, with all its joys and hazards, of our entanglement in the place, time, and multispecies complexities of life on Earth' (44). For Rose, the self is figured dialogically;

like dialogue, it must have a source in time and space, and it also needs to be open, its outcome(s) cannot be known in advance. Similarly, the poetic is more dialogical than the prosaic: poetic structures are more amenable to indeterminacy, and frequently they require more readerly care. Poems are therefore less efficient, more vulnerable and more easily dismissed. However, openness and vulnerability constitute 'a fertile stance,' in which the ground can become destabilised, and possibilities for surprise, challenge and change can emerge (Rose 'Slowly' 8). Such possibilities require 'an ethical stance in favour of plurality, heteronomy, and the disruptive agency of others' (Rose 'On History' 157). Breaking open the self-enclosure of the classical Western subject, the natural world itself becomes 'a dialogic partner' in a 'huge paradigm shift': 'from concepts of equilibrium to pervasive disequilibrium; from concepts of objectivity to intersubjectivity; from visions of deterministic prediction and certainty to an awareness of uncertainty and probability' ('On History' 159).

However, Rose is clear that openness and its relationship to an ethics of heteronomy are very closely tied to a particular conception of storytelling: 'when ethics arise out of events involving embodied beings and actual encounters, understanding depends on stories' (*Wild Dog* 14). Within the dynamic unsettlement of the poetic, it's important to explicate some of the particularities of Rose's storytelling, in order to differentiate it from normative examples of the term. For Rose, 'an ethics of story' is inextricable from 'coming face-to-face with neighbours and their stories'; Levinas meets Aboriginal poetics, then, where the story is 'not meant to be a closed system,' but rather is kept 'open to the world' by continual performance and re-iteration for and with others (*Wild Dog* 14). To survive, the stories need to be kept moving, to be shared and re-interpreted.[3] These stories are not *about* concepts, written as if from the outside; rather, they participate *in* and *share* events (Rose 'Slowly' 9); to keep them alive therefore requires that dialogical partners are present. The story might be a live event, then, and/or its transcription—as Dennis Tedlock notes, an oral poetics 'is by its nature participatory' ('Toward' 515). The priority is for knowledge to keep moving, 'letting the flow of ideas take [us] to new places' (Rose *Wild Dog* 15). Critically, such stories resist 'declaring final meanings' and 'are not always packaged in convenient forms' (15). Readers might need to try hard to understand them, but this is the ethical imperative of Rose's poetics: like any relation, engagement with an open text of indeterminate form requires labour and, at the very least, that reading conventions are ruptured. This is why, I think, she wants 'us book people' to move from the regime of the closed text to become 'open-ended dialogical partners' by 'opening ourselves more fully' to the stories of Aboriginal Country and, by extension, 'to trees, dingoes and… to the vulnerability of the living Earth' ('On History' 167).

This dialogical and thoroughly decolonial poetics relies upon resisting the arrogance of certainty, and the imperialist drive to generalise and categorise produced by such certainty. Importantly, this resistance should not be an act of denial or negation, but rather based on

'passionate exuberance' for 'a world in which life exceeds knowledge, and in which mutability and uncertainty are blessed emanations of life' (Rose, following Lev Shestov, *Wild Dog* 6). This could be the experimental resistance of an artistic avant-garde, where orthodoxies of power hinder the imagination of new, possible worlds. Such behaviour is what Rose would call 'wild': not to be confused with 'wilderness'; to be wild is to refuse to submit to the conventional limitations imposed by the illusory certainties of Western thought (12). Indeed, when we turn to learn from people who are immersed in a world in which 'no individual or species has a monopoly on information', such as the Yarralin of the Northern Territory, we see that they exercise a profound humility in their relationship with Country: 'Yarralin people are reluctant to intervene in ecological processes except in limited and localised ways, or in ways that are authorised by accumulated experience' ('Exploring' 384). When I recognise my place in a larger system, where that system is always coming into being through the actions and relations of its components, then the whole system remains outside the limits of my comprehension. In turn, I am not a mindless cog in a machine, but a participant in life's becoming. Crucially, '[a]s the whole is unknowable in its totality, so *mystery* becomes part of our human condition' (emphasis added, *Wild Dog* 46).

