Ecopoetic metafiction: the interaction of organism and environment in postcolonial literatures

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Abstract
This doctoral thesis is a study of the interaction of organism and environment as represented in three postcolonial novels published between 1994 and 2006 and written by authors from Canada, India and Australia: Rudy Wiebe's A Discovery of Strangers, Amitav Ghosh's The Hungry Tide and Alexis Wright's Carpentaria. I argue that these novels have emerged from the literary junction of the movements of postmodernism, postcolonialism and environmentalism, and that the formal features of these narratives have been influenced by this junction to the point that they can be said to form a new genre, which I call "postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction."

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Ecopoetic Metafiction
The Interaction of Organism and Environment in Postcolonial Literatures

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Foreword

I wish to share what strikes me as a paradox: the subject of this doctoral thesis was initiated by what now constitutes its ultimate chapters. It is indeed the peculiar ecopoetics of *A Discovery of Strangers, The Hungry Tide* and *Carpentaria* that got me started. It is the way these literary storyworlds (including fictional organisms, environments and their interactions) are constructed, formed, and produced in reading that triggered in me the need to do research. Engaging with these three novels was not only a pleasure, it stimulated me intellectually in a way I had never been, causing me to reflect on the act of meaning-making at the core of reading. The complexity and self-reflexivity of these novels pushed me to understand the *interpretation of literary works as a cultural, cognitive and ecological process*.

I needed to make sense of this intellectual transformation of mine. I needed to explicate, to detail, and to analyze the cognitive operations and phenomena that, as I understood it, underlay my skilled practice of reading, and the historical and ecological circumstances that made it possible. I needed to ground my work as reader and scholar *into* the world. I began to envision the very act of reading as an interaction between organism and environment, namely between a reading organism and a textual environment. It will come to you as no surprise, then, that each of the three novels that I study in the second part of this thesis are not only profound reflections on the relationships between organism and environment, but are also (and perhaps even more importantly) reflections on the relationships between reader and text.

It is illusory to think that the thesis you hold in your hands can ever be finished. This dissertation is the frozen surface of an ever-flowing river; it is a segment in my line of thought. The letters on this page are a congealed linguistic landscape, but my writing process is a nonlinear, dynamic and textual ecosystem. Indeed, my greatest challenge in trying to account in writing for the dynamism of the reading process was to avoid reduction. In his poem “The Meaning of Existence” Les Murray explains:

Everything except language
know the meaning of existence.
Trees, planets, rivers, time
know nothing else. They express it
moment by moment as the universe.

Even this fool of a body
lives it in part, and would
have full dignity within it
but for the ignorant freedom
of my talking mind. (2012, 77-78)

If, as Murray suggests, the universe is the expression of the meaning of existence, then an account of this universe based on a radical ontological separation of observer and observed can never be faithful, even remotely. The “liberation” of the speaking subject from the material world is, in Murray's poem, inappropriate and foolish. As I see it, what matters is not so much the speaker’s *freedom from* the universe and language's alienation from it, but rather the speaking-and-reading organism's *enmeshment within* it. Here I can only agree with Murray, but also with Scott Slovic who addresses the apparent disconnection held by many between literary analysis and world analysis (Slovic 2008, 28) and instead proposes “to embrace the literary text as language that somehow contributes to our lives “out in the world” (28). Reading is an intellectual activity, but it cannot be only about intellectualizing: it also has to be about *experiencing*. Therefore, before illuminating the context of reading, it would be worth illuminating one’s context of reading. The first step towards an encounter with “the world and literature together” (28) is to encounter one’s world first. My story then in this thesis is not about all readers, it is about my reading. My reading of texts, but also my reading of the world, of its history. Writing about reading is not a clever antithesis. It is the process that underlies these very words you are now perceiving and processing.

A long time ago, before I even contemplated going to University, when I was naively trying to make sense of the meaning of existence,¹ I found out that creative writing could help me combine my experience of the world and my experience of literary texts. Following Slovic's cue to embrace storytelling (28) and Professor Tom Griffiths’s advice to take academic research outside of academic buildings to the public, I have decided to include one such combination. The poem below is entitled “CrossHatched.” It emerged from the

¹ I now know, like Murray, that the meaning of existence is existence itself!
very patterns that made up my Canberran environment in 2013-2014, but it is also the result of my intellectual engagement with the historiography of Australian environmental attitudes, including Australian Indigenous art practices and ways of knowing. In a way, “CrossHatched” and the series of poems I wrote in Australia bring together my three passions: reading, writing, and experiencing the world around me:

**CrossHatched**

In the tangle of life,
semantic lines
kiss and caress
into a knot
of relationality.
In this place of time
and moment of space,
we are crosshatched,
signshaped into existence.
Lines and dots
form the skeleton
of our build,
the pores and wrinkles
of our body,
but also the flows
and waves
of water and air,
of sap, blood,
skin and bark,
of paths and trails.
In the mesh of life,
lines of meaning
brush.
They speak
the mind of place
with the voice of time.
We, my OtherSame,
we but dance
to its rhythms
throughout the days
and nights
of these
our lives.
Introduction: Organism/Environment in Postcolonial Literature

This doctoral thesis is a study of the interaction of organism and environment as represented in three postcolonial novels published between 1994 and 2006 and written by authors from Canada, India and Australia: Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*. I argue that these novels have emerged from the literary junction of the movements of postmodernism, postcolonialism and environmentalism, and that the formal features of these narratives have been influenced by this junction to the point that they can be said to form a new genre. The novels of this new genre have three discursive dimensions that interrelate to form a whole: a postcolonial dimension, an ecopoetic dimension and a metafictional dimension. For this reason, I choose to call this genre *postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction*.

I identify two formal characteristics of postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction. Firstly, the organizational principle of these novels is an ecopoetics – a way of producing, forming, constructing literary storyworlds, including fictional organisms, environments and their interactions – informed by the political, sociocultural and ecological situation of settler societies as well as their attitudes to indigenous peoples and environments. Secondly, although the three novels depict different postcolonial places, moments, cultures and ecologies, they nonetheless share a metafictional self-awareness in the creation of the storyworld. This metafictional quality is signaled by episodes where the act of reading a text is analogized to the act of interacting with an environment. Moreover, the metafictionality is carried by the use of free indirect discourse and by inscribed processes of textual production or reception.\(^2\) Free indirect discourse draws attention to the transformative mingling of voices that takes place in all textual practices, and the inscribed processes of textual production and reception function as cues to guide the reader’s understanding of their own practice. Ultimately, by drawing attention to their postcolonial ecopoetics in episodes of self-

\(^2\) By “inscribed processes of textual production or reception,” I refer to moments where a fictional organism is represented *in the text* as performing these communicative actions.
reflexivity, I argue that the texts encourage the reader to reflect on their act of reading and experiencing literary and physical ecosystems.

