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Résumé de l'article

This article delineates the idea of an Indigenous hydropoetics as an ancestral outlook on rivers grounded in Aboriginal cultural traditions of, and everyday interactions with, rivers. In particular, two features—embodiment and relationality—prove integral to conceptualising Indigenous hydropoetics in response to the hydrological precarities of the present. Recognising rivers' capacity for agency, the idea is developed in relation to contemporary Aboriginal Australian poetry narrating long-standing human interdependencies with rivers. The hydropoetic verse of Jack Davis, Samuel Wagan Watson, and Jeanine Leane reveals embodied relations to—and relational epistemologies of—rivers and their habitats through a focus on Derbal Yerrigan (the Swan River) of Western Australia, Marrambidya Bila (the Murrumbidgee River) of New South Wales, and Maiwar (the Brisbane River) of Queensland, respectively. Their writing integrates Dreaming narratives and elicits river poiesis, while also confronting aquatic conservation urgencies in Australia. Evoking sacred rivers whose origins lie in the Dreaming, their work also presents a medium for reverent listening to the fluvial world. While Leane's hydropoetics centres on the mediating role of memory—hers and the river's—Watson's poetry calls attention to fractured river ecologies in Brisbane's urban environment. For Davis, bodily relationality between humans, plants, and rivers presents a potent means of ecopolitical resistance through multispecies solidarity. Immersed in Aboriginal creation narratives, an Indigenous hydropoetics foregrounds the multidimensional intersections between humans, rivers, and all life, thus energising new imaginings of rivers and encouraging receptivity to their biocultural complexities.

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John Charles Ryan

> I am a child of the Dreamtime People
>
> Part of this Land, like the gnarled gumtree
>
> I am the river, softly singing
>
> Chanting our songs on my way to the sea.
>
> - Hyllus Maris (1988, 60, ll. 1-4)

Introduction

Regarded from a technocratic standpoint as channels for agriculture, industry, trade, transportation, and urban development, rivers are the most biodiverse yet vulnerable ecosystems in the world (Wu et al. 2021). The factors imperiling river basins globally include erosion from land-use changes, sedimentation from dam construction, and the intensifying effects of climate disturbance (Dethier, Renshaw, and Magilligan 2022). Australia's longest river, the Murray, is severely threatened by escalating human demands on the environment and the overconsumption of water for irrigation, both exacerbated by continuing ecological degradation (Hart et al. 2021, xxii). In conjunction with practical conservation strategies, creative perspectives on human-water interrelations are vital to reimagining the spiritual, social, and cultural significance of riverscapes. Through the framework of the transdisciplinary environmental humanities (Hubbell and Ryan 2022), the idea of *Indigenous hydropoetics* will be delineated in this article as an approach to thinking about rivers that incorporates the sustainable hydrological values of Indigenous people with an emphasis on the Aboriginal people of Australia. Cultural groups across Australia hold in common a custodial ethics of rivers shaped by ancestral connections to water. Together with land and sky, water forms part of Country,[1] an Aboriginal term signifying "a nourishing, responsive, relational, living terrain imbued with spirit that is at once the recipient and provider of love and care" (Wooltorton, Poelina, and Collard 2022, 401, n9). As Country, land is an integrated natural, cultural, and spiritual whole.

The sacredness of freshwater bodies — rivers, streams, creeks, wetlands, billabongs, soaks,

springs, and aquifers — continues to mold Indigenous values, identities, and livelihoods in Australia (Moggridge and Thompson 2021). Rivers are encompassed within kincentric ecologies that seamlessly integrate ecological, social, and family relations (Wooltorton, Poelina, and Collard 2022, 394). For Queensland poet Samuel Wagan Watson (2020, 47), "From the southern banks of the Brisbane River my Mununjali blood flows south. My Birri-Gubba blood is far in the north, on the Dawson River, another river, another world away." Indigenous approaches to river management are thus grounded in "reciprocal relationships" between people and the more-than-human world (Martuwarra RiverOfLife, Taylor, and Poelina 2021, 40). Accordingly, "Kin is an undivided, non-binary world of interrelationship, such that speaking with and as River on the basis of cultural knowledge and authority […] is normal" (Martuwarra RiverOfLife et al. 2022, 432, capitalization original). Regarded as sacred entities, rivers are moreover central to Aboriginal creation narratives or Dreaming stories.[2] As a case in point, among the Nyikina people, the Martuwarra, or Fitzroy River, of Western Australia emerged during the Bookarrarra, the dawn of time, through the actions of the ancestral beings Woonyoomboo, the night heron, and Yoongoorrookoo, the rainbow snake (Martuwarra RiverOfLife et al. 2022, 425). Woonyoomboo planted the freshwater mangrove (majala, or *Barringtonia acutangula*) along the river and conferred First Law to the Nyikina (Martuwarra RiverOfLife et al. 2022, 425).