Mystery is an essential part of Rose's theorisation of holistic systems (e.g. 'On History' 163); our desire to know must comingle with the mystery inherent in an always incomplete knowledge of the more-than-human world. The implications for writing are profound: both desire and mystery 'call to us in the language of sensuous experience' (*Wild Dog* 50). If experience is uncertain, open-ended and relational, then our language for it must have similar properties: the desire to know, to clarify (exemplified by the logos of the prosaic preposition) is transformed by the mystery of the response (when logos is fractured, and spaces open between the cracks). When readers encounter such mystery in a text, it should be cause for celebration rather than frustration, scepticism or suspicion. After all, mystery signals 'the integrity of larger systems' (Rose 'On History' 163); texts that produce mystery are, therefore, vital for cultivating an awareness of these complex systems. The 'infatuation with certainty' is analogous to attempts 'to cut through the dynamics of mystery and desire; to distil clear boundaries and stability from dynamic fluctuation' (*Wild Dog* 51). We might think of page after page of rectangular arrangements of prose, the form of which is all but entirely unresponsive to the contexts in which it is produced. Moreover, such constant, monotonous form is indicative of the intentions of prosaic thought: to establish order on an open (blank) field, to establish a hierarchy of the most important components of a conceptual system, to introduce coherent theorems (or even laws) and to then conclude by using these theorems to simplify and order the conceptual system and related experiential or epistemological domains. If writing is to be ecologically-oriented, then predictable forms and procedures should be treated with extreme caution: predictability might lead to 'loss of connection, loss of the larger system, more prosaically, bad theory, and, in Levinas's terms, desacralization', that desperate search for 'clarity and certitude', and the related 'seizing and encompassing' pursuit of 'purity' ('On History' 163).

I suggest that Rose's poetics finds its most beautiful expression in her analysis of rhythm, dance and cosmogony in the Victoria River. In response to the 'sensuous spaces' of the world in which we live, she argues that dance 'mobilises and extends' the possibilities for ecological attunement by 'conjoining action and pause, space and place, time and rhythm, politics and *poetics*' (emphasis added, 'To Dance' 287). Within this mobile, poetic field, signs have meaning but, like the white space around a poem, the silences and absences *around* these signs become important as well:

> Living things communicate by their sounds, their smells, their actions, the stinging bite of the march fly, the sight of flowers floating on the water. They also communicate by their non-presence. Events that occur to the same rhythm require intervals of non-occurrence. There are times when things do not happen, and it is the not-happening that makes it possible for the happening to have meaning. ('To Dance' 291)

The first sentence of the above quote is of particular interest to me because of the way that it shifts, from a predicable prosaic mode that suggests the construction of an argument ('Living things communicate by their…'), to two resonant images that would not be out of place in an image-based poem. The preposition, then, is not supported by a grammar that structures an elucidation of its validity, but rather is unsettled by the resonance of two fragments, one of which is deeply (and unpleasantly) sensual and close-to-hand (the march fly's sting), while the other allows us to breathe outwards across a body of water. Wonderfully, the poetic structure of this sentence *performs* the argument that unfolds: the prosaic mode says, 'This is how the world works,' while the poetic mode unties those moorings and suggests that, actually, between the objects that we can sense, there are all kinds of hidden connections, and lots of open space, too. In this way we approach both the paradox and the irreducible value of the poetic: housed in language structures, it will always echo the grammar of certainty; around these echoes, however, lies the uncharted ocean of the white page (or the performance space), towards which its fragments and deviations will always gesture.

Moreover, Rose's analysis of rhythm extends, from the rhythmic alternations of presence/absence and occurrence/non-occurrence within dance itself, to the architecture and significance of ceremony (during which many dances are performed). Here, too, we find rhythm: 'the pattern of dance and non-dance,' where each song is '*punctuated* by a pause, a break in the music' (emphasis added, 'To Dance' 292). In poetry as in dance, punctuation introduces discontinuity and fragmentation, but the 'gaps' between each fragment are rarely without value because they are 'set within a larger oscillation' (292).[4] Drawing on Catherine Ellis, Rose proposes that these oscillations produce an 'iridescence' by 'flipping' between one pattern and another, interrupting the flow of time and