Rudy Wiebe is a descendent of Mennonites who emigrated from Russia to Canada at the end of the 1920s. Wiebe’s work is concerned with the influence of colonial history on contemporary Canadians, and more particularly on writers of fiction. Wiebe’s sixth novel A Discovery of Strangers (1994) reconstructs the meeting of two opposing ways of knowing and interacting with an environment: that of the European explorers and that of the Indigenous Tetsot’ine. The novel is a work of historiographic metafiction whose structure, form and content combine historical sources and fiction, traditional ecological knowledge and cartography, and oral storytelling and writing techniques to dramatize the encounter between the Dene people of what is now the Northwest Territories of Canada and the explorers of the second Franklin expedition to map the Arctic in the 1820s. A Discovery of Strangers has been discussed for its postcolonial and fictional revision of history (Birkwood; Tremblay) and for its imaginary recreation of indigenous voices (Beck). The novel has also elicited responses about Wiebe’s treatment of Indigenous and Christian spiritualities in regard to his background as a Mennonite (Van Toorn, 1995a). The geographical theme of “the North” has also been a focus of certain critics, notably in its revelation of masculine traits (Nonnekes), its untranslatability in language (Hoeppner), and perhaps more interestingly for this thesis in its representation of cultural otherness (Keller; Brandsma). However, none of these critical accounts of A Discovery of Strangers have focused as I will do on the dialogical ecopoetics of the novel that connects history and fiction, European and Indigenous knowledge systems, and organism and environment.

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in 1956 and he has studied anthropology in Delhi and Oxford, combined with fieldwork in Egypt and North Africa. In his work, Ghosh is concerned with the figure of the Subaltern, and he seeks to tell the stories of those who have been silenced by History. The story of The Hungry Tide (2004), his sixth novel, is set in the mangrove, deltaic and tidal region of the Sundarbans, at the border of India and Bangladesh, where in the course of the 20th century successive waves of migrants have settled on the many islands that compose the delta. Ghosh’s narrative presents three
foreigners’ experience of the Sundarbans, as well as the transformations that each foreigner’s knowledge and moral system undergoes after their meeting with this unfamiliar environment. *The Hungry Tide* has received wide critical praise and attention. More particularly, the links between the structure of the narrative system and the content of its story, most notably its tidal ecosystem, have been discussed in depth (Gurr; Bartosch; Barras, 2014) The novel’s environmentalist message (Anand; Kaur) and critique of class inequalities in India (Nayar; Pulugurtha; Tomsky) have also been amply discussed. However, in this thesis I go further in the analysis of the formal features of *The Hungry Tide* and show that the storyworld emerges not only from the tidal pattern of the Sundarbans, but also from its migration history as well as from its mangrove and deltaic ecosystem.

Alexis Wright was born in 1950 and she is from the Waanyi, an Australian Indigenous people from the highlands of the southern Gulf of Carpentaria. Wright is an active voice in the intellectual Australian landscape, and in her work she resists, challenges and sarcastically comments on the aftermaths of the imposition of a colonial European way of life on Australian Indigenous populations and environments. In her second novel *Carpentaria* (2006), Wright creates the voice of an old Aboriginal storyteller who narrates the story of a fictional community, the Pricklebush, and more particularly the struggle of the Phantom family against a transnational mining company that greedily exploits their sacred lands. *Carpentaria* has elicited an impressive number of interpretive responses: it has been construed as a contribution to a better understanding of indigenous knowledge (Devlin-Glass), and as a reflection of the transcultural quality of the region of the Gulf of Carpentaria (Martin, Mead, and Trigger); it has been read as an ecofeminist narrative that decolonizes and dismantles imperial and patriarchal structures of oppression (Rigby), and as an example of how the modes of the carnivalesque and of magic realism unsettle traditional assumptions about Aboriginal people (Molloy); and finally, it has been read self-reflexively, as a novel with a modernist aesthetics whose equivocality, uncertainty and lack of resolution ought to make non-Aboriginal readers notice and reflect on the irreconcilable differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of doing, knowing and being (Ravenscroft).
Carpentaria opens up a spectrum of responses without ever confining itself to one, which partly explains its success.

At this point, I would like to say that in this thesis, my analysis of literary texts is driven more by an attention to form and less by “a ‘green’ moral and political agenda” (Garrard 3). I do not presume to speak for the whole of humanity in advocating for the preservation of the biosphere as a whole. I believe there is a danger in “evaluat[ing] texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis” (Kerridge and Sammells 5). By doing so one risks instrumentalizing literary texts and losing sight of their idiosyncrasies. I am wary of reading texts for their “usefulness,” for it implies reducing their background noise, their internal contradictions, their unique combination of voices and perspectives, and making sure to highlight only those aspects that reinforces an arbitrary green political agenda. Indeed, in retrospect, what is useful to one group of people may be devastating to the other, and historically, the latter has usually tended to be non-European populations. In some cases, preserving the environment of a region means harming its human inhabitants, and this has strong ethical implications.

In the same vein, if this thesis owes much to Jonathan Bate’s The Song of the Earth (2000) and Lawrence Buell’s The Environmental Imagination (1995), respectively for their concepts of ecopoetics and environmentality, it is different in its treatment of the relationship between culture, history and the Environment. Indeed, both The Song of the Earth and The Environmental Imagination are part of a strand of ecocriticism that has attempted to link the perception of the environment to the creation of national cultures and identities in the nineteenth century. Buell’s The Environmental Imagination, as its subtitle suggests (“Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture”) is directed towards connecting perceptions of the American wilderness with the emergence of an American culture after the 1850s, thereby hinting at some connection between a “natural” landscape and a national identity. In The Song of the Earth, Bate focuses on the British Romantics’ concerns with the “severance of mankind from nature” (245) at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. Similarly to Buell, Bate is partly concerned with the creation of a national identity through a poetic rendering of regional specificity (216).
This focus on tying the emergence of national, regional or more generally cultural identities to the natural world has led many ecocritics to focus on the environmentalist content of environmental literature. This focus on content is also present in postcolonial environmentalism, whose “central tasks”, according to its main proponents, “is to contest western ideologies of development” (Huggan and Tiffin 20), and in ecofeminism, which, as Australian philosopher Val Plumwood says, is situated at the edges where the “four tectonic plates of liberation theory – those concerned with the oppressions of gender, race, class and nature – finally come together” (1993, 1). But as Timothy Morton argues in The Ecological Thought, “[e]cocriticism has overlooked the way in which all art – not just explicitly ecological art – hardwires the environment into its form” (11).3 This overlooking of the formal aspects of environmental literature is precisely what this thesis attempts to remedy.

