

## Dividing up the Land: Mapping Mateer onto Williams

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*William Carlos Williams is often held up as a forbearer for American eco-poetics in his reshaping of the natural image towards establishing a poetic gaze that is resistant to anthropocentrism. Writing half a century later, the poetics of the transnational poet John Mateer also wrestles with the intersection of the human and the natural. This paper performs a reading of Mateer through the lens of Williams to demonstrate the legacy of Williams, across cultures, in constructions of the natural in poetry. A comparative approach is necessary in a time of globalization and similarly this is not a simple prosodic exercise for, as it will be shown, the post-modern language turn has meant that just challenging the pathetic fallacy, as Williams does, is no longer sufficient to embed a poem with respect for the alterity of the natural world. This paper proposes the theory of Jean-Luc Nancy as a way of accessing the difference between the poets and of driving ecocritical thinking forward.*

The emergence of ecocriticism in anglophone literary studies over the past two decades has led to a renewed interest, or re-envisioning, of several key modernist poets, including William Carlos Williams. Williams's role as the so-called father of objectivism, his interest in poetic form facilitating engagement with the world, and his displacement of the poem's centre from human experience onto the external world are all cited as reasons to place him as a progenitor of eco-poetics in the US and more broadly. Yet there are perceivable differences between the poetics of William's Anglophone modernism and what is now considered eco-poetics. Of particular interest is the way in which Williams's 'Americanness' is a limitation when operating from within an ecological framework in which the impact of transnationalism is starting to make greater and greater waves. This paper briefly considers the poetics of some of William Carlos Williams' lesser known mid-career works, before moving on to highlight the current features of eco-poetics as evident in the work of transnational peripatetic poet John Mateer. Mateer occupies a distinct place in Australian and world letters although his work, especially his early Western Australian poetry, has not received particular critical attention. Mateer's status as a perpetual migrant, and the way this filters through into his poetry, offers a unique lens through which to assess contemporary eco-poetics-both the lineage of Anglophone modernism and which theoretical models might best suit a transnational eco-poetics.<sup>1</sup> This is especially necessary when considering the ongoing attempts to build up a theoretical base for

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of transnationalism and eco-poetry see the work of Ursula K. Heise, for example 'Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies', *American Literary History*, vol. 20, nos.1-2, 2008, pp. 381-404; U. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008.

ecopoetry and ecocriticism. Use of phenomenological theorists, especially Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, is increasingly prevalent in ecopoetics. Yet, as the work of Ursula Heise demonstrates, a reliance on phenomenological theory is perhaps not suited to an ecopoetry seeking to move beyond national boundaries and to embrace wider ideas of what constitutes an environment.<sup>2</sup>

In his first Australian collection, *Burning Swans*, written just after moving to Perth from South Africa, John Mateer writes:

'Two Years Ago'

When the locust plague  
was supposed to infiltrate  
the city we found a wing  
on our driveway's black.  
The interior of the land  
had become a skin 'evidenced'  
by the oily crystal of a dead  
insect. It mightn't  
have been that. We  
drove down south, through  
fields bristling with dark  
life. They bopped on the window,  
screeched against wipers. I  
was stopped by two people  
who said, "The creatures'll  
eat anything if it's green."  
There didn't seem to be  
any green, just bleak  
earth-shades breaking  
into other light.<sup>3</sup>

Reading this poem for the first time I was struck by a sense of familiarity, like I was hearing a voice I knew well coming in and out of reception. I couldn't remember whose, until I was flipping through *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams* and came across the following poem from Williams's collection *Sour Grapes*:

'Blueflags'

I stopped the car  
to let the children down  
where the streets end  
in the sun  
at the marsh edge

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<sup>2</sup> Heise, *Sense of Place*, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> J. Mateer, *The West: Australian Poems 1989-2009*, Fremantle, Fremantle Press, 2010, p. 19.

and the reeds begin  
 and there are small houses  
 facing the reeds  
 and the blue mist  
 in the distance  
 with grapevine trellises  
 with grape clusters  
 small as strawberries  
 on the vines  
 and ditches  
 running springwater  
 that continue the gutters  
 with willows over them.  
 The reeds begin  
 like water at a shore  
 their pointed petals waving  
 dark green and light.  
 But blueflags are blossoming  
 in the reeds  
 which the children pluck  
 chattering in the reeds  
 high over their heads  
 which they part  
 with bare arms to appear  
 with fists of flowers  
 till in the air  
 there comes the smell  
 of calamus,  
 from wet, gummy stalks.<sup>4</sup>

In his introduction to Williams's selected works Robert Pinsky asserts that 'Williams is perhaps the first poet to describe the landscape as it looks not as someone walks through it, or sees it from a building, but as it appears from a car'.<sup>5</sup> Despite the obvious differences between the two poems, it is this particular vehicular sense of momentum that I think was that initial instance of connective tissue for me between Mateer and Williams. Furthermore Pinsky, and many others, refer to Williams's way of seeing as an "alertness", a quality which also is to be found in Mateer.