Recognizing the agencies of water, an Indigenous hydropoetics is further evident in contemporary Aboriginal Australian poetry that narrates human-river interdependencies. In the context of biospheric change, two aspects of an Indigenous hydropoetics — corporeality and interrelationality — prove especially integral to articulating the concept's potential as a response to Anthropocene urgencies. In Yorta Yorta writer Hyllus Maris' poem "Spiritual Song of the Aborigine" (1988), for instance, the speaker identifies ancestrally, empathetically, and sonically with rivers as kin, "chanting our songs on my way to the sea" (60, l. 4). Similarly, the hydropoetic verse of Aboriginal Australian writers Jack Davis, Samuel Wagan Watson, and Jeanine Leane reveals embodied relations to — and relational epistemologies of — rivers and their habitats through attention to Derbal Yerrigan (the Swan River) of Western Australia, the Murrumbidgee River of New South Wales, and Maiwar (the Brisbane River) of Queensland, respectively. Rather than giving voice to rivers — and thus reinforcing an anthropocentric stance on water — the hydropoetics of Davis, Watson, and Leane acknowledges the intrinsic languages of rivers.

As this article's sole author, I write from the perspective of a non-Indigenous, non-Australian environmental humanist with the duty to identify my positionality in research involving Indigenous knowledge and values. As a member of Nulungu Indigenous Research Institute at the University of Notre Dame, Australia, I respond to the need to understand the optic through which I approach the material in relation to longstanding power differentials between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. To begin with, I acknowledge that all Indigenous primary and secondary resources — poetry, prose, oral narratives, and criticism — appear in the public domain. What's

more, the article aims to place emphasis, where possible, on the diverse voices of Indigenous writers, theorists, philosophers, knowledge-bearers, and Cultural Custodians. More specifically, I adopt a decolonial standpoint on poetics and aesthetics. As elaborated, for instance, in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012), decolonial theory interrogates the complex imbrications between academic research practices and Anglo-European imperialism. Her approach situates research critically within the framework of Indigenous "self-determination, decolonization and social justice" (Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 35). In contrast, to appropriative research lacking an ethical orientation, a decolonial standpoint embraces "the healing, the recognition, the dignity of those aesthetic practices that have been written out of the canon of modern aesthetics" (Mignolo and Vázquez 2013, n.p.). Furthermore, as scholar of Latin American literature Juan G. Ramos (2018) asserts, decolonial theory "names a process of undoing the hierarchical relationship between philosophy and art, as well as Eurocentric conceptions of art in relation to those artworks produced elsewhere in the world" (4). I accordingly conceptualize an Indigenous hydropoetics as a creative-ecological means to call attention to the urgent importance of Aboriginal Australian self-determination, decolonization, healing, and dignity.

Towards an Indigenous Hydropoetics: Embracing Potamocentrism

The focus of hydropoetics is to counter terracentrism — the privileging of the terrestrial over the aquatic — and to embrace hydrocentricism or, more precisely, potamocentricism oriented towards new perspectives on rivers beyond their normative social construction as industrial conduits or exploitable commodities (Ryan 2022). Stemming etymologically from *potamos* for river, potamocentrism denotes an ecological worldview reflecting physical, emotional, and spiritual identification with rivers as sentient entities. Potamocentrism disrupts an ontology predicated on the perceived constancy of terra firma and "demands a more dynamic approach to organizing life on Earth" (Bennett 2020, 178). In contrast, terracentricism reflects the evolutionary constitution of *Homo sapiens* as a ground-dwelling species. The Western inclination to background the aquatic consequently arises from an incapacity to perceive and cognise the poietic transformation of rivers and other waterbodies over time. Unlike a relatively perdurable phenomenon — a flower, tree, boulder, mountain, or other ostensibly static object in the environment — a river is a process, a perpetual in-becoming whose subjectivity lies distributed across inhuman spatial and temporal scales. As such, the idea of *poiesis* is valuable to elucidating the lives of rivers and human-water interdependencies. Broadly speaking, poiesis brings attention to the transformational capacities inhering in that which exists. The term denotes the idea of "bringing forth" — the lively potential of beings, things, and elements — including rivers and their habitats — to change, evolve, coalesce, dissociate, intensify, and dissipate.

The idea of poiesis is integral to delineating hydropoetics as a framework for rethinking the

cultural significance of rivers, articulating the complexities of human-water interactions, and confronting river conservation urgencies in the Anthropocene. Cultural theorist Warwick Mules (2014) maintains that an object is indistinguishable from the transformation it manifests and, moreover, that poiesis "identifies the being of things in their becoming other: in their creative, shaped and connected possibilities" (22). Correspondingly, philosopher Arkady Plotnitsky (2013) asserts that "all poiesis, all creative making (the original ancient Greek meaning of poiesis) is material and performative" (275). The conceptualisation of poiesis as transformation is prominent in Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela's (1980) influential notion of autopoiesis as "what takes place in the dynamics of the autonomy proper to living systems" (xvii). For Maturana and Varela (1980), autopoiesis underscores the interdependent nature of entities as "composite unities realized through neighborhood relations" (xxiii). In this sense, beings are constituted by their ecological interchanges within living systems. Characterised by their relations, rivers and other fluvial phenomena emerge from exchanges between environmental agents (Maturana and Varela 1980, 118). A living system, therefore, is always intrinsically autopoietic insofar as the diminishment of its autopoiesis leads to biological disintegration, decline, and death (Maturana and Varela 1980, 112).