recalibrating one's relationship to the performance. There are all kinds of flips at many different scales, involving dancers, audience and Country. Different flips can occur simultaneously, too, rather than as singular, binary alterations between one complete state and another. What results is a complex, many-sided array of moving, partially concealed images, which also happen to be full of anaphora, assonance, alliteration and irregular rhyme: 'There are multiple flips: not just background and foreground as a dualism, but a multiplicity of possible foregrounds and backgrounds, a multiplicity of flips, a multiplicity of overlapping and intersecting iridescences' (293). I can only describe the energy at play here as a kind of poetry, where poetics finds alignment with the ancient mythological structures of a continent: 'a heartbeat of the created world, a pulse in the life of country' (294).[5]

In Indigenous Australia, creative power is mobilised and brought into proximity through such ceremony. This power emerges as a rhythmic component from 'a state of powerful rest' (294). But if 'the immanent world of becoming' of this poetic plane is not entirely perceptible, then it should not be dismissed as 'random' or 'irrational'; rather, Rose figures it as 'an unfolding into the patterned and dancing ephemeral' (294). In other words, becoming manifests as the creative, effervescent patterns of particular dances. When performed, these dances reiterate the primordial codes of ecological relation. Through this understanding of ceremony as 'an account of cosmic process' that is 'world-generative,' Rose thus highlights the critical relationship between poetics and the Indigenous custodianship of Australian ecosystems (294). Here, *pattern* is fundamental: correctly patterned, language transforms into poetry; correctly interlocked, poems become cycles, which are performed 'to draw the power… out of the earth' (294). Rose suggests, furthermore, that the effectiveness of such poetry is situated in its resonance with the rhythms of the ecosystems to which it calls: 'The poetics of time, its patterns, waves, and interlocking rhythms work with the politics of correct performance, to transform cosmogonic potential into living action' (294).

In Rose's work, the relationship between the rights of Aboriginal peoples to practice their law, ecological function and decolonial aesthetics is tightly bound. Fundamentally, poetics is necessary to understand this relationship, which cannot be rendered as a prose story about one thing leading to another, or a character acting or being acted upon, or even a world from a certain point of view, but rather is articulated with *rhythms*, the 'heartbeat of time'—punctuated, that is, with flips between movement and stasis, actors and ecologies, foreground and background, presence and absence, and so on (295).

Poetics in Practice

Having established an outline of Rose's poetics, I will now illustrate how this poetics can be mobilised in textual analysis. The examples I provide are transcriptions of oral

narrations, a detail which will become important later on, and both are Indigenous stories. One is narrated by Paddy Roe, a late elder of the Goolarabooloo community in Australia's north-west, and the other is a translation (from Zuni) of Andrew Peynetsa's narration , from the Zuni Pueblo in the western United States. Apart from their intriguing similarities, which I'm going to discuss, I've chosen stories from Indigenous Australia and North America because they intersect with the two great fields of Rose's intellectual ecology. 'As a member of two powerful settler societies, the United States and Australia,' she writes, 'I find myself with a heightened awareness of the patterns that cross these two nations' (Reports' 5). The 'core problematic,' she says, is that the colonisers are 'paradoxically situated' (5). On the one hand, they came to the New World because of a hope that it would be better than the Old; on the other hand, the colonial project has riddled these New Worlds with 'dispossession, death and despair,' thereby polluting and destroying that hope (5). Situated in the parallel histories of the colonisation, Indigenous dispossession and ecological destruction of Australia and North America, the following readings will take up the imperatives posed by Rose's work in the first section of this essay. Accordingly, I look at the two stories as instructional sites of lively, shared meanings and relations; both are entangled with human and non-human worlds, and with Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures and languages.