In 'Blueflags' this alertness is primarily a function of the immediacy of the action in the poem: the 'presentness'. David Frail writes that Williams aims 'to free his readers' imaginations so that they [can] experience the world with sensual

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<sup>4</sup> W.C. Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Volume I 1909-1939*, New York, New Directions Publishing, 1991 p. 168.

<sup>5</sup> R. Pinsky (ed.), *William Carlos Williams: Selected Poems*, Washington, Literary Classics United States Inc., 2004, p. xxiv.

immediacy'.<sup>6</sup> From the first line of 'Blue Flags'—'I stopped the car'—the reader is plunged into events unfolding in real time and present tense; each line reveals the speaker's perceptions as they are being processed, with lines breaking as we move from one image to the next. This perception is panoramic: even though the car has stopped the landscape described by the speaker seems to fit closest with the experience of driving past a field and a lake. Each line is a precise unit of information contributing to this panorama. This linear unpacking makes each image-unit appear to be roughly weighted equally and therefore of approximate equal value in the poem. This is one common way that Williams communicates his reverence for the seemingly everyday and the natural, by attending to all of its minutiae. In *Spring and All* Williams writes that 'there is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world'.<sup>7</sup> 'Blue Flags' enacts, and forces the reader to engage in, an alertness that tries to break this barrier.<sup>8</sup>

Mateer shares with Williams this alertness and a desire for specificity. How these factors are embodied in Mateer's 'Two Years Ago' is not immediately obvious. Mateer differs from Williams in that he locates us in the past tense, immediately in the province of memory, through the title and through the first line, '[w]hen the locust plague'. The scene described by Mateer's speaker unpacks in a similar way to 'Blue Flags', but there is a subtle tension between the poem's alertness and specificity and the location of the poem within a particular speaker's past. While specific, memory cannot offer us the same immediacy as the present tense action of 'Blue Flags'. We are aware that what we are occupying is a version, while Williams offers us action as it *is*. There are further small hints throughout 'Two Years Ago' of questions as to whether a poem, which on some level is always a version, can ever engage in the immediacy Williams strives for. Mateer deploys the plain language of Williams, but at points his plainness is more obfuscating than illuminating. His speaker is doubtful of his own recollections and the power of his observatory capabilities, saying '[i]t mightn't/have been that' and later 'there didn't seem to be any green'. At these moments enjambment is used to embody the uncertainty of the speaker's recollections and, perhaps more importantly, the uncertainty of the relationship between the speaker and the landscape. The attention to the minutiae of the natural world demonstrated in the idea that a poem might centre on something as small as a locust wing, harks back to Williams. Similarly, Mateer wants to value and embody landscape as Williams does; however, he is aware (as is the poem) of a gap between human/land, poetry/experience.

Randall Jarrell says of Williams that he leads his reader to be 'full of an innocent lyric pleasure in just being out in the open, in feeling the wind tickling his skin', whereas the alienation of Mateer's speaker from his landscape speaks to an unease, a lack of innocence.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Frail posits that Williams's poetics are 'profoundly apolitical, even asocial'.<sup>10</sup> Whether or not this assertion is wholly true, there is a

<sup>6</sup> D. Frail, *The Early Politics and Poetics of William Carlos Williams*, Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1987, p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, p. 175.

<sup>8</sup> Pinsky, *William Carlos Williams: Selected Poems*, p. 60.

<sup>9</sup> R. Jarrell, *No Other Book: Selected Essays*, New York, HarperCollins, 2000, p. 78.

<sup>10</sup> Frail, *The Early Politics and Poetics of William Carlos Williams*, p. 92.

difference in how Mateer and Williams approach the land that is both social and political.

In his introduction to *Ecopoetry: A Critical Anthology*, J.S. Bryson states that:

... by the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth, what was considered an overly romantic nature poetry—steeped in pathetic fallacy—had lost credibility, largely as a result of nineteenth-century science and the drastic changes in the way Westerners envisioned themselves and the world around them.<sup>11</sup>

Williams, he asserts, was among the modernists who reacted against this romanticism, constructing a new nature poetry in keeping with the epistemological shift.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Mark Long proposes that Williams offers a way to negotiate the representation shift between Romanticism, modernism and post-modernism.<sup>13</sup> Nature, as we have seen in 'Blue Flags', no longer serves as an object upon which human experience might be transposed. Rather, through specificity and alertness, Williams focusses us upon the thingness of the natural object in its own right. This can be seen clearly in Williams's short poem 'Approach of Winter':

The half-stripped trees  
struck by wind together,  
bending all,  
the leaves flutter drily  
and refuse to let go  
or driven like hail  
stream bitterly out to one side  
and fall  
where the salvias, hard carmine,-  
like no leaf there ever was-  
edge the bare garden.<sup>14</sup>

There is ostensibly no human presence in this poem, it is purely imagistic. The key characteristics of 'Blue Flags' appear again here: lines as image units, specific and plain language, present-tense and immediacy. The combination of these creates what Williams would call a word-machine, where the poem on the page muscularly enacts the object it represents, 'a physical more than a literary character'.<sup>15</sup> This poem certainly could not be accused of pathetic fallacy, but it is, in its own way, fallible.