Over the last two decades, the concept of poiesis has been vital to the emergence of environmental poetry — or ecopoetics — characterised as poetry or poetic thought that expresses ecological values, critiques environmental degradation and instills in audiences an ethics of nature (Bryson 2005; 2002; Hume and Osborne 2018; Killingsworth 2004; Knickerbocker 2012; Morrison 2015; Rigby 2004). Catherine Rigby (2004), for example, defines the concept of ecopoiesis in terms of human interactions with the more-than-human that enhance ecological vitality. In contrast, Scott Knickerbocker (2012) proposes the idea of *sensuous poiesis* as "the process of rematerializing language specifically as a response to nonhuman nature" (2). Broadened beyond its literary provenance, however, the term *ecopoetics* also encompasses diverse biocultural practices concerned with conservation, sustainability, and more-than-human justice (Hume and Osborne 2018). As the intensive study of environmental poetry, the scholarly field of ecopoetics nonetheless has exhibited a prominent terracentric partiality throughout its short history. Seminal publications such as J. Scott Bryson's *The West Side of Any Mountain* (2005) allude only briefly to rivers and other waterbodies as symbolic figures in American environmental poetry. Lynn Keller's *Recomposing Ecopoetics* (2017), furthermore, foregrounds the role of terrestrial organisms — beetles, butterflies, and birds — in recent environmental poetry. While ecopoetic theory asserts planetary values, scholars such as Keller place limited emphasis on the biosphere's hydrological systems including its precious and precarious freshwater ecologies. Among ecocritics and environmental humanists, the problem of terracentrism persists, notwithstanding the inclusion of river-themed poems in prominent ecopoetic anthologies (see, for example, Fisher-Wirth and Street 2013).

The terracentric focus of ecopoetics as a critical practice signifies the wider social, cultural, and political privileging of the terrestrial over the aquatic. In response, Indigenous hydropoetics aims to blur the rigid Western distinction between the grounded human and inundated non-human — between terra firma and aqua pellicientes — by cherishing, materially and figuratively, "the freedom of the open water" (Bennett 2020, 173-74). Energised by poetry yet not constrained to creative writing genres, Indigenous hydropoetics is an outlook that advances "a river-centric view of the world," acknowledging rivers as "sentient entities that [or who] are allowed to express their own voice [or voices]" (Brierley 2020, vii, viii). A hydropoetic perspective regards rivers as "place-beings" bearing moral status and with whom humankind is interconnected in myriad ways (Brierley 2020, viii). As interdisciplinary geographer Gary J. Brierley (2020) elaborates, "if we are part of the river and the river is part of us, it is subject to sensations, it experiences responses, it has a form of consciousness. In other words, it is sentient" (17). Conceptualising rivers in this mode, Indigenous hydropoetics counters an ethos of Western dominance over rivers and instead accepts the responsibility of kinship. From this standpoint, rivers are fellow beings — percipient interlocutors — who command dialogue and garner respect: "When working with a river, the first place to start is to talk to it, finding out who it is and what it needs to flow" (Brierley 2020, 21). Correspondingly, as hydrologist Luna Leopold (1977) contended more than four decades ago, "economic views are too insensitive to be the only criteria for judging the health of the river organism. What is needed is […] reverence for rivers" (430). With these ideas in mind, the discussion now turns to Derbal Yerrigan (the Swan River) of Western Australia and the hydropoetics of Noongar writer Jack Davis.

Derbal Yerrigan and Wagyl: Jack Davis' Swan River Hydropoetics

Comprising fourteen language groups and approximately 30,000 individuals, the Noongar are the Aboriginal people of Southwest Australia including the metropolitan areas of Geraldton, Perth, Bunbury, and Albany. Derbal Yerrigan (the Swan River) flows from the Avon River in the Wheatbelt region of the Southwest 175 kilometers west to its mouth at the port of Fremantle on the Indian Ocean. The name Derbal Yerrigan denotes "mixing and flowing" where *derbal* refers to mixing because, at locations such as Burswood peninsula near Perth, "you have the sweet water and the salt water coming together. That is where you have got your tidal movement. Water flows under there too" (Nannup 2008, 109). The Noongar recognize the Wagyl (spelled alternately as Waakarl and Waakal) as a major creation being who protects Derbal Yerrigan and other freshwater sources (Wooltorton, Poelina, and Collard 2022, 398). The Wagyl represents the interdependent relationship between all freshwater bodies — seas, estuaries, rivers, wetlands, and groundwater — and safeguards *kayepa dordok* or "living water" (Bracknell et al. 2022, 404, 405). The twists and turns of Derbal Yerrigan from source to sea represent the path

journeyed by Wagyl as the rainbow serpent's movements across the ancient landscape produced the region's hydrological features (Bracknell et al. 2022, 406). Noongar Elder Noel Nannup speaks of Wagyl and the emergence of Derbal Yerrigan in his story "The Carers of Everything" (2003).