I provide synopses to begin, which are important, of course, but which allow only a limited picture of the broader textual systems at work. Paddy Roe's 'Yaam' is a story about a marginal character in Australia's West Kimberley. Yaam, described by Roe as 'cranky' (mad) (Roe and Muecke 38), believes that the cattle he lives with are his family. They, like him, have lost their country. When Yaam returns to the camp of his human kin, he imposes an old custom of self-punishment by denying their gifts of clothes and food. He doesn't stay around, though—soon he's leaving to go back to his bullocks. Ultimately Yaam is killed when a tree falls on him during a cyclone. In 'The Boy and the Deer', Andrew Peynetsa tells the story of a Zuni boy who was abandoned by his mother as a baby and then rescued by deer. Taking him into their care, the deer become the Boy's new family. Some years later, his human uncle is out hunting and notices the Boy among a deer herd. After conferring with the village priest, the village decide to hunt down the Boy and his herd. Killing all of the deer, they capture the Boy and take him back to the village, where they discover that he is one of their own, and he is reunited with his human mother. The story ends a couple of days later, when his mother asks him to go out and fetch 'the center blades of the yucca plant' (Peynetsa and Sanchez 24). Having found a good specimen with long blades, the Boy is killed when he pulls on one and suddenly it comes loose and spears into his heart.[6]

As I mentioned, there are some rather startling similarities between each story that have led me to discuss them in tandem here. Most obviously, perhaps, each protagonist lives at the margins of human society and his home is, instead, shared with non-human kin. For both

Yaam and the Boy, their non-human family is a refuge from the pressures of human life—tellingly, both flee when they encounter their fellow humans for the first time. Both characters might be figured archetypally as 'the last of their tribes,' too: Yaam, we learn, lost his human family long ago, while the Boy must watch on as his entire deer family are hunted down and killed. The manner in which these characters die is also similar: not only does death come after they leave human community, but it comes in the form of 'nature'—whether the sharp blade of the yucca or a tree felled by a cyclone (because the deadly forces are larger-than-human, they may also carry extra moral authority). All of these congruences are significant because they are signs of each story's porosity, of what happens when one is brought into dialogue with another and relations emerge. Following Rose, 'it becomes possible to open new conversations with people whose histories are completely different, but whose worldviews work with uncertainty and connectivity. This is a moment for new conversations and new synergies' (*Wild Dog* 3).

Might it be, then, that Zuni and Goolarabooloo communities have similar experiences to share? Might they want to exchange thoughts about red soils and shockingly blue skies, or say similar things about the pressures of invading cultures and the resultant social and ecological devastation? One way to summarise what's going on in both would be to say that the stories are post-colonial allegories about the disappearance of a people, culture or civilisation. The loss of the Boy's deer family in 'The Boy and the Deer' could be a Zuni allegory for the loss of one's culture after Western invasion; similarly, we might suggest that Yaam's story is allegorical of the tensions that can beset a multicultural family of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous ('introduced') people in a torn, colonised landscape.

As I've written elsewhere, however, the point in comparing these two stories is to explore the ways in which they *differ* ('Fire'). In other words, to focus on their shared status as allegory would be a mistake: they would become subjects of a universal category, or a basic archetype with which we might reductively organise the world's literature from a lofty position of authority. Instead, following Rose's lead, we look for differences, and we acknowledge their irreducible particularities. For example, Yaam's non-human family is an introduced species (cattle), unlike the Boy's (deer). Also, Yaam is already 'mad' when he appears to us, whereas the trauma that besets the Boy seems to lead him to a form of madness only at the tale's conclusion. In fact, when we insist on summarising these stories according to pre-arranged categories, we fail to notice some of their most important components, foremost of which is that each 'story' is actually a poem, or a verse narrative, with lines arranged into loose stanzas according to the rhythmic decisions of Peynetsa and Roe. By translating these oral narrations into written poems, Tedlock and Stephen Muecke recognise the many *poetic* qualities of spoken language, and illustrate how these are neglected if the stories are rendered in prose (see Tedlock 'On Translation' 129-132). After all, in spoken language, 'meaning':

> is not only carried by the sheer words as transcribed by alphabetic writing
> but by the placement of SILENCES
> by TONES of VOICE
> by whispers and SHOUTS.   (Tedlock 'Learning' 712)

So transcribed, spaces around and through the spoken performances emerge—in Rose's terms, instead of atomistic blocks of grammatically standard prose (common in other transcriptions of Indigenous stories), the texts are porous and 'leaky' poems. This porosity presents multiple opportunities for dialogue and interpretation, as well as plenty of mystery. The poems also emphasise the thoroughly local and individual qualities of the narrations: Muecke faithfully transcribes Roe's Aboriginal English according to its own syntax, rather than refashioning and disembedding it with a standardised dialect. Similarly, Tedlock's translation gives typographical value to Peynetsa's alternations in pitch and rhythm. Accordingly, both poems adopt experimental approaches to punctuation, lineation and typography; they are entangled with global developments in literary aesthetics, but they are also thoroughly local and unique.