As Bryson demonstrates, Williams is often cited as a key antecedent in developing an American ecopoetics. This is primarily a function of his focus on external reality which, as in the two poems we have considered, leads away from a

<sup>11</sup> J.S. Bryson, *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, Salt Lake City, The University of Utah Press, 2002, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Bryson, *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>13</sup> M. Long, 'William Carlos Williams, Ecocriticism and Contemporary American Poetry', in JS Bryson (ed.), *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, Salt Lake City, The University of Utah Press, 2002, p. 59.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, *The Collected Poems*, p. 151.

<sup>15</sup> W.C. Williams, *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams*, New York, New Directions, 1969, p. 256.

poetics of the 'I'. This move towards an outward and neutral gaze is in many ways a challenge to anthropocentrism. Lawrence Buell suggests Williams propels American poetry 'toward the goal of a poetics that would relinquish the superintending human consciousness. He almost seems to have realised his demand for an art that is 'not 'realism' but reality itself'.<sup>16</sup> This direction of the gaze outside the human is a necessary first step towards ecocentredness. Williams in his sparsity and his focus on the image is allowing the external world to be the centre of the poem, if not the entire poem. This meets several of the preconditions various ecocritics have established for what should, or could be, considered an environmental or ecopoetic text. For instance, it clearly fulfills the first of Buell's four key principles, namely that '[t]he nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history'.<sup>17</sup> An argument could also be constructed that the seasonality in 'Approach of Winter' meets the second principle, that of '[s]ome sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given'.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, of Terry Giffords's six qualities of a post-pastoral nature poetry, Williams would meet the first two: of an awe demonstrated in an acute awareness of nature, and a recognition of the essential creative and destructive cycles of the natural world.<sup>19</sup>

Although Williams acknowledges a barrier between experience and the representation of that experience in language, there is not recognition in this poem, or in 'Blue Flags', of the role human observation plays in constructing the natural world. Many of Buell and Giffords's other features also rely on an understanding of the text as bound to a particular, flawed and limited human consciousness. For Buell this is a moral necessity, with his other two features being that '[t]he human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest' and that '[h]uman accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation'.<sup>20</sup> Giffords's remaining criteria also circle a moral compass but are embedded in understandings of society, proposing that post-pastoral nature poetry requires:

1. Inner human nature to be understood in relation to the nature that is outside the human.<sup>21</sup>
2. '[A]n awareness of both nature as culture and culture as nature'.<sup>22</sup>
3. '[T]hat with consciousness comes conscience', where our ability to perceive the destruction of nature offers us the option to take responsibility for its survival.<sup>23</sup>
4. '[T]hat the exploitation of the planet is of the same mindset as the exploitation of women and minorities'.<sup>24</sup>

Williams is a deeply humanistic writer, motivated by a desire to help people in both his practice as a doctor and in his poetry. He is capable of writing out of deep

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<sup>16</sup> L. Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, Boston, Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 164.

<sup>17</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> T. Giffords, *Pastoral*, London, Routledge, 1999, pp. 150-153.

<sup>20</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Giffords, *Pastoral*, p. 157.

<sup>22</sup> Giffords, *Pastoral*, p. 163.

<sup>23</sup> Giffords, *Pastoral*, p. 163.

<sup>24</sup> Giffords, *Pastoral*, p. 165.

empathy with the other humans he sees and encounters in his poems, as in his famous poem 'To a Poor Old Woman'.<sup>25</sup> What comes across clearest in Paul Mariani's seminal biography of Williams, is Williams's motivation to connect poetry to his society, to arouse empathy but also to reflect on and contribute to American social consciousness.<sup>26</sup> What differentiates this slightly from the moral orientation sought by Buell and Giffords is that the compassionate perspective of Williams does not link back to the natural world. Instead, the interaction between the speaker and the natural in 'Blue Flags' is presented as neutral, and in 'Approach of Winter' it is assumed that it is possible to present an unbiased, objective, exact linguistic representation of nature. Williams's precision and plain language give us the impression that what is being imparted is true and there is no doubt over which words are the right words to convey this truth. As Buell states, 'He cannot give up prosodic formalism. He cannot give up the old tradition of the discrete orderly holistic image—as if the natural world were an infinite series of internally unified self-contained objects'.<sup>27</sup> In this Buell quote we see clearly how Williams keeps the natural world and the human world separate and without a dynamism that could allow for interaction and change.

Although Mateer is quite close to Williams in poetics, he operates from a different, later, epistemological position. One way to start theorizing this difference is provided by two separate ecocritics drawing from phenomenological origins. Kate Rigby uses Heidegger extensively in her essay 'Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis' and more broadly in her volume *Topographies of the Sacred*. The key features of the ecopoiesis she uncovers relate to the idea of a 'negative' ecopoetics as one that draws attention to itself as text. She states that poetry saves the earth by drawing attention to its textual qualities through 'disclosing the nonequation of word and thing, poem and place' which can include explicit disavowals of sayability but also 'the formal qualities manifested by all texts, qualities that declare them to be artifacts, carefully crafted works of poetic techne rather than spontaneous self-disclosure of phusis'.<sup>28</sup> For Rigby this ecopoiesis relates to Heidegger's concept of dwelling, where through ecopoiesis poetry can act to restore the reader to the 'fourfold' natural world, making them a part of it, not apart from it. Similarly, stemming from Merleau-Ponty, Leonard Scigaj's concept of poetry of 'référence' proposes a three step process of

- (1) reaching a self-reflexive acknowledgement of the limits of language',
- (2) referring one's perceptions beyond the printed page to nature, to the referential origin of all language', and
- (3) In most cases achieving an atonement or at-one-ment with nature.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> P. Mariani, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked*, New York, McGraw-Hill Book Company.