In Nannup's account of Noongar Dreaming, while the spiritual forebears gathered to debate who should become carers, Wagyl physically opened a space between the sky and earth. As the plant, tree, bird, mammal, and reptile ancestors watched:

they saw the great serpent use all its muscles together and, with all its strength and energy, it lifted the sky, and in total defiance move across the land creating a smooth trail beckoning all the others to follow […] At times this great serpent went under the ground and came up again forming the area where there would be lakes. (Nannup 2003, 1)

Later, the ancestral crocodile Yondock travelled down from the North, inciting natural disasters including the flooding of Derbal Yerrigan with salt water. As the custodian of freshwater, Wagyl journeyed the length of the river to intervene in the emergency. The inevitable clash between Yondock and Wagyl saw the rainbow serpent triumph as Yondock's bodily remains turned into Meandip (Garden Island), a narrow island located about five kilometers off the coast of Western Australia (Robertson et al. 2016, 49). Crucial to Wagyl's Dreaming relationship to Derbarl Yerrigan is the seahorse. Although the first Wagyl was male, a powerful female Wagyl later took up residence in the ocean. When she attempted to access the river, two male serpents prevented her, so she transformed into a seahorse: "That is why the seahorse is part of our story for the river. There she was, swimming along like a seahorse […] the guards couldn't help staring at her. They forgot what they were meant to be doing" (Nannup 2008, 111). After the female Wagyl passed the distracted guards, she jettisoned her seahorse disguise in Djenalup ("place of the footprint" or Blackwall Reach), the deepest part of Derbarl Yerrigan.

Wagyl and the sacred hydrologies of the Southwest appear prominently in the writing of Jack Davis (1917-2000), a Noongar poet, playwright, and activist. The publication of *The First-Born and Other Poems* (1970) distinguished Davis as the second Indigenous Australian writer, after Oodgeroo Noonuccal (née Kath Walker), to publish a poetry collection. Subsequently, Davis released the collections *Jagardoo: Poems from Aboriginal Australia* (1977) and *Black Life* (1992) as well as the plays *Kullark: The Dreamers* (1982) and *No Sugar* (1986), all of which confront the challenges of preserving Aboriginal identity. For instance, *Kullark* (1982) reinterprets colonial history, notably the murder of Yagan (1795-1833), the Noongar freedom fighter who resisted British settlement in Western Australia. Eventually apprehended then decapitated, his body was transported to England and exhibited as an antipodean curiosity at European museums until the 1960s. In the play, Yagan is described as "a member of the Swan River (Tjuaht) people," indicating his ancestral identification with Derbarl Yerrigan (Davis 1982, 5). *Kullark* depicts Wagyl as an embodiment of Aboriginal cultural vitality and a voice of the deep Indigenous history that vastly

precedes European settlement. In Scene Two, through direct address, Yagan commemorates Wagyl's creation of lakes, swamps and "the wide clear river, / As you travelled onward to the sea" (Davis 1982, 12).

Davis' hydropoetic sensibility is further palpable in *No Sugar* (1986), a four-act play set in the 1920s and 1930s at Moore River Native Settlement and other locales in Western Australia. The play centers on an Indigenous family, the Millimurras, and their struggle to endure the imposition of assimilationist policies during the Great Depression. At the end of Act Two, Scene Six, Joe Millimurra, the family's eldest son, reveals to Mary Dargurru, a girl from the Kimberley region of Western Australia, his intent to escape the Native Settlement and return home to the town of Northam 175 kilometers away. Joe implores Mary, "Come on. I'm gunna show you my country. Got a big river, swans, beautiful white swans" (Davis 1986, 70). The "big river" to which Joe alludes is presumably Gogulgar Bilya (the Avon River), a tributary of Derbal Yerrigan (Ballardong NRM Working Group 2022, 16). Joe associates his Country with swans and the river, demonstrating the centrality of local hydroecologies to Indigenous identity. Waterbodies connect cultures to landscapes; consciousness of water catchments thus vitalizes culture (Nannup 2008, 107). As Noel Nannup observes, traditionally within each catchment, people "needed to know where the water came from because water is the giver of life and everything in that catchment is a part of you and you are a part of it" (Nannup 2008, 108). Also in Act Two, Scene Six, the character Jimmy Munday performs his grandfather's song in Noongar language, entreating crabs "to come up the river and for the fish to jump up high so he can catch them in the fish traps" (Davis 1986, 65-6). Davis' English translation of the chant announces, "crabs, crabs, crabs, crabs / In the river mouth, / They are coming in the river mouth, river mouth" (1986, 110). Jimmy's song of increase and praise narrates Aboriginal people's corporeal relationships to rivers and fluvial creatures through acts of subsistence.

Davis' poem "The Fight To Save Bennett Brook" (1992, 61) exhibits catchment consciousness while protesting the disturbance of the brook's sacred hydrology. Bennett Brook physically connects Derbarl Yerrigan to the Gnangara Mound, a major aquifer that supplies most of Perth's drinking water. A contextualizing note by Davis explains that "Bennett Brook is one of the few sacred places left to the Aboriginal people of Perth. A company intends to build houses on the land and the Aborigines are fighting to retain it" (Davis 1992, 61). In the poem, "The brook now bears / an alien name," a reference to the overwriting of Noongar place names by Anglo-European toponyms (Davis 1992, 61, ll. 5-6). The Whadjuck Noongar of the Perth area know Bennett Brook as Korndiny Karla Boodjar or "big fire and camping place," signifying the cultural importance of the brook to cooking, eating, sheltering, and socialising. Despite the brook's sacred standing, "The sound of trucks / and whorls of dust" epitomize the ongoing fragmentation of the cultural ecologies of Korndiny Karla Boodjar (Davis 1992, 61, ll. 7-8). Human-water-plant intercorporeality, however, offers a mode of resistance through solidarity between people and

other life forms:

> We are but swamp reeds
>
> standing in the sun
>
> but resilient
>
> bending with each blow. (Davis 1992, 61, ll. 14-17)