I have chosen the three novels of my corpus because they signal a shift in the way the interaction of organism and environment is represented in literature. As a legacy of and a reflection on the settler colonies of Canada, Australia and the Sundarbans, I argue that their form and content embody an ecological thought4 imbued with a postcolonial outlook on indigenous peoples and the environment. Instead of considering the Environment as a metaphor for exposing Canadian, Indian and Australian Aboriginal identity – as the Romantics and Transcendentalists did for respectively Britain and the United States – these three texts make use of organism/environment interactions to unsettle imperialist and nationalist regimes and discourses, but also the genre of the novel itself and its analysis.

Indeed, the second reason for constituting my corpus out of these texts is that their recourse to indigenous and non-European ontologies, in order to represent the storyworld as emerging from organism-environment interactions, renders classical narratology inadequate and thus demands a redefinition of such classical notions as author, character,

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3 It is to be noted that here the environment refers as much to the physical and material environments as to the cultural and social ones.
4 Morton also explains that thinking ecologically is “a contemplating that is a doing. Reframing our world our problems, and ourselves is part of the ecological project” (2010b, 9). Art and its study therefore occupy a crucial function in this contemplation of ecology, for art at the same time organizes our perception of the environment and is permeated by its ecology.
plot and theme. In order to understand these novels, characters cannot be conceived as independent and isolated subjects. Nor can the environment be envisioned in stasis as a theme for revealing hidden national or personal traits or as an external setting devoid of agency; and the causal structuring of events through plot cannot be thought of as the main and only structuring device of the narrative. Instead, I argue that in these texts characters ought to be understood as four-dimensional organisms embedded in history and ecology, the environment as a dynamic meshing of ecological processes, and the depicted ecosystem as the central structuring element of the storyworld.

The third reason for choosing these texts is their recourse to indigenous ontologies to reconceive the form of the novel: instead of concealing the novel’s fictionality to render its representation of the world more plausible, this produces a metafictional mode of representation in which texts draw attention to the construction of the storyworld in the process of reading. Readers are thus required to position themselves consciously with regard to the postcolonial and environmental complexities of the narratives. All three novels incorporate in their form, structure and style – indeed in the very storyworld they depict – an ecological thought in which organism and environment, but also reader and text, are inextricably enmeshed. This “mesh,” as Morton puts it, connects “all living and non-living things” (2010b, 28), as well as “their habitats, which are also made up of living and nonliving beings” (29).

The enmeshment of organism and environment and the revelation of this entanglement through art was theorized by Gregory Bateson at the end of the 1960s in essays on Balinese painting (“Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art”) and on epistemology, ecology and survival (“Form, Substance and Difference”), both of which were part of his collection of essays Steps to an Ecology of Mind. In this collection, not only was Bateson stating that “the unit of survival is a flexible organism-in-its-environment” (457), but also that art could aid an individual consciousness to apprehend the multilayered complexity

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5 Here I use the term “entanglement” in a specific way: “To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence” (Barad ix).
of this organism-plus-environment system (145). Bateson’s formulation has been instrumental in the early stages of this thesis, notably because it lies at the core of Timothy Ingold’s and Richard Lewontin’s writings (respectively The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill and The Triple Helix: Gene, Organism, and Environment). Both Ingold and Lewontin have made use of Bateson’s statement (organism and environment are inseparable) to develop their respective fields of ecological anthropology and evolutionary biology, and both anthropologist and biologist have had a major influence on my research.

Indeed, in order to account for the enmeshment of organism and environment as represented in the three texts of my corpus, I have developed a form of embodied econarratology informed by theories of cognitive and embodied understanding of language (Zwaan), by approaches in which organism and environment are inextricably enmeshed (Bateson; Ingold, 2002; Lewontin, 2000; T. Morton, 2010) and by the novels themselves. My formulation of embodied econarratology is guided by two questions: How is the storyworld produced in reading? and What can diegetic organism-environment relationships tell us about the act of reading, and vice versa? The first question has led me to develop a methodology for studying the production of a storyworld in reading, or more precisely the configuration of narrative processes that make up these novels. In dealing with the first question, I am concerned with the relationship between the work-as-a-whole and the text-as-process. The second question has made me focus on certain self-reflexive episodes that dramatize both the entanglement of organism-environment and that of reader-text. These episodes serve as cues to orient my analysis and interpretation of the novels, to bring cohesion to their storyworld, and to rethink the similarities and differences between textual and environmental hermeneutics.

The main elements of this embodied econarratology are interactional patterns and interactional epistemes. I define interactional patterns as sequences of interaction between an organism and its environment; they enable me to account for the literary recreation of an organism/environment interaction in time and space, which can be thought of as a line of becoming (Ingold, 2002, 83). Interactional epistemes refer to a community’s
intersubjective system of ecological knowledge about how organism and environment should and/or do interact; the study of their construction and alteration enables me to account for the transcultural transformations inherent in settler colonies, where no knowledge system can be said to exist in isolation from alternative epistemologies.

Moreover, my version of embodied econarratology posits that the storyworld is a literary ecosystem and that the reader is both an organism of this literary ecosystem and a set of cultural prejudices projected into the narrative. By acknowledging the twofold nature of readers, embodied econarratology makes central the ability of language to make the reader’s cognitive system resonate, empathize and in extreme cases identify with the described situation. It therefore sheds light on how postcolonial texts can use the very fact that the reader is an organism to attempt to transform their cultural prejudices. In this context, playing with the interplay between the reader-as-reading-organism and the reader-as-culturally-prejudiced-subject can become a counterdiscursive strategy that enables non-Indigenous readers to vicariously experience forms of knowing with which they were previously unfamiliar.