<sup>26</sup> Mariani, *William Carlos Williams*.

<sup>27</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p. 164.

<sup>28</sup> K. Rigby, 'Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis', *New Literary History*, vol. 35, no. 3, p. 437.

<sup>29</sup> L. Scigaj, *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets*, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1999, p. 38.

Williams is an origin point for the development of the type of ecopoesis desired by Rigby and to a lesser extent that of Scigaj. His stated desire to remove the conscious barrier between reader and the world is a call for dwelling or 'at-one-ment'. His focus on transmitting sensory experiences to his readers is likewise a move to embed human consciousness in bodily experience of the world. Further, there are perhaps some nascent beginnings of recognition of the limits of language. In 'Winter' Williams describes the salvias as 'like no leaf there ever was'; the negation here ends the poem on a brief note, not necessarily of uncertainty, but of unsayability. A recognition of what exists outside perception and therefore simultaneously what exists outside language. Yet, as noted by Buell, the precise completeness of Williams's imagery implies for the most part a belief in a similar completeness of language. The idea of the 'word machine' does allow the external world to enter the poem but it does not acknowledge the limitations of the poem in presenting the external world, nor does it make this limitation a function of the human consciousness composing the poem. The key paradox which comparing Mateer and Williams highlights is that, through removing the human from his poetry, Williams in some ways reinforces anthropocentrism. This is not to say that an 'I' is necessary for ecopoesis, but rather that the combination of Williams's objective and absent speaker with his prosodic formalism does not allow for the reflexivity regarding language which Scigaj and Rigby call for.

It is apparent that these features are present throughout Mateer's work. As discussed, in 'Two Years Ago' Mateer makes us aware of an inability to replicate exactly the speaker's originating experience and of the gap between speaker and landscape. The difference between this approach and Williams's approach is made clearer in examining another Mateer poem, this time from the mid 1990s, 'Dusk':

The tree had exploded, shattered  
showering this path in brittle  
fragments, bonewhite.

I wasn't sure where the path went.

There was the non-existent tree  
bloodshot in the World's Eye;  
a space you couldn't cross.

I went around to where I am to sleep  
where kangaroos will be seen like  
one clapping hand and above the clouds  
an aeroplane drags out a thundery din.

Near, in a lone she-oak: *prana*.

Around us, the virgin wandoo  
like cold white-skinned apparitions gathering  
for Law are receding

deeper, closer than sight.<sup>30</sup>

There is a much deeper sense of the speaker's uncertainty here than in 'Two Years Ago' and than in Williams's poems, which offer a way of developing knowledge of the world, a world of certainty and accessibility.

In the Mateer poem uncertainty operates on both a linguistic and a narrative level. When the speaker says 'I wasn't sure where the path went', it questions our ability to be sure of exactly where we are in the world, and offers up a world with 'a space you couldn't cross', directly indicating a separation, and subsequent limitation, of man and the natural world. In the ending of the poem Mateer draws our attention to the limits of human perception with the statement 'closer than sight'. This statement is akin to Williams's 'no leaf there ever was' in its use of paradox: just as the leaf cannot exist except in its negation, neither can what is 'closer than sight' be pinpointed or explained in exactness. It is important to note that in the Mateer poem this uncertainty is embodied in a human speaker through his use of 'I': the uncertainty then becomes a function of the human moving through the world—a bodily uncertainty.

What Mateer does further in 'Dust' that Williams does not, is drawing our attention to the gap between language and experience. In using the word 'prana' and the Nyuungar tree name 'wandoo', Mateer intermingles dictions, making us aware of the multiplicity of language, that there is no singular correct word for any one thing. By combining languages a space opens up which holds the idea of the tree 'she-oak'/'prana' without seeking to directly pin it down. The speaker—and the poet—construct the natural in the poem through the selection of particular words, a selection which inevitably omits others. This heteroglossia marks the poem as artefactual, whereas the simple diction of Williams is seemingly natural.<sup>31</sup>

Importantly, this uncertainty contributes to a true ambivalence about the interaction of the human and the other-than-human and about the role of the poet in creating the poetic artefact. I was reminded of John Kinsella's remarks in *Contrary Rhetoric* looking at the Australian anti-pastoral, that despite the inherent violence of the anti-pastoral, every act of creation is by definition positive.<sup>32</sup> There is violence in both these Mateer poems – the locust plague and bodies, the shattered trees – but there is also beauty literally breaking through in the end of 'Two Years Ago': 'earth shades breaking/into other light' and in the disorienting central image in 'Dusk' of '[k]angaroos...like/one clapping hand'. This is a recognition of the creative and destructive cycles sought by Gifford: the poem finds its centre in the void between these poles, whereas in Williams the objective gaze offers us reverence or neutrality. Importantly – at the risk of being repetitive – the objective gaze in Williams's is only turned outwards. Alternately, Mateer's gaze finds violence and ambivalence through looking simultaneously inward and outward, looking for and with the intersection of human-being and Being.