As outlined in my introduction, I am not operating with an artificially dogmatic distinction between 'prose' and 'poetry', but rather, I use these terms to represent different regions on a spectrum of written language. That region denoted by 'prose' is so dominant that it has become normative; in part, its dominance reflects a broader lack of attention to the textures and rhythms of language, and to the bodies that use it and listen to it. Tedlock's assessment is a perfect illustration (literally and figuratively) of this situation:

> It was not until the Renaissance that there began to
> develop the
>   kind of prose narrative we know today
> the kind that is
> read silently and has lost many of its oral features.   ('Learning' 712-713)

The single worst thing about prose, according to Tedlock, 'is that there is no SILENCE in it' ('Learning' 713). Without silence, there is little room for absence. Absence, as Rose shows, is necessary to understand oscillation; without oscillation, the ecological dance evaporates in searing plains of uniformity. Alternatively, when patterns emerge through rhythmic alternations, repetitions appear, and thereby weave narrative threads into circular eddies. Tellingly, the conclusions of 'Yaam' and 'The Boy and the Deer' are rather subdued affairs, occurring abruptly after almost all of the important action has taken place. This suggests that the function of the stories is not to lead us to a resolution (the lodestar of any telos). Rather, if the journey of our reading (or listening) is of more importance than a destination, then we might need to circle back: just as, on a microscopic level, each narrative loops around multiple repetitions in order to build emphasis and tension,

macroscopically Peynetsa and Roe might tell a story countless times in many different contexts, each with subtle variations. The idea of reading or listening to a story more than once might be hard to imagine in an era saturated with an abundance of narrative content, when we devour entire television series in a matter of hours before moving on to a new novel or the latest film. There's little time to return to anything. With oral stories like these, however, the ending fades in significance beside an extended duration of repetitions; like many poems, these endings bleed into series of reiterated *performances*. In between each performance, of course, are Rose's *punctuations* of time and space; rather than any operatic climax, the duration of these poems across multiple contexts and over long periods of time constitutes the flourishing of their expression.

Once it is acknowledged that events are not predictable, and that time won't always unfold in an orderly manner, then the narration of these events must also engage with uncertainty. By utilising multiple sonic and rhythmic variations, these poems produce unsettled worlds that would have otherwise been restricted by the more uniform distributions of prose. In 'The Boy and the Deer', for example, the uncertainty of the uncle's hunt is evoked by a judicious variation of pitch and rhythm. As Tedlock points out, the tension of the scene is maintained 'through nine lines of extremely uneven length and two extra-long pauses before the end of a complete sentence coincides with a pause' (Peynetsa and Sanchez xxvi):

> There they lived o-------n for a long time
>
>   ●
>
> until
> from the village
> his uncle
> went out hunting. Going out hunting
> he came along
> down around
> Worm Spring, and from there he went on towards
>
>   ●
>
> the Prairie-Dog Hills and came up near the edge of a valley there.
>
>   (Peynetsa and Sanchez 8-9)[7]

We can see in examples like these a 'tension between line boundaries and sentence boundaries' (Peynetsa and Sanchez xxxvii). In other words, what we can *see*—typically revealed by the contents of a sentence—is unsettled by the moving frames of the variable lines and font sizes. The world is a lively one, then, the features of which are revealed unpredictably as we move through the landscape. Indeed, resolution comes as the last line extends into something resembling prose: now the uncle can see out across the valley, and 'THERE IN THE VALLEY was the herd of deer' with 'a little boy going around among them' (Tedlock's introduction in Peynetsa and Sanchez 9).[8] However this panoptic view is

momentary at best because, like the hunter, we are yet to see what will lie beyond the valley, we don't know what might happen next.