At this point a reader may wonder why I am looking at the representation of “the interaction of organism and environment” and not the representation of “the interaction of self and place,” for the former seems a rather peculiar way of approaching literary texts. The primary reason for this peculiar approach is to get away from the notion that literary storyworlds are pre-formed entities that the reader enters (a dualistic view of reader and work), and move towards the notion that literary storyworlds, their forms and substances are made to flow forth in reading, are constructed in reading, and that this construction is mutual: just as the reader constructs the storyworld in reading, so does the storyworld construct the reader (an interactional view of reading-organism/textual-environment). This notion that storyworlds emerge in reading is very much informed by Richard Lewontin’s

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6 In her book *The Storyworld Accord*, Erin James for instance explains that a storyworld is a “mental model of context and environment within which a narrative’s characters function and to which readers transport themselves as they read narratives” (253). The use of the term “transport” is here problematic, for it implies that the storyworld preexists the act of reading, whereas I wish to insist that the storyworld emerges in the act of reading.
thesis that one of the foundational principles behind life is that organism and environment
co-construct each other (2001, 48), and by Tim Ingold’s “dwelling perspective” in which the

What do I mean by organism then? The OED tells us that an organism is an “individual
animal, plant, or single-celled life form. Also: the material structure of such an individual; an
instance of this” (3.a.). Defining the organism as the “material structure of an individual”
however raises multiple questions, especially with regard to the postcolonial and/or
indigenous texts of my main corpus, which are often not founded on a scientific
epistemology. What does “material” mean to a European? Does it mean the same to an
Indigenous Australian? To a Bengali Indian? To a Canadian Mennonite? Does it mean the
same in the twenty-first century? In the twentieth? In the nineteenth? The short answers
are of course not and it’s complicated! The second definition of the OED can help us here:
the organism is also a “whole with interdependent parts, compared to a living being; an
organic system” (emphasis added; 2.a.). If an organism can also be envisioned as a living
being, then it means that what is or is not an organism depends on what one calls “life.”
Again, semantics seems to lead us astray, losing us into the meanders of language, for the
realm of the living is not the same in Cartesian metaphysics as in Waanyi Law.7 For these
reasons, I choose to define an organism according to its main feature, namely the fact that
an organism is a being that is surrounded by an environment with which it effectively
interacts! Instead of trying to identify the boundaries of the organism, I believe it is better to
keep it as open as possible, and to always consider the organism as caught up in a
dialogical relationship with the environment.

But what is the “environment”? Here also, the answer to that question is complex, as
the scare quotes attest. There are two ways of defining the notion of “environment”: it is at
the same time an idea, a concept that refers vaguely to the global physical surroundings of
humanity (i.e., planet earth), but it is also the unique and evolving physical conditions that
surround one organism and with which the organism interacts.

7 The Waanyi is Alexis Wright’s people, an Australian Indigenous people in the southern plains of
the Gulf of Carpentaria.
Usually, the environment with the "e" in a lower case refers to the physical conditions and circumstances that enable an organism to survive, and therefore there are as many environments as there are organisms (Ingold, 2002; Lewontin, 2001). The period of colonial expansion expanded the scientific understanding of earth’s numerous environments (Beinart and Hughes; Robin), notably their diversity which was unknown to the European scholars of the time. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, colonial expansion thus afforded access to new worlds to naturalists such as Carl Linnaeus in Lapland (1732), James Cook in the South Pacific Ocean (1768-1771, 1772-1775), Alexander Von Humboldt in the Americas (1799-1803), Charles Darwin on the HMS Beagle in his trip around the world (1831-1836). These scientific journeys, in turn contributed to fueling the emerging discipline of "ecology," a name which was coined in 1866 by Ernst Haeckel as the “science for understanding how organism relate to their ‘external world’” (Robin, Sörlin, and Warde 205).

The concept Environment with a capitalized “E,” is like “the West,” or “the Orient,” or “Man,” that is to say, an incomplete and imperfect reduction of a complex situation. In contrast with the lower-case environment, the Environment, which I choose to capitalize in this thesis because it represents an idea, emerged after the Second World War in the writings of a few authors, the most famous being the American ecologist William Vogt in his book *Road to Survival*, published in 1948 (Robin, Sörlin, and Warde 158). The Environment became “the word with which it was from [then] on possible to talk about many, if not all, [of the] issues [of rising populations, eroding soils, threatened species, and polluted waters], or at least their effects on nature” (158), and as such the word was “first and foremost a work of integrative imagination, of combining a set of already existing issues and problems on various scales into a meaningful whole” (159). However, this idea of the total Environment of humanity raises a number of issues, for as the historian Ramachandra Guha argues, the Environment is tied to American imperialism and has been used to export American environmental policies to non-American contexts, often to the detriment of local and indigenous populations (Guha 412).
The “environment” of the title of this thesis is not a “term denoting something out there that is important for our well-being but is affected (negatively) by human action” (Robin, Sörlin, and Warde 157). In this thesis it carries a narrower meaning: in keeping with Bateson, Ingold and Lewontin, the environment is *that which surrounds the organism*, and with which the organism effectively interacts. In my view, organism and environment are entangled; they are always in a process of interaction in which they define, fashion, and emerge alongside each other. Organism-and-environment is a dynamic system; it is *the mesh*, as Morton would say, and neither one nor the other are ever discrete, static, closed or rigid.

In this thesis, I am concerned with *postcolonial* fiction that dramatizes the relationship between fictional organisms and their material environment and that reflects on human communities’ specific ways of understanding the concept Environment in the settler societies of Australia, Canada and the Sundarbans. In the context of the three main books of my corpus, the term “postcolonial” does not refer to a simplistic challenge to the West or to Empire. Rather, it refers to the specific material and epistemic legacy of settler societies: the facts that indigenous populations and their environments have been forcefully exploited, if not dispossessed by the colonizers, and that European migrants have settled into unfamiliar environments. Both of these colonial processes have resulted in major disturbances in organism-environment interactions, namely a disconnection of organisms from their traditional environments (physical and sociocultural). 8 *Carpentaria, The Hungry Tide* and *A Discovery of Strangers* reflect on these processes of European migration and indigenous exploitation, and on the subsequent disconnections they provoke. The three texts are critical of these colonial processes, but they also attempt to overcome the collective and cultural trauma of invasion by producing a new form of fictional discourse that accounts for the complex literary legacy of settler societies. The term “postcolonial” therefore encompasses the creative impulse to acknowledge, undermine and move beyond colonialism culturally, socially and ecologically. 9

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8 Of course, this is not to say that indigenous ways of life are fixed and unchanging, or that indigenous people live in a pristine environment.