We are led in 'Dusk' from an opening stanza reminiscent of purely imagistic Williams, through the destabilization of the speaker's relationship to their

<sup>30</sup> Mateer, *The West: Australian Poems 1989-2009*, p. 72.

<sup>31</sup> As Williams's poetics is so varied, there are many instances of him intermingling dictions and using Spanish which are not covered by the examples in this essay. For a full overview of Williams's poetic career see Paul Mariani's *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked*.

<sup>32</sup> J. Kinsella, *Contrary Rhetoric*, Fremantle, Fremantle Press, 2010, p. 132.

surroundings, to end upon the 'wandoo' being described as 'cold white-skinned apparitions gathering/for Law are receding/deeper, closer than sight'. This ending is social and political, and it presents the social and political as inextricable from the consideration of landscape, a key factor in Gifford's post-pastoral nature poetry which is absent in Williams. Martin Harrison, in the preface to Mateer's collected works, asserts that 'what underlies his poetry is a special sense of history, a particularly honest awareness of how this historical dimension of experience impinges on-'occurs'- in the present: literally in the present moment of awareness'.<sup>33</sup> This describes the combination of Mateer's poetics and epistemology well, and this is embodied in the ending of 'Dusk', where the trees are occupied by the white colonial settlers and this occupation is also wrought in language as the trees are simultaneously 'wandoo' and 'Law'.

Part of the issue and necessity of comparing Williams and Mateer is the broader critical conversation surrounding each writer. Williams has often been framed from the perspective of 'localism', which dominated US literary criticism in the 1980s and 1990s and which continues to exert a prevailing influence over ecocriticism.<sup>34</sup> It is important to note that in recent years this has altered and Williams's representation has shifted to be an alternate figure to the other much cited antecedents of American ecopoetry—Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder and Robinson Jeffers. The centrality of this 'triumvirate of white men', Lynn Keller argues, 'suggests that poetry readers continue to romanticise a notion of nature or wilderness as being opposed to urban and suburban living' and also indicates a 'concurrence with their belief that bringing language close to nature means using a simple accessible vocabulary to produce accurate, accessible, largely unadorned representations of sensory, and particularly visible, phenomena'.<sup>35</sup> As during his lifetime, Williams occupies an idiosyncratic position, sometimes aligned with these more traditional characteristics of ecopoetry and more recently as a progenitor of new movements in ecopoetry towards the experimental. These movements position experimentation as essential to consideration of the multiple and complex ways humans and environment interact, as well as allowing for a deeper critique of anthropocentrism through questioning the role of the lyric 'I' in the construction of the world.<sup>36</sup> Critics that highlight Williams's role in opening out ecopoetry to experimentation cite his formal inventiveness<sup>37</sup> and his emphasis – in poems such as 'Between Walls' and 'By the Way to the Contagious Hospital' – of merging the natural with the urban, moving beyond the idea of

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<sup>33</sup> M. Harrison, 'Introduction', in J. Mateer, *The West: Australian Poems 1989-2009*, Fremantle, Fremantle Press, 2010, p. 13.

<sup>34</sup> Heise, 'Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn', p. 384.

<sup>35</sup> L. Keller, 'Green Reading: Modern and Contemporary American Poetry and Environmental Criticism', in C. Nelson (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern and Contemporary American Poetry*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 608-610.

<sup>36</sup> For essential texts on this movements see J. Retallack 'What is Experimental Poetry and Why Do We Need it?', *Jacket*, 32, April 2007, <http://jacketmagazine.com/32/p-retallack.shtml>, (accessed 3<sup>rd</sup> February) and L. Keller, 'Green Reading' cited above.

<sup>37</sup> M. Long, 'William Carlos Williams, Ecocriticism and Contemporary American Poetry', in JS Bryson (ed.) *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, Salt Lake City, The University of Utah Press, 2002, p. 59.

environmental literature as 'nature' poetry.<sup>38</sup> This second point is particularly influential, with Mark Long proposing that:

Williams's exemplary efforts to see poetry as a distinctive form of cultural practice underscore how the ecological poet must not be limited to a subject matter such as the environment or to the ideological shape of a belief such as saving the environment.<sup>39</sup>

'Blueflags', with its images of cars, streets and houses, firmly locates the natural within the urban and this is definitely part of the connective tissue binding Mateer's poetics to Williams. For both poets the natural world is bound to the social world, although, as we have seen, this is perhaps more politicised in Mateer's work.