Like the band of heat that wobbles on the horizon on a scorching day so that the land appears to be melting into the sky, variable lines unsettle what we see, unmooring the phrase so that it floats a little in front of its content. As readers, what we see (or hear) has a very close relation to what we know; in each poem, variability impacts not only on how we journey through space but also on what we can know of others who inhabit it. Mystery is thus an essential product of their poetics. In 'Yaam', for example, Roe deliberately plays with the distance between his own knowledge of the story and the relative ignorance of his audience. When it is decided that Yaam had better come back into camp, a discussion ensues:

> all right -
> 'Well you better camp here with us -
> only one night you know we must keep you here' -
> 'Yeah all right' [Yaam] say --
> all right -
> he stop with these people little while -
> they talk-talk all talk language ----
> all talking language --
> after talk-talk ---
> ooh might be just about eight or nine o'clock I think you know, they talk right
>   up to about that time, nearly sleep time -
> 'Well' he tell-em 'I gotta go now' ---
> 'I bin leave some people behind […]'   (Roe and Muecke 41)[9]

As with the example from 'The Boy and the Deer', here we see Roe modulating the speed of time by using short, variable rhythms and a highly flexible syntax. Again, note how the moment of greatest clarity resembles a longer line of prose. What's particularly interesting, however, is how the uncertainty of what is going to happen reaches an ontological limit point, past which Roe will not provide any details: the 'talk-talk' in another language clearly contains the most crucial details of their conversation, but this is not translated for us. So, when Yaam suddenly decides to return to his 'people' after what must have been hours of discussion, readers are confronted with a situation that could not have been predicted. In this light, Yaam's preference for bovine over human seems comical and, indeed, Roe laughs a little, shortly after. But I suspect that his laughter would be more about our confusion or surprise than about Yaam's non-human family.

Readings that seek to reduce different forms into an 'essence' from which they are purportedly derived take us an order away from the stories themselves; they provide a kind

of telos or overarching framework which, as Rose shows, allows us to reduce their complexity to a category that is disembedded from any local context. But Roe's and Peynetsa's stories 'are always grounded in specific places' (Rose *Wild Dog* 4)—during his narration, Roe indicates 'that little leaf hill there see' to which Yaam retreated (41), while 'The Boy and the Deer' is explicitly set below the cliffs of the Big Mountain Mesa in New Mexico. After acknowledging that allegorical readings can have an initial or introductory value, we might then turn to immerse ourselves in the details of the story-worlds. Instead of uplifting the stories from their contexts, what's needed is a reading that learns from Rose's analysis of rhythm, or what she has also called 'a particular nomadic problematic' ('Dance of the Ephemeral' 165). That is, a story can be both one thing and something else, it can 'speak both to the local and the universal' (*Wild Dog* 4), it can be in the text and in the world. Next to allegory, then, we can also ask, What does each story *do*? How does it function in the world as an order unto itself? With Roe and Peynetsa, at least one thing is clear: all kinds of families are possible in multispecies communities. To reduce these stories to purely allegorical depictions of human communities is to deny that Indigenous peoples on both of these continents understand the world they live in to be 'saturated with mindfulness' (Rose 'Slowly' 6). In both Indigenous Australia and America, 'plants as well as animals are sentient, and the earth itself has culture and power within it' (Rose 'Slowly' 6). From such a perspective, an allegorical reading performs a gross, colonialist reduction: it implies that only humans can form families, or that humans, cattle and deer can't nourish each other in loving, familial bonds. But these stories tell us that this is not the case. Yaam, for example, refuses the flour, tea and sugar that are offered to him when he comes back to camp, but this refusal appears to be based on more than tribal custom. Rather, Yaam seems to insist on an alternative community formation, which includes his cattle companions and their country:

> if they take 'im [Yaam] back [home] he'll still go way you know they didn't want
>   to take-im away from the country -
> (Roe and Muecke 42)

Similarly, after the Boy has returned to his village, he and his human family gather to feast on the bodies of his 'deer elders', who had been slain in the hunt (Peynetsa and Sanchez 23). According to Peynetsa's nephew Joseph, however, the Boy 'didn't eat the deer meat, because he said, "This is my mother, my sister, my brother"' (28). Just as the story itself is open to dialogue, interpretation and modification from an audience member, so too are the apparently 'timeless' customs of Zuni ritual when a boy is confronted with competing familial claims across species boundaries. Unfortunately, the Boy's unhappiness becomes chronic. Joseph thinks 'he was really unhappy' because 'he was lonesome [in the village], and used to being out in the wilds'. Thus, when he left his mother's house on his fifth day in the village to look for the blades of the yucca plant, according to Peynetsa 'he had it in his mind to kill himself, that's the way I felt when I was telling it' (28). We see, then, that