Speaking for Noongar people — as a collective "we" — the poem's narrator identifies with the robust plant life of the brook's wetland habitats. Similarly, Noel Nannup (2008) draws attention to the correlation between human and fluvial bodies: "When the river is healthy, we are healthy" (114). Furthermore, Davis's "The Land at the Brewery" (1992, 22), maintains Noongar peoples' right to access land and water and laments, "All that is left / is this minute patch of sand" (ll. 1-2). In 1989, Indigenous protesters occupied Goonininup, the location of the Old Swan Brewery beside Derbarl Yerrigan, to voice opposition to the ruination of the site (Foley 1999). Situated between the river and Kaarta Garup (Mount Eliza) — and abundant in natural freshwater springs — Goonininup is an especially sacred place in Wagyl Dreaming. In poems and plays such as these, Davis develops a hydropoetics steeped in Noongar creation narratives and giving prominence to the embodied imbrications between humans, rivers, and all that exists.

Maiwar and Moodagurra: Samuel Wagan Watson's Brisbane River Hydropoetics

As the longest river in Southeast Queensland, Maiwar (the Brisbane River) flows 344 kilometers from Mount Stanley to Moreton Bay on the Coral Sea, passing through the traditional lands of the Wakka Wakka, Yagera, and Turrbal nations. The Turrbal are the Indigenous people of Mianjin (present-day Brisbane City), whose Country surrounds the river from Moreton Bay through Brisbane's Central Business District (CBD) to the town of Dinmore. Inland from Turrbal Country are the traditional lands of the Yagera (or Jagera) people encompassing Maiwar's route from Dinmore to Lake Wivenhoe, a reservoir formed by the Wivenhoe Dam. The rest of Maiwar runs through Wakka Wakka land from Lake Wivenhoe to river's source at Mount Stanley. In the Southeast Queensland area, "countries were divided by the creeks, rivers and mountains" (Ruska in Wang, Ruska and Kerkhove 2018, min. 1:06-1:10). For Maiwar's Indigenous caretakers, the rainbow serpent, Moodagurra, created the river during Dreamtime. In the narrative, Moodagurra becomes stuck as she travels up a dry creek, so she appeals to Yara (rain) and Ngalan (clouds) for assistance. The two Ancestor Beings bring about thunderous rain that washes under Moodagurra's belly, enabling her to squirm free from the creekbed. As Moodagurra proceeds farther up the creek, her writhing motions produce Maiwar's curving path (Cook et al. 2022, 29-30). Yuggera, Noonuccal, and Yugumbir cultural custodian Shannon Ruska clarifies that

"Moodagurra — the rainbow serpent — she's the one that will bring the floods. She decides when the big rains come" (Ruska 2016). In a different Dreaming narrative by Wakka Wakka and Turrbal Elder Joe Kirk, Duelgum (the freshwater eel) creates the river to journey to Moreton Bay to lay her eggs in the seagrass (Kirk 2014).

Shannon Ruska (2021) further elaborates the Dreaming stories of Maiwar told to him by his Elders. In Birana — a flat treeless space without mountains, hills, wetlands, and rivers — two ancestors, Biami and Birali, create the land, goannas, dolphins, eagles, and kangaroos. The brothers, Yalgara (the goanna) and Gowanda (the dolphin), have a disagreement and declare war on one another. Yalgara rounds up the terrestrial animals while Gowanda gathers the salt water creatures. Mibin (the eagle) joins the struggle with an ancient spear from the south. On Mibin's arrival, Yalgara leaps up, seizes the weapon, and lances Gowanda who then blows the spear out of his body. Gowanda's blood pours forward, scorching the land, and congealing into the red rocks at Moreton Bay. Now an old man, Gowanda settles near the river, becomes wise and grows a mane of white hair that transforms into the fin of the dolphin. For the Indigenous people of Southeast Queensland, women are responsible for waterways and, during dances, invoke the tracks of Moodagurra who gave rise to Maiwar. Manifesting as subterranean and aboveground waterways, the paths Moodagurra made during the Dreaming link one nation to another. Maiwar's Indigenous nations, moreover, recognize goannas, dolphins, and other creatures as totems connecting cultural groups from source to sea and delimiting custodial obligations. As the basis of ancestral law, each totem must be respected by neighboring tribes. Rather than a commodity that humans buy, sell and exploit, Maiwar Country is an ever present force commanding reciprocity (Ruska 2021, mins. 13:46-26:41).

As a material and spiritual omnipresence, Maiwar figures extensively in the writing of Samuel Wagan Watson, a poet of Irish, German, Dutch, and Indigenous (Munaldjali and Birri Gubba) descent. Born in Brisbane in 1972, Watson spent his childhood in the Sunshine Coast region of Southeast Queensland but later returned to Brisbane to pursue a literary career. In addition to publishing his work in print format, Watson has inscribed poetry in Brisbane's built environment such as the Eleanor Schonell Bridge, or Green Bridge, that traverses Maiwar near the suburb of St Lucia (Heiss and Minter 2008). His poetry collections include *Of Muse, Meandering and Midnight* (2000), *Smoke Encrypted Whispers* (2004), and *Love Poems and Death Threats* (2014), all of which interrogate Australian settlerism and promote Indigenous sovereignty. In the short documentary *Bound in Bitumen*, Watson reads "Last Exit to Brisbane," a poem about Boundary Street in south Brisbane. During the nineteenth century, the thoroughfare imposed a perimeter that Indigenous people were not allowed to cross at night and on Sundays:

> Boundary St
>
> that forged black scratch

a vein from Southbank to West End

with a tail swallowed by the chocolate river. (Watson 2005, secs. 10-14)

Watson's image of Boundary Street's "tail swallowed by the chocolate river" invokes the Creation Serpent, Moodagurra, whose sinuous movements defy Brisbane's colonial-era gridlike structure. Moreover, Watson's forthcoming short fiction collection, *New and Used Ghosts* (2023), celebrates Indigenous heritage through stories of the Brisbane environment including of Maiwar and the Dreaming Ancestors of the fluvial environment.