These recent trends in experimental ecopoetics and its ecocritical consideration have involved a re-envisioning of the role of the lyric in keeping with the broad reconsideration of the lyric in post-modern poetics.<sup>40</sup> Mateer and Williams share what could be broadly termed an investment in the lyric and it is in the particularities of their individual lyrics that the greatest difference between their poetics is revealed. Williams was rigorous in his reinvention of his poetics, defying classification into a particular school or group. Yet the poetry considered here would seem to best fit in with the idea of the modern lyric as described by T.S. Eliot as 'the poet speaking to himself' with brevity.<sup>41</sup> While Williams directs the gaze outwards, his intent is not one of overcoming anthropocentrism; instead, as Williams states, his poetry was shaped by 'whatever character my environment has presented'.<sup>42</sup> In the poems selected from *Sour Grapes*, the interaction of the environment and the poetry exists to better access the poet's inner life, as in Eliot's understanding of the lyric.<sup>43</sup> Of *Sour Grapes* Williams writes:

[w]hen the mood possessed me, I wrote. Whether it was a tree or a woman or a bird, the mood had to be translated into form...To me, at that time, a poem was an image, the picture was the important thing. As far as I could, with the material I had, I was lyrical, but I was determined to use the material I knew and much of it did not lend itself to lyricism.<sup>44</sup>

This quote illustrates the dual role Williams plays in both shaping ecopoetry and in progressing the lyric. His is a distinctly personal lyric shaped by 'mood'; however, unlike traditional nature poetry or the Romantic sublime, the images he uses

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<sup>38</sup> J. Skinner, 'Thoughts on Things: Poetics of the Third Landscape', in B Iljima (ed), *((eco(lang)(uage(reader)))*, New York City, Yo-Yo Labs & Nightboat Books, 2010, pp. 11-47.

<sup>39</sup> Long, 'Williams Carlos Williams', p. 67.

<sup>40</sup> For a thorough overview of the lyric see 'Lyric' in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012.

<sup>41</sup> T.S. Eliot 'The Three Voices of Poetry', *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1954, pp. 38-43.

<sup>42</sup> W.C. Williams ctd in Mariani, *William Carlos Williams*, p.124.

<sup>43</sup> Mariani, *William Carlos Williams*, p. 124.

<sup>44</sup> W.C. Williams ctd in Mariani, *William Carlos Williams*, p. 184.

in the construction of his lyric are taken from his urban surroundings with attention paid to the actual, not the idealised.

As noted, the unity of Williams's images speaks to a unity of self not present in Mateer. Mateer's lyric self is a fractured one: in 'Two Years Ago' there are two speakers and in 'Dusk' the perspective of the self is fractured and uncertain. In Lynn Keller's work on the contemporary ecopoet Juliana Spahr, she highlights the idea of the post-modern lyric as inheriting the traditional lyric's straining against impossibility. Except, in the post-modern lyric, the impossibility is formed by trying to establish a self, or trying to contain both the self and the self's socio-political identity. It is this difference in lyric perspective which I have highlighted that potentially separates Mateer from Williams and which can be theoretically embodied within the work of Jean-Luc Nancy.

The final lines of 'Dusk' also lead us to look beyond Rigby's idea of a Heideggerian inspired ecopoetics of 'dwelling' towards consideration of theories that better hold the political context of Mateer's work. Rigby herself acknowledges the anthropocentric limitations of applying Heidegger in ecocriticism, particularly in how Heidegger does not question the role of the mortal as that which is capable of calling things into being.<sup>45</sup> I would add that Heidegger's separation of the work from the artist effects a similar paradox to that identified in Williams: 'who the author is remains unimportant here, as with every other masterful poem. The mastery consists precisely in this, that the poem can deny the poet's person and name'.<sup>46</sup> Seeking a work where the perspective is removed from the artist and relocated to the external world is an ecocentric goal but I do not think this is what is achieved in Williams, nor what was sought by Heidegger.

Here I think the work of Jean-Luc Nancy in *Being Singular Plural* provides a path to understand the reframing of the lyric and to viewing Mateer with a wider lens and allowing us to further differentiate him from Williams.<sup>47</sup> In *Being Singular Plural*, Nancy sets out to reverse the basic Heideggerian order of ontological exposition where 'Dasein' (being-there or being-here) precedes 'Mitsein' (being-with), such that 'Mitsein' is repositioned as central. The ontological positioning in this essay leads to Nancy's central concept, a reconception of 'Being-with' that sees the individual being co-determined and co-determinative of the collective, which includes the human and the other-than-human in a knot of co-existence, where '[t]he plurality of beings is at the foundation [fondment] of Being'.<sup>48</sup>

In Williams's 'Blueflags' I noted the sequential action and completeness of each individual image, resulting in a poem where the human is held separate from the natural. The concept of linear time has been argued as being one of the foundations for the separation of nature and culture, with the idea of 'Being-with' as a way of avoiding

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<sup>45</sup> Rigby, 'Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis', p. 433.

<sup>46</sup> M. Heidegger, 'Language', *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter, New York, Harper and Row, 1975, p. 195.

<sup>47</sup> J.L. Nancy, 'Of Being Singular Plural', *Being Singular Plural*, trans. R. Richardson and A. O'Byrne, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000, pp. 1-100.