both Yaam and the Boy refuse their human communities, regardless of the consequences. As an open, dialogical system, a certain amount of mystery is also important: each story is at once larger than, and open to the interpretation of, its narrator. So, like the minds of the characters, the story is not a bounded, concrete or transparent entity. Further, even for the narrators, there are multiple, and sometimes mysterious, forces at work. Peynetsa, for example, 'feels' that the Boy wanted to kill himself, but he isn't sure; similarly, of Yaam Roe says:

> I dunno what made 'im mad in the first place -------
> they never tell me how he get mad --   (44)

Rose's attention to the details of context, time, dialogue and mystery emphasises that to tell a story is not to see through it, but to participate in its dynamic, energetic complex.

Readers still might want to categorise these stories as fable about the perils of intercultural hybridity, where the protagonist meets with a ghastly fate because he refused traditional custom and community. However, such a summary would ignore the fact that these stories are transcriptions of narrative *events*, that the transcription, therefore, is but an instance in a long series of repetitions, where each instance is manifest for a particular purpose and audience. Implicit in the narration, then, is a kind of hope—that the story be active, powerful and alive, that it might exert a change on the world into which it enters. Their bleak outcomes are therefore *productive* as instructional or cautionary interventions in time and space. To understand this, Rose's analysis of different modes of time is helpful, with its attention to the enduring terrain of Dreaming, from which the structures of the present are determined. As singular events, these stories occupy ephemeral portions of time, but as poetic reiterations they reaffirm the ancient contours of the spaces that they traverse. The stories are not closed systems, their direction is not towards a completed past; rather, when they are performed they open into dialogue with people and their shared, multispecies worlds. If we remember that humanity 'is an interspecies collaborative project' (*Wild Dog* 11), in which complexity and uncertainty are normative conditions, then 'Yaam' and 'The Boy and the Deer' can be read not only as stories, but as poetic performances of highly unstable and participatory ecologies, where the outcomes are unclear and resolutions are held open by reiterative patterns. The borders between language, characters, narrators and audience are hazy and porous as any in Rose's dancing plenitude.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Furthermore, given the focus of Rose's work, I am wary that poetry be overlaid too readily with stereotypical understandings of ecopoetry, which are largely based on readings of Romantic and post-Romantic poets. Central to the first wave of ecocriticism, Romantic poetics have unfortunately become too normative in discussions of ecological poetry. Typically, Romantic poets lament an increasing separation between 'civilisation' and 'nature', and treat poetry as a means of transcending that divide. Poems about nature are thus about returning readers to a sense of being at home in the earth (Keller 10). However, there are all kinds of ecopoems that deny or are suspicious of the possibility for transcendence, just as there are many poets—particularly Indigenous poets—who do not believe that they are separated from 'nature' at all.

[2] Poems with such open forms might be more effective ways of conceptualising ecological systems. As Timothy Morton argues, 'The Book of Nature is more like a Mallarmé poem than a linear, syntactically well organised, unified work' (61).

[3] See also Benterrak, Krim et al. *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology.* Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984, p. 91.

[4] Indeed, pauses could be fundamental to the oscillations of all kinds of human and non-human art, such as the tacit periods in between phrases of bird song, which, as Hollis Taylor argues, allow the music to 'breathe,' and stimulate the mind by encouraging it to 'reach' into the silence (118).

[5] See also Minter (2012). For Minter, poetry from the Dreaming contains the very codes of ecological communities.

[6] Given that the boy's mother was made pregnant by a sun god, and that he was born into a kind of poverty —'I had no clothing,' he recollects, 'I was poor' (Peynetsa and Sanchez 22)—there are obvious parallels with the New Testament story of Jesus's youth, which there is not sufficient space to explore here.

[7] The long dash indicates the extension of the vowel sound. A half-second pause occurs with a new line, while a longer pause is represented by a dot. Smaller font is for a softer voice.

[8] Capitalised words indicate a louder voice.

[9] The hyphen at the end of each line indicates a pause (one second per hyphen).