9 One way of doing so is to involve the reader more actively in the construction of the postcolonial storyworld, rather than offer the reader a preformed and unchanging storyworld.
This thesis is divided in five chapters, with the first one being an account of environmental attitudes and postcolonial environmentalism that clears the ground and establishes some theoretical and methodological foundations for the construction of my close textual analysis in the three final chapters. Chapter 2 is my formulation of postcolonial econarratology and my definition of the genre of postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction, which is rendered necessary by the fact that the three novels of my main corpus present a form of environmentalist discourse that creates an ontological connection between the interaction of organism-environment and the interaction of reader-text. These works of ecopoetic metafiction enable me to inscribe the socioecological processes of reading and meaning-making in a larger context of storyworld- and world-formation, but this complexity in structure, form and content demand a new terminology, a new method, and a new understanding of texts.

The chapter on postcolonial econarratology is followed by three chapters in which I examine how a dynamic topic connects the depicted ecosystem – including human communities and knowledge systems – with the produced storyworld. I am interested in the way reading brings to the fore the entanglement of ecosystem and storyworld. More precisely, I examine how the representation of ecological and phenomenological processes can be reconnected by means of figuration, and how self-reflexivity can offer new insights into the potential of literary texts to lay bare relations between reader, text, and context.

At the core of the dynamic storyworld-production of the three main novels analyzed in this thesis, there is a process of defamiliarization that is followed by a process of cohesion. The three texts begin by plunging the reader into a storyworld that precipitates interrogation of the relationship between stories, organisms and environments. After unsettling the cultural assumptions that the reader may reasonably be considered to have regarding the form of the novel and its representation of stories, organisms and environments, the texts bring coherence to the production of the storyworld in reading.

In A Discovery of Strangers, the defamiliarization of the form of the novel is produced by the fact that the text voices “the land” and the ecological relations of the lines of consciousness of the animal-persons who populate it, in particular caribou and wolves, but
also indigenous “persons”, in opposition to the English explorers, who are not referred to as “persons.” This meshwork of indigenous trajectories of life is disturbed by the arrival of the exploring strangers who alter the ecology of the Dene land in an irremediable way, and by doing so alter the narrating voice as well. The text then brings coherence to this dissonant ecology by constructing the encounter of history and fiction as an echo of the encounter of indigenous Tetsot’ine and English explorers. The formal qualities of historiographic metafiction are then made to enter into resonance with the content of the story, thereby offering in reading a possible coherence where form and content enact each other in a perpetual discovery of strangeness.

At the beginning of The Hungry Tide, an inscribed mytho-eco-poetic narrative of the region where the story is set defamiliarizes the relationship between reading, storyworld and storytelling. This inscribed narrative is written by the protagonist’s uncle and read by the protagonist, and it operates a translation wherein the ecology of the region of the Sundarbans is described as the interplay of the embodied divinities of Shiva and Ganga. The precise locus described in the inscribed story is however a place of unmeshing, a delta where the river-deity Ganga separates into various riverine threads and where the cosmic unity of Shiva’s braid comes undone. The cohesion of this ecological and mythological unmeshing is brought about by the ecology of the Sundarbans (its confluence of rivers, its daily tidal encounters of river and sea, and its continuous reshaping of the mangrove islands). The region’s ecology functions as a topic that brings cohesion not only to the inscribed narrative of the opening, but also to the narrative system of The Hungry Tide as a whole, for it enables the reader to make sense of the trajectories of life of the protagonists Nirmal, Fokir, Kanai and Piya.

In Carpentaria, the process of defamiliarization is produced by an inscribed storyteller, who sounds like an Aboriginal Elder narrating the journey of the ancestral serpent at the origin of the features of country and of the storyworld. The implied audience of this storyteller is asked to actively imagine this process of world-formation, and to conceive of it as a reality. The opening therefore undermines Cartesian metaphysics, Newtonian physics, colonial cartography and modern geology in a counter-mimicry imbued with satire, thereby
offering the reader an ecopoetics that incorporates Aboriginal concepts of Dreaming, Country, Story and Law. The defamiliarization of the scientific episteme is total in the storyteller’s flagrant appropriation of the conventions of realism, and the storyworld achieves coherence in reading only when the reader accepts the foundational role of the serpent as creator of the world and of satire as a mode of apprehension of the postcolonial situation.
1. Environmentalism and Empire: Untangling Environmental Attitudes

The “Environment” is a complex term that refers both to an all-encompassing concept and to myriads of constantly evolving and infinitely various material and physical entities. As such, it is almost impossible to define, categorize, and use in discourse. It would be impossible to provide an exhaustive study of the concept in this thesis. Rather, the aim of this chapter is (1) to map the complexity of the field of poscolonial environmentalism by pinpointing ways of relating to the “environment,” both as a concept and as an entity, and (2) to identify how the three main literary texts of this thesis tie these attitudes to the development and subsequent dismantlement of the British Empire.

The twentieth century was a period of important sociocultural and ecological changes. These changes reminded contemporary societies that their existence and well-being were contingent on the environments in which they were embedded. It was the beginning of a new form of environmental awareness. On a global scale, the realization that the natural world was more than a mere setting or background for human activities arrived late as a reaction to the manifest changes in human ecologies, and some already thought it was too late to counter the effects of anthropogenic ecological alterations of the globe. After the Second World War, a euphoric period of unprecedented economic growth became an anxious period of catastrophism; what was supposed to be a period of reconstruction was replaced by the prospect of a future of desolation. Environmentalism was born in a context where humanity seemed on the verge of destroying itself. These catastrophist attitudes were however followed by an idealistic wish to enter a period of sustainable development. Extractivist attitudes towards the physical world, which were increasingly deemed destructive, had to deal with with the rise of protectivist\textsuperscript{10} attitudes towards our habitats, deemed more respectful of the sanctity of Life. However, protectivist attitudes were never

\textsuperscript{10} Here I use the “protectivist” because it is more neutral and less historically connoted than “preservationist” and “conservationist.” In other words, protectivism encompasses the environmentalist, preservationist and conservationist movements.
unchallenged; their optimism, imposing and sometimes imperialistic views had to come to terms with the cynicism of capitalism and the doubts of postmodernism or postcolonialism. In this period of sociocultural and ecological changes emerged new metaphors and narratives to describe and explain the physical world. The traditional metaphors of the world as divine order, as living being, and as machine (Botkin) were in the twentieth century joined by the cybernetic and poststructuralist views of respectively nature-as-system and Nature-as-discourse. As to the narratives of social, technological and societal progress, they were challenged by a narrative of ecological decline.