<sup>48</sup> Nancy, 'Of Being Singular Plural', p. 12.

this concept of time.<sup>49</sup> How Mateer's 'Dusk' reveals 'Being-with' is through a blurring of spatiality: although complete, the images and actions exist in the same space-time. More importantly, the human and the other-than-human are shown to occupy the same spaces, dependent on, but not eclipsing, one another. In the beginning, the tree is shattered over 'this path', so the speaker literally walks through the tree and later, 'where I am to sleep' is simultaneously 'where kangaroos will be seen'. The final image of the poem – of the trees 'like cold white-skinned apparitions gathering.../receding/deeper, closer than sight' – sets up parallels of seeming opposites gathering/receding/deeper/closer. These opposites do not cancel each other out but expand together outwards and inwards in a way that is suggestive of Nancy's idea of 'with':

"With" is the sharing of time-space; it is the at-the-same-time-in-the-same-place as itself, in itself, shattered. It is the instant scaling back of the principle of identity: Being is at the same time in the same place only on the condition of the spacing of an indefinite plurality of singularities.<sup>50</sup>

Revisiting Martin Harrison's comment of how the 'historical dimension of experience impinges on – "occurs" – in the present: literally in the present moment of awareness', it becomes apparent that Mateer shares some ontological features similar to 'with'. This occurs because of how Mateer has constructed space-time in the poem, and how, unlike Williams, the human speaker is present and directly implicated in the 'with' as a body perceiving and moving among other bodies. Mateer's political consciousness becomes part of the human of the 'Being-with'. Stemming from the work of Raymond Williams in *The City and the Country*, in Giffords, Buell and other contemporary theorists such as Joshua Corey, there is a strong desire to make the social or cultural inextricable from the natural. Many propose that the idea of nature should be repositioned so that nature is read only as a social construct, therefore seeing a separation of environment from human as part of a praxis which inevitably results in destruction.<sup>51</sup> What Nancy offers is an epistemology which can hold the socio-cultural, political and natural in simultaneity.

Potentially Nancy's greatest contribution to our understanding of Mateer and Williams rests in his repeated and urgent challenges to ideas of sovereignty, through his spoken disavowal of the myth of national boundaries and the underlying core principle that a human being, human body, only gains meaning through blurring, blending and binding its boundaries with others. This is essentially a non-anthropocentric perspective, well-fitted to developing thought on ecopoetics. Buell perceives challenging anthropocentrism to be the greatest hurdle to developing what

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<sup>49</sup> M. Bastian, 'Inventing Nature: Re-Writing Time and Agency in a More-than-Human World', *Australian Humanities Review*, vol. 47, 2009, p. 99.

<sup>50</sup> Nancy, 'Of Being Singular Plural', p. 35.

<sup>51</sup> J. Corey, 'A Long Foreground: Exploring the Postmodern Pastoral', *The Arcadia Project*, [web resource], July 2012, <http://arcadiaproject.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/A-Long-Foreground.pdf>, (accessed 5 June 2015), p. 28.

he terms an environmental perspective.<sup>52</sup> Nancy, while primarily a political philosopher, is direct in his rethinking of anthropocentrism:

We would not be “humans” if there were not “dogs” and “stones.” A stone is the exteriority of singularity in what would have to be called its mineral or mechanical actuality [*litteralite*]. But I would no longer be a “human” if I did not have this exteriority “in me,” in the form of quasi-minerality of bone: I would no longer be a human if I *were* not a body, a spacing of all other bodies and a spacing of “me” in “me.” A singularity is always a body, and all bodies are singularities (the bodies, their states, their movements, their transformations).<sup>53</sup>

Mateer displays a similar ontological orientation, revealed in his ‘spaces that can’t be crossed’ and his layering of composite images of the other-than-human and human. More importantly, in Nancy this breakdown of the idea of sovereign body is tied directly to a breakdown of the sovereign nation state.<sup>54</sup> It is becoming a key tenet of ecocriticism that the concerns of ecological destruction expand beyond the arbitrary cartographic boundaries of countries. Further, that as we come to understand environmental issues as inextricable from social inequality, country boundaries, while increasingly porous, reinforce this inequality. This is what leads Ursula Heise<sup>55</sup> and Buell<sup>56</sup> to call for a transnationalism in ecocriticism.

There are further points of difference between Williams and Mateer which help us understand the concerns raised by Nancy and how they fit within the broader fields of ecopoetry and ecocriticism. Key to this is how Williams represents a particular type of American democratic idealism and localism, while Mateer is often labelled as transnational, although to some he fits into a lineage of Australian poetics which Harrison sees defined by a contested and anxious relationship to land.<sup>57</sup>

Williams, writing in 1934, was dedicated to the need for settler Americans to develop a specific and local poetics. Of the need for this new frame of reference he writes:

Americans have never recognized themselves. How can they? It is impossible until someone invents original terms. As long as we are content to be called by someone else’s terms, we are incapable of being anything other than our own dupes.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> Nancy, ‘Of Being Singular Plural’, p. 18.

<sup>54</sup> Nancy, ‘Of Being Singular Plural’, p. 36.