Engraved on the reinforcing crossbars of Eleanor Schonell Bridge, Watson's "Poetry on the Green Bridge" evinces an Indigenous hydropoetics of Maiwar shaped by the Dreamings of Brisbane-area Aboriginal cultures. Evoking Maiwar's power, presence, and poiesis, the poem comprises two short parts, "On the Transom of Ghosts" and "Dreaming River Triptych" (Watson 2014, 33). Inviting passersby to appreciate Maiwar flowing beneath them, the first part is "*an interactive poem for the commuter*" (Watson 2014, 33, l. 1, italics original). In the poem-imprint, the river is a songline or Dreaming track: "*On this transom, the river's dawning skin* … stand / here […] *and whisper upon night's canvas, whirlpool eyes, the* / *songlines of Kurilpa ghosts*" (Watson 2014, 33, ll. 2-3, 5-6, italics original). Meaning "place for water rats," the term *Kurilpa* is the Indigenous appellation for the land occupied by the suburbs of West End and South Brisbane. The poem's second part captures the perpetual transformation and renewal of Maiwar over immense stretches of time as Watson mediates the presence of Moodagurra through the figure of the serpent: "Never the same this river — archaic vein, snaking through / the land's dreaming cortex" (Watson 2014, 33, ll. 7-8). The river is eternal, timeless, beyond the normative linear construction of time as *chronos*, "the past, present and future — an / aquarelle triptych *cultured* on every tide" (Watson 2014, 33, ll. 10-11, emphasis added). Through the use of the rhetorical technique of anthimeria — where *culture* (noun) becomes *cultured* (adjective) and *culture* (verb) — Watson indicates how Wakka Wakka, Yagera, and Turrbal nations care for Maiwar and, in reciprocal return, have been *cultured* by the river's all-encompassing, ever-changing nature.

The historical context of "Finn" is the Queensland flooding of 2010-11 during which the banks of the river broke, resulting in the evacuation of Brisbane CBD, West End and Fortitude Valley along with the inundation of 20,000 homes (Watson 2014, 34-35). The poem tracks the poietic transformation of Maiwar from an object of inspiration to a source of terror through the use of fluvial signifiers such as *recession*, *recidivism*, *flotsam*, *excess*, and *wake*. In the narrative, "the river lurks in the shadows of our apocalyptic horizons […] No one knows the limits of excess it may break" (Watson 2014, 34, ll. 2, 4). Unlike the evocation of Maiwar in "Poetry on the Green Bridge," the river in "Finn" is a volatile, destructive, and bewitching entity:

> Naïve as we had been, this river is no longer a vent
>
> of childhood adventure.
>
> In a flash we have all relinquished association.
>
> It has been known as *Miramar* and *Brisbane* and Lord knows
>
> any other alias in these days of terror and suspicion.
>
> (Watson 2014, 31, ll. 15-19)

The crisis of flooding discloses society's broader estrangement from Maiwar, an urban ghost in the heart of Brisbane. Anglo-European toponyms reinscribe the historical "terror and suspicion" of settler culture towards Maiwar. Nonetheless, as also evident in "Poetry on the Green Bridge," Maiwar is a changeable presence with the capacity for metamorphosis: "This is not the same river as yesterday" (Watson 2014, 34, l. 24). The catastrophe asserts a fluvial ontology defying perceived terrestrial permanence in "a floating world" in which nothing is "as anchored as it seems" (Watson 2014, 34, l. 29). Rather than a static phenomenon, Maiwar is a dynamic being who embodies Moodagurra and kindred Dreaming Ancestors: "Tomorrow the tide will shed another serpentine identity" (Watson 2014, 34, l. 34). More than a celebration of Maiwar from an Indigenous standpoint, "Finn" narrativises the river's multidimensional agency.

At the same time, Watson's hydropoetic body of work foregrounds the industrialization of Maiwar. The satirical "Recipe for Metropolis Brisbane," for instance, decries the degradation of the river, as "1 utopian landscape with a blue river" is combined with conservative politics, bitumen, steel, concrete, and exhaust then stirred "until the blue river turns brown" (Watson 2008, 217, ll. 3, 15-16). Likewise, Maiwar's ecological decline features saliently in "On the River" as "deserted factories," "abandoned mechanical bits," "grey smoke billowing," "electric fences and weeds" engulf the riverbank, adding a dystopian backdrop to a story of nascent love between two writers (Watson 2000, 7, ll. 8, 9, 15, 16). The prose poem "Smoke Signals," additionally, opens with the speaker's memory of "construction cranes like herds of praying-mantis, high on the steamy Bjelke-Petersen plateau above a brown snake-coiled river" (Watson 2004, 147). The poem shifts from this littoral image to the narrator's memory of learning, as a child, to distinguish between the black smoke of Brisbane's working class, industrial neighborhoods and white smoke of affluent, residential suburbs. In this way, Watson's hydropoetics incorporates Maiwar Dreaming and elicits the river's poiesis while drawing attention to the despoliation of aquatic ecologies.