With the rise of environmentalism in the 1960s and its critique of mechanistic epistemologies, twentieth-century scholars, researchers and scientists reestablished the natural world as an indispensable element of humanity and began rethinking the relationship between humanity and the world. When it was directed towards the future of contemporary societies, this relationship was to be sustainable (World Commission on Environment and Development); it was a political and economic program. When it was directed towards past and present alterations of the state of the earth, this relationship became embodied in the term Anthropocene (Crutzen), which stresses the inability to think of the geology of the Earth without acknowledging the presence of the human-as-species. When it was directed towards individuals and their personal relationship with the world, the relationship had to do with dwelling and consciousness (Heidegger).

Reconceptualizing the relationship between humanity and the world necessitated holistic approaches to specific problems, giving rise to transdisciplinary approaches to the study of organism-environment relationships. As environmental historian Tom Griffiths puts it, “[s]ciences and the humanities – so often separated in our training and thinking – are now [in the twenty-first century] turning towards one another with a grateful and urgent sense of opportunity and collaboration” (2007, n.p.). This collaboration is based on three intellectual revolutions that “have challenged the vision of the separability of nature and culture” (n.p.). The first of those three revolutions is the Darwinian realization that humans are animals subject to evolution, and that therefore human cultures exist within the physical world. The second intellectual revolution concerns the discovery by the science of ecology that the
natural world is changeable, dynamic, and affected by human undertakings. The third intellectual revolution has affected both scientific and humanist communities; it consists in the advent of theories of uncertainty\(^\dagger\) that recast nature as holistic, creative, irreducible and unpredictable. In these theories, facts, existence, knowledge and observation are always situated historically and geographically; they are relational and therefore they are also partial; consciousness is immanent in the material world, not outside or above it. By undermining claims of absolute facts, objective truth, and total knowledge, and by accepting that mystery is part of our world, Griffiths explains that the scientific theories of uncertainty, from the 1960s onwards, would lead to “greater respect for indigenous cultures” (n.p.). The environmental humanities were therefore born as a consequence of the destabilization of the concepts of humanity (through evolution), nature (through ecology) and knowledge (through relativism). By dissolving the boundaries and stasis of the categories of humanity, nature and knowledge, the intellectual revolutions of the past two centuries have opened up a new field of investigation, a transdisciplinary dialogue between scientific and humanist knowledge, between (post)colonial and indigenous knowledge. The collaborative opportunity embodied in the environmental humanities also allows scholars to combine their research endeavors to better experience, understand and investigate humanity’s relationship with its collective environment.

In contemporary societies, conflicting environmental metaphors and attitudes overlap, which complicates the dialogue between sciences, the humanities and populations. In this context, the function of the environmental humanities as a metadiscipline is to offer a forum for humanists to “critically reflect on cultural contexts and value-laden assumptions that shape scientific inquiry and policy making, and to develop alternative, holistic, multicultural, and historically sensitive perspectives on environmental problems” (Forêt, Hall, and Kueffer 68).

Among the positive aspects of this transdisciplinary endeavor of the environmental humanities, Griffiths cites first the complementary combination of “scales of time and space,”

\(^\dagger\) Amongst them, perhaps the most famous is Einstein’s theory of relativity.
which allows the environmental humanities to cover geological, evolutionary, societal and human temporalities and spatialities. Another positive aspect is the environmental humanities’ ability to use the scientific method in concert with storytelling and narratives. Griffiths justly and passionately explains that stories are a powerful educational tool that change the way we act and use knowledge: “it is learning distilled in a common language. It is also a privileged carrier of truth, a way of allowing for multiplicity and complexity at the same time as guaranteeing memorability. Story creates an atmosphere in which truth becomes discernible as a pattern” (n.p.). From this account, it is no surprise that literary analysis is integral to the environmental humanities, not the least because the focus of literary analysis is precisely on the ways stories are constructed and on the effects they produce. It is in this context that this section will seek to analyze the rise of environmental consciousness by using historiography as the primary text. Following Hayden White on the analogies between historiography and narrativity (1975), I will attempt to lay out the development of attitudes towards the environment.

Environmental attitudes are born out of a conjunction of multiple factors and they take many forms. Their birth and growth are affected by influential personalities, by technological improvements and by the emergence of new sciences, and one must not forget their strong connections to national, imperial and global policies and politics as well as other movements of emancipation and resistance to which the conservation and environmentalist movements owe a great deal. Furthermore, environmental attitudes represent how a group of human organisms relate to the environment on a macrological level. Together with the personal situation of each organism, environmental attitudes inform humans’ interaction with their surroundings. For these reasons, understanding environmental attitudes is an important step before investigating how human-environment relationships are depicted in literary texts.

There is no simple narrative that could explain the emergence of environmental consciousness, which is why in this section I prefer to divide my analysis in three attitudes towards the world that I deem the most important in contemporary human societies. (1) Extractivism sees the natural world as a resource to be used. This attitude is best expressed in colonialism and capitalism. (2) Protectivism conceives of the natural world as an
indispensable habitat to be conserved or preserved; it is manifest in the conservation and environmentalist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth century, and also in the emergence of environmental consciousness that resulted from these movements. Relativism acknowledges the extreme complexity and fluidity of the world and the multiplicity of worldviews, while refuting the universalist positivism of some branches of Western knowledge; it arises along the paradigm shift triggered by relativity and quantum theories in physics, by poststructuralism and postmodernism in the human sciences, by postcolonial revisions of history, by the reevaluation of traditional ecological knowledge, and by the findings in cognitive sciences. These three attitudes towards the environment are not homogeneous, due to the fact that they have overlapped and coevolved with the others spatially, temporally, conceptually and thematically.