<sup>55</sup> U.K. Heise, ‘Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies’, *American Literary History*, vol. 20, no. 1/2, 2008, pp. 381. 404.

<sup>56</sup> L. Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, New York, Wiley Blackwell, 2005.

<sup>57</sup> M. Harrison, ‘Self, Place, Newness’, *Meanjin*, vol. 60, no. 2, 2001, p. 23.

<sup>58</sup> W.C. Williams, *In the American Grain*, New York, New Directions, 1956, p. 226.

Even though he is writing about the lack of this specifically American poetics, there is the belief here that there is an identity to be claimed through language and that such an identity will be unifying and beneficial, that it will help found in some way a Nation state. Mateer, writing a second person essay in *Cordite* about his now infamous Yagan series, has this to say:

[h]e started remembering his ambition at the time: *To write a poetry that imagines the trauma of this place, to be a poet who could express mourning and the resistance of language in a landscape so populated with irony that it hardly seems connected to the earth.* He argued with himself, or, more accurately, with his twin: “It wasn’t naïve, it was a belief in the redemptive act of poesis.” “No, it was vanity, the desire to be a poet.” “It was a cultural and psychic necessity.” “No, you are deceiving yourself, because it was the playing out of your own issues.”<sup>59</sup>

Even writing critically, Mateer has multiple possible conflicting relationships to the land and Williams does not. Indeed, in this critical piece we see Mateer construct and place into conversation versions of himself, speaking out differing ideas of poetry and of language and how it might interact with ‘landscape’, or with ‘place’. Nowhere does he name or confine this understanding to the nation. Instead, in Mateer’s work we consistently see ambivalence towards nation building, to language and to poesis.

In completing this analysis I am conscious of how comparison often sorts poets and poems into categories of better and worse. This paper is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of Williams’s poetics, which are incredibly nuanced and varied across his long poetic career. Similarly, many of the concerns, poetic and political, surrounding Mateer’s work have not been considered. Instead, my aim was to examine a few poems in order to isolate a few points of difference concerning anthropocentrism between the contexts of Williams and Mateer. I am cautious that such a retrospective comparative analysis constructs time in a linear fashion, especially when proposing something like a ‘change’ in thinking/creating as I am doing. It was not my intent to isolate Mateer from Williams, but rather to bring them into the same space and see what different elements emerge from each. The key difference that has emerged is akin to the shift from a modernist to a post-modernist perspective on language, with Mateer incapable of engaging with the world as Williams does concretely through language. This seems to link with a much greater uncertainty regarding the interaction of the human and the other-than-human. As the criticism of Williams evolves, so, too, does how his language is conceived. This current paper holds to the perspective identified by Long, which is that ‘Williams offers a model of how to negotiate the “representational shift” while still attending to, and communicating about, the physical world in a way which attempts ‘authenticity’.<sup>60</sup> These attempts at ‘authenticity’ are proposed to be in keeping with a Heideggerian or phenomenological ecopoetics. More recently, Judith Schwartz has begun the work of considering how the Objectivists and Williams function as pastoral poetry. For Schwartz, far from being

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<sup>59</sup> J. Mateer, ‘Nativism and the Interlocutor’, *Cordite*, vol. 40 no. 0, December 2012, <http://cordite.org.au/essays/nativism-and-the-interlocutor/>, (accessed 3 February 2015).

<sup>60</sup> Long, ‘William Carlos Williams’, p. 63.

committed to 'authenticity', Williams 'creates an image while simultaneously calling attention to its artificial nature'.<sup>61</sup> More work remains to be done separating out how the features of Williams's images consciously engage with artificiality. Even accepting Schwartz's premise, there remains a qualitative difference in the lyric of Mateer and Williams as discussed above, one which allows for greater indeterminacy in the case of Mateer.

Comparing Williams and Mateer also allows us to recognise how, in a world defined by global environmental questions and impacts, it is necessary to breach and subsequently recognise the artificiality of sovereign boundaries, both of nations and of the individual. In bringing Williams into contemporary conversation, we bring along the ideas and ideals of when he composed, a time which we now know has ongoing environmental impacts on our present and future. In doing so, what has become most apparent is how Williams's desire to connect his readers bodily to the world through poetry establishes an early archetype of what I will loosely call phenomenological eco-poetics. In Heideggerian, or Rigby's, terms Williams does indeed invite us to dwell in the world. Yet his world is one constructed according to national boundaries and, as is the greatest concern when adopting Heideggerian terms for ecocriticism, his poetics do not contain the challenges to anthropocentrism that we associate with the contemporary eco-poetics of someone like Mateer, or for that matter, of the contemporary theory of someone like Nancy. More work remains to be done, particularly in expanding out Nancy's theories to see how they might engage with the ideas of language put forth by the ecocritics considered in this paper. As an interim conclusion, it appears presentness in, or consciousness of, the world is no longer enough to encapsulate the complexities of how we now think of the relationship between the human and the more-than-human.

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<sup>61</sup> J Schwartz, "The World is the Greatest Thing in the World': The Objectivists' 'Immanent' Pastoral' in P Murphy (ed) *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook*, Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1998, p. 35.