Marrambidya Bila and Girawu: Jeanine Leane's Murrumbidgee River Hydropoetics

Stretching 1,485 kilometers through New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory,

Marrambidya Bila (the Murrumbidgee River) is Australia's third longest river and a major tributary of Dhungalla (the Murray River) (Australian Government 2021). Marrambidya Bila flows west from Peppercorn Hill in the Australian Alps of New South Wales through the capital region of Canberra to the river's convergence with Dhungalla near the town of Boundary Bend, Victoria. Along the way, Marrambidya Bila crosses the traditional lands of several Aboriginal cultural groups including the Barapa Barapa, Muthi Muthi, Nari Nari, Ngarigo, Ngunawal, Wamba Wamba, and Wiradjuri nations. The mountainous eastern area from which Marrambidya Bila emerges belongs to the Ngunawal and Ngarigo whereas the westernmost reaches of the Lower Murrumbidgee fall within Muthi Muthi and Nari Nari Country. The Wiradjuri are the largest Indigenous nation of the river's plains and slopes. Denoting "three river people," the name *Wiradjuri* refers to the Marrambidya (Murrumbidgee River), Galari (the Lachlan River), and Wambuul (the Macquarie River), all of which traverse Wiradjuri Country (Saddler 2020, mins. 1:32-1:44). In the Wiradjuri language, Marrambidya Bila signifies "big boss, plenty big water" (Saddler 2020, secs. 11-15). Wiradjuri cultural custodian Mark Saddler (2020) emphasizes that, in his people's language, "*bila* is river. Any *bila* or *darrun* (creek) that runs through any Aboriginal nation is extremely important […] Marrambidya is one of our *murru* (walkways), and it's a special place we come back to constantly to reconnect to Country" (mins. 0:28-1:04). When rivers become sick, then humans, animals, plants, reptiles, and Country as a whole also turn ill.

In a traditional story narrated by Lucinda Firebrace (2012), the Creation Being connected to Marrambidya Bila is Girawu, the goanna wife who unleashed water from the mountains, forming an extensive hydrological system. During the Dreaming, there is no river. Animals die of thirst on the dry land. Only the goannas are healthy. Other creatures begin to wonder if the goannas have a clandestine water supply. Growing impatient with their husbands, the goanna wives decide to search for the water cache. They agree that the best way to discover the water is to stay overnight on the mountain, now known as Peppercorn Hill. Frightened of malevolent spirits, though, many women refuse to go but a brave woman named Girawu volunteers to venture into the wilderness and save the dying animals from thirst. On arriving at the mountain, Girawu sits down but awakens suddenly to a band of little men. The group's elder reassures Girawu that they will lead her to the sacred water. Reaching the source, she drinks to her fill then asks the elder how to assist the desperate animals. The elder instructs Girawu to bring her sister goannas to the mountain so she departs and soon returns with them all. The little men tell Girawu to thrust her yam-digging stick into the mountain and run away immediately. On heeding the directions, a water torrent gushes from the earth, pours down the valley to Dhungalla (the Murray River), and obliterates the goanna men's camps. Rejecting their selfish husbands, the goanna wives turn into teal ducks and glide into the swamp where they live today, caring for Marrambidya Bila — their lifeline, blood, and mother.

As a fluvial entity saturated with stories, Marrambidya Bila recurs throughout the work of Jeanine

Leane, a Wiradjuri poet, novelist, and researcher from south-west New South Wales. Leane was born in Wagga Wagga in 1961 and grew up in on a sheep farm outside Gundagai, a rural town situated beside the Murrumbidgee River. Made of iron and timber, the heritage-listed Prince Alfred Bridge spanning Marrambidya Bila in Gundagai appears frequently in her verse and prose to symbolise the intersection of settler and Indigenous cultures. Leane has published the poetry collections *Dark Secrets After Dreaming: AD 1887-1961* (2010) and *Walk Back Over* (2018) as well as the poetry anthology *Guwayu - For All Times: A Collection of First Nations Poems* (2020) and the short story collection *Purple Threads* (2010). For *The Disappearing*, a project by Red Room Poetry mapping poetry to place, she gained more familiarity with the Prince Alfred Bridge, Marrambidya Bila and the water systems of Gundagai Country (Leane 2019, mins. 7:39-8:31). The river is a palpable figure, as well, in *Purple Threads*, a "short story cycle," or collection of "independent yet interrelated short narratives" told from the perspective of Sunny, a Wiradjuri girl, and her sister, Star, growing up outside Gundagai (Kadmos 2014, 1-2). In the opening story, "Women and Dogs in a Working Man's Paradise," Sunny recollects Marrambidya Bila's devastating floods: "When the waters subsided, the carcasses of drowned stock hung high from the bridge poles and gum trees on the flat below" (Leane 2011, 3). Moreover, in the story "Lilies of the Field," during an exchange between Nan and her Anglo-Australian husband, Sunny's grandmother declares proudly, "I was born round here, on this country, bit farther back from the river 'tween two creeks, placed called Murrumburrah" (Leane 2011, 44). Nan's assertion demonstrates the intertwining of riverscapes, memory, and identity for Wiradjuri people.