First, it is important to stress that the narrative of progress – in which contemporary societies would move linearly from extractivism to protectivism in the twentieth century – is an illusion. Informed by the works of environmental historians (Beinart and Hughes; Cronon; Griffiths; Grove; Hays; Hughes; Lowenthal; Marks; McNeil; Mosley; Pyne; Radkau; Richards; Robin; Sandwell; Worster), I argue that the three environmental attitudes detailed below are entangled discursive processes that demand a self-reflexive form of criticism. Moreover, it is important to note that the interconnectedness of extractivism, protectivism and relativism is contingent on their imbrication with Empire. Indeed, extractivism is a foundational impetus for colonization. Once settler colonies are established, extractivism becomes untenable in the long-term, because it exhausts the resources that justify its very existence. Historically, imperial extractivism has (literally and metaphorically) cleared the ground for the emergence of conservation movements and ecological protectivism (Grove 3). In the same vein, the colonial expansion of the territorial limits of the Empire to the detriment of indigenous populations has triggered in the postcolonial era the rise of land

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12 I am aware that the term “the West” or “Western” is problematical. I do not use it as the dominant term of a geographical or cultural binary. Like Ingold, I feel it is useful when used self-consciously to refer to the fact that “our very activity, in thinking and writing, is underpinned by a belief in the absolute worth of disciplined, rational inquiry” (2000, 6). Not all communities and cultures share this belief, especially in a postcolonial context. Of course, this does not mean that the knowledge produced in the said cultures is less valid than “Western” knowledge.
rights movements (Huggan and Tiffin 121), of ecofeminism (Plumwood, 1993, 41) and of the environmental justice movements (Garrard 128). Environmental attitudes in the twenty-first century are legacies of the tumultuous relationship between the Empire, the newly-settled environments and the indigenous populations that populated them and still populate them nowadays.

Each of the three environmental attitudes conceives of the organism-environment relationship in its own way: extractivism characterizes the Environment as an inferior entity that is to be mastered by Humanity (H>E); protectivism, on the contrary, portrays the Environment as a superior entity necessary to Humanity and to other beings (E>H); relativism attempts to avoid hierarchizing organism-environment relationships, and rather seeks to look at the individual relations themselves (o⇔e). I argue that in order to study postcolonial forms of environmentalism as represented in literary texts, one needs to adopt a relativistic understanding of organism-environment relationships. But first, let me take you through a sketch of the development of environmental awareness.

Take a territory where an indigenous community has lived for innumerable generations. This community lives off the land, and therefore to subsist it protects the land, its beings and its ecology. The way of life of this indigenous community can be called a protectivism of subsistence. One day, a ship of explorers arrives; the explorers take a look at the land, see its potential, and let the metropolis know about it. A few years or decades later, a fleet of settlers land on shore and slowly begin changing the ecology of the territory to extract its resources and feed their homeland. The colonizers’ way of life is based on an extractivism of empire. After a couple of generations, however, some descendants of settlers realize that they are destroying the ecology of the territory and decide to manage the land more efficiently. They move from imperial extractivism to the protection of resources for future exploitation, also called conservationism. Yet, from the realization that extractivism is harmful in the long term, other forms of protectivism emerge: some settlers refuse to take part in the exploitation at all and rather push for the preservation of pristine environments devoid of human beings, including indigenous peoples; some militate for the protection of the environment for public health reasons, and others fight for rescuing the
planetary ecosystem from the clutches of anthropocentrism. For numerous years, extractivism and protectivism cohabit, not without tension. These tensions are however complicated: if colonizers hope to protect the “newly-settled” environment, this endeavor actually entails the continuation of the destruction of indigenous ways of life. What is protection from the point of view of the colonizers therefore means exploitation and destruction from the point of view of the indigenous population. And this is the crux of the problem in a postcolonial and globalized society, for if we only consider the exploitation and protection of the environment, we are left with a conundrum: if the protection of the environment for one amounts to the destruction of the environment for another, then there is no possibility of both solving the problem and keeping everyone happy. In this sketch, we need a third environmental attitude that acknowledges the plurality of perspectives, the multiplicity of discourses, and the overlapping of attitudes. And therefore, from the tension of extractivism and protectivism, of imperial environmentalism and traditional ecological knowledge, of neocapitalism and the fight for land rights emerges an environmental attitude that I call relativism. For those who hold a relativist attitude towards the environment, the colonialist linear narrative of extractivism-followed-by-protectivism can no longer be seen as sustainable, and ought to be replaced by a postcolonial nonlinear narrative of extractivism-and-protectivism-and-relativism. It is with this in mind that I would like to begin a more detailed review of extractivism.

1.1 Extractivism

Extractivist environmental attitudes are characterized by an instrumentalization and exploitation of the physical world by a human community; they are grounded in a belief that positivist knowledge should be instrumentalized to extract natural and exploit human resources. The goal behind extractivist attitudes is growth, and in practice it involves proactively colonizing the physical world by using its resources to develop, often exhausting them in the process. There are two cases in which extractivist attitudes are most prominent: colonialism, which is based on the accumulation of territory, and capitalism, which is based
on the accumulation of wealth. Both colonialism and capitalism are contingent on a belief that knowledge can be used effectively to manipulate the “natural” world, extract its resources, and transform them to create wealth.

The extractivist view of the world-as-resource was made manifest during and right after the colonial and imperial periods of European expansion, which started in the second part of the fifteenth century, and is sometimes called the Age of Discovery, though it could easily be called the Age of Invasion. This view of the world continued to exist during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, though in the case of the European countries, this imperialist control over nature is no longer prominently in the hands of the states, but is held by corporations in what we can call a capitalist regime. When it was applied globally to fuel the capitalist system and create growth, the exploitation of the physical resources of the world had enormous effects on eco- and sociocultural systems, and for centuries it will continue to influence the lives of billions of humans.

Extractivist attitudes are driving elements in the three novels analyzed in detail in this thesis. In *A Discovery of Strangers*, the English explorers of the second Franklin expedition (1819-1821) need the indigenous Tetsot’ine hunters to accumulate caribou meat and hide in order to fulfill the goals of the expedition, which is to discover the Northwest passage to Asia, chart the shoreline and identify the natural resources of the subarctic region. By introducing the Tetsot’ine to firearms and asking them to hunt more caribou than the two groups actually need, the explorers initiate a radical alteration of the region’s socio-ecosystem, which passes from an ecology of subsistence to an economy of excess (Wiebe, 1995a, 23). As for *The Hungry Tide*, in the intradiegetic story of Bon Bibi, which is foundational to the knowledge system of the subaltern people of the Sundarbans, extractivist attitudes are made manifest by the greedy colonizer Dhona, who enters a pact with a demon to plunder the resources of the mangrove forest (Ghosh, 2005, 104). In *Carpentaria*, extractivism is even more obvious as it is embodied in the transnational corporation *Gurturrit International*, a ruthless mining company that pillages the minerals of the region of the Gulf of Carpentaria (Wright, 2006, 7), and that does not hesitate to murder to preserve its monopoly.
Seen from a twenty-first-century perspective informed by ecology, one of the obvious shortcomings of extractivist environmental attitudes and practices are their lack of understanding of the interconnectedness of organism and environment, as well as their inconsiderate impacts on ecosystems and indigenous populations. By reducing the physical world – mineral, vegetal and animal, including other human beings – to a resource-trove to be plundered until exhaustion in extreme cases, or by believing in infinite territorial and economic growth, exploitation *per se* is a shortsighted practice that lacks the farsightedness needed when one deals with environmental issues. Extractivist environmental attitudes are based on the “big idea” of growth (McNeill, 2000), which is itself underlain by the mechanistic materialism that was the outcome of Cartesian and Newtonian thinking, though far from what the founders intended. However, exploitation rarely went alone; protection was often nearby. The exploitation of the environment, so visible after the beginning of the European colonial processes in the fifteenth century and the subsequent modernization of the world, indeed goes in hand with a protectivist strand of environmental attitudes, for it happened that exploitation processes would stir protective attitudes towards environmental resources. In that context, conservation was a tool of exploitation, for if resources were depleted, they could not be extracted anymore.

### 1.2 Protectivism

Protectivism is more complex than extractivism. It constitutes the bulk of what is commonly referred to as *conservation, preservation* and *environmentalist* movements. Protectivist attitudes are *not* characterized by an exploitation of the physical world, but rather by an effort to *protect* the physical world, its resources and inhabitants – be they animal (including humans), vegetal or mineral – and their connections and interrelations. Protectivist attitudes are highly heterogeneous: they emerge as local, regional, national and/or global movements that critically respond to the ecological alterations caused by extractivist practices, and as such their specificities depend on the motivations of those who constitute the movement. Protectivist attitudes tend to represent the environment, be it local or global,
as *vulnerable* to human undertakings and needing protection. The impact of humanity on its surroundings reaches its climaxes in the rhetorical figure of the *environmental crisis*, which is then used in ecological and environmentalist discourses as a means to trigger changes in environmental awareness. The environment thus becomes an issue to solve through management, technology and knowledge.

I identify five main types of protectivist attitudes: protection for subsistence, where a relation of mutual care is necessary for the sustainability of both community and environment; protection for exploitation, which attempts to conserve physical resources for long-term exploitation; protection for recreation, which focuses on preserving “natural” spaces for entertainment and leisure; protection of public health, which attempts to create healthy habitats that allow human beings to live in well-being; and protection of the earth-system, which seeks to preserve the ecology, equilibrium, biodiversity and ecosystemic richness of the globalized earth.

In the three novels analyzed in the following chapters, protectivist attitudes towards the environment play an important function. In *A Discovery of Strangers*, a protectivism of subsistence is displayed by some of the main characters, the indigenous elders Keskarrah and Birdseye and their daughter Greenstockings. All three repeatedly and critically comment on the explorers’ lack of respect towards the environment, as well as on Franklin’s men’s inability to listen to the stories told by the land (Wiebe, 1995a, 15, 75-76, 130, 131, 132, 298). If in *ADOS* protectivist attitudes are mostly held by indigenous characters in the form of a protectivism of subsistence, this is not the case in *The Hungry Tide*, in which a form of conservationism is held both by the Indian state’s Forest Department to the detriment of the subaltern local population of the Sundarbans (Ghosh, 2005, 160), and by the character of Piya (in a heightened form), who is blinded by her awareness of ecological diversity to the point that she initially puts it before the wellbeing of the human inhabitants of the Sundarbans (301). Finally, in *Carpentaria*, environmental protectivism is the main thrust of the plot: the protagonist Will Phantom is an environmental activist who, in an effort to hinder Gurfurritt’s monopoly over the region’s natural resources, sabotages the mining
company’s pipeline (Wright, 2006, 330) and triggers an epic chain of events that ultimately leads to the destruction of the town of Desperance.

Because of the widespread and diverse effects of extractivist environmental attitudes, protectivist responses are seen almost everywhere and can take very varied forms. Indeed, the diffusion of environmental awareness in public consciousness after the 1960s – mainly due to environmental hazards affecting public health – together with the already-present institutional environmental consciousness – which followed the Conservation movement – means that environmental protectivism has had an impact on all levels of society, from the individual to the United Nations, including regional, national and corporate institutions. The rise of this environmental consciousness has taken the form of policies, laws and taxes, of changes of personal behavior, of establishments of protected spaces, and of development of new technologies, theories, disciplines and even religions. What most of the sociocultural effects have in common is their status as a response to an environmental crisis.

Indeed, if growth was the economic “big idea” of the twentieth century, its ecological counterpoint is the notion of “crisis.” The environmental crisis is a representation which is the result of a mass-diffusion of environmental ideas combined with a growing awareness of environmental alterations caused by human undertakings. Environmental awareness and representations of environmental damages have pervaded “human consciousness” to a level never reached before, i.e., to a level where the ecological myths of pristine aboriginal “balance” now may (wrongly) appear real. Indeed, if acknowledging the interconnectedness and relatedness of all things and beings is important, and if wishing to construct a relatively stable and just society is commendable, sadly, ecological thinking is impeded by two major shortcomings. First, it is still too largely based on Frederic Clements’ flawed succession theory (Warren), where the climactic equilibrium is often thought to reside in preindustrial societies, and where the “crisis” of modernization is held responsible for all ecological issues. In this environmental narrative, the Apocalypse and Post-Apocalypse are the logical consequences of this succession theory. In this frame of mind, in order to prevent decline from happening and in order to protect growth, recreational well-being, public health and the earth-system, humanity must restore a balance that in actuality has never existed, and
the tools to do so are technology and knowledge. However in the latest phase of the twentieth century, the very notion of balance has been criticized by new ecology, which has shown it to be a representation, a simulation of the human mind. In effect, preindustrial balance is a utopian concept, a simulacrum that has concealed its very non-existence.

The second shortcoming of ecological thinking at the end of the twentieth-century was its insistence on the holistic concept of Life-on-earth as one totality. In this view, because things and beings are interconnected, then they are supposed to form one homogeneous entity called *Life*. This way of thinking, by trying to escape the binaries human/environment, culture/nature, recreates another binary: anthropocentrism vs ecocentrism. Because consciousness of