More specifically, Leane's hydropoetics probes the dialectical nature of memory. The idea of river memory developed in her work encompasses Aboriginal people's memories of Marrambidya Bila over deep cultural time, from the Dreaming through the turmoil of the settler era through to the present. Yet the river is also memory incarnate — a remembering subject and "a deep archive" — with the capacity to hold Country, Wiradjuri people and all beings in memory (Leane 2022a, n.p., l. 39). Published as part of *The Disappearing* project, "Tracks Wind Back" opens, "Gundagai is the bend, the curve, / the turn in the Murrumbidgee River" (Leane 2022b, n.p., ll. 1-2). In Wiradjuri, the word *Gundagai* means "to cut with a hand-axe behind the knee," a reference to the town's position on a major curve of Marrambidya Bila visually reminiscent of a bent knee (Ardha 2019). Eternally transforming yet maternally constant, the river is "ebbing and flowing - the ancient mother / of Wiradjuri children" (Leane 2022, n.p., ll. 3-4). Invoking the suffering inflicted on Indigenous societies during the colonial period, "Tracks Wind Back" is addressed to Marrambidya Bila as a listening presence. Altering river ecologies with axes and muskets, settlers were nevertheless "awestruck by your beauty, / your promise" (Leane 2022, n.p., ll. 5-6). In sharp contrast to the colonial instrumentalization of the river as a resource, Marrambidya Bila remains, for Wiradjuri people, a memory-keeper who "remembers all her children, / holds all our stories - keeps our Dreaming" (Leane 2022, n.p., ll. 23-4).

The title of Leane's second poetry collection, *Walk Back Over* (2018), alludes to Gundagai's Prince Alfred Bridge, but also suggests the critical importance of interrogating the past through memory. In "Archive" (Leane 2018, 8), memory is a transcorporeal phenomenon pulsing through the bodies of people, land, trees, and rivers. Leane's most concertedly fluvial poem, however, is "Bridge Over the River Memory," appearing as "River Memory" in *Walk Back Over* (2018, 25). As similarly evident in "Tracks Wind Back," memory in the poem traverses human and the more-than-human domains. The river is both a *subject of memory* and a *remembering subject*. Multidimensional modes of memory mix together like currents as the poet recalls the force of Marrambidya Bila rising so high the river "swallowed / the bridge and the town" (Leane 2022a, n.p., ll. 47-8). The narrative's mnemonic focal point is the bridge, the "longest wooden bridge in the world" (Leane 2022a, l. 9), constructed of local trees such as river red gum, a species growing throughout Australia in floodplains and along the banks of watercourses. Like Marrambidya Bila, the trees afforded the raw materials of colonial expansion yet their histories have been elided:

> How many river gums were felled? What
>
> were their names before they were rearranged
>
> across the river — once their life blood.
>
> What was their history? (Leane 2022a, n.p., ll. 26-9)

For gum trees — as for Wiradjuri people — the river is "their life blood." Reasserting Indigenous memory, then, necessitates excavating fluvial and arboreal histories. The poem evokes the coursing of memory through place, people, trees, and rivers in an inter-mnemonic flow:

> The water under the bridge ripples over
>
> my memory now. The bend of the
>
> Murrumbidgee — a deep archive —
>
> flows steady and slow. (Leane 2022a, n.p., ll. 37-40)

As the Dreaming of Girawu, the goanna wife, also demonstrates, Marrambidya Bila is "a deep archive" of Wiradjuri memory. Accordingly, Leane's hydropoetics narrativizes river memory as a corporeal and interrelational means of thinking through Australian history.

Conclusion: Indigenous Hydropoetics and the Poiesis of Australian Rivers

The hydropoetic writing of Davis, Watson, and Leane incorporates Dreaming narratives and elicits river poiesis, in the form of poetry, while also confronting aquatic conservation urgencies in Australia. Taken as a whole, their work forwards an Indigenous hydropoetics immersed in Aboriginal creation narratives and emphasising the embodied relations between humans, rivers,

and all life. Their poetry evokes the poiesis — the dynamic emergence or bringing forth — of sacred rivers whose origins lie in the Dreaming while also presenting a medium for reverent listening to rivers. Although representing different Indigenous nations, the three poets indeed share a concern for rivers as deep cultural heritage. Yet, while Leane's hydropoetics centers, in particular, on the mediating role of memory — both hers and the river's — Watson's poetry calls attention to fragmented river ecologies in the urban landscape of Brisbane. For Davis, additionally, bodily relationality between humans, rivers, and plants constitutes a potent means of ecopolitical resistance through multispecies solidarity. Through the poietic transformation of language, Indigenous hydropoetic writing such as theirs energizes new imaginings of rivers and encourages human receptivity to their biocultural complexities. In an era of global river imperilment, hydropoetics as river poiesis calls attention to the vital importance of the sustainable hydrological values of Indigenous people in Australia and elsewhere.

Notes

1. Throughout this article, Country is capitalized to reflect the Indigenous Australian understanding of land as an animate presence.

2. In keeping with Aboriginal cultural conventions, Dreaming is capitalized here and elsewhere as a proper noun signifying living ancestral narratives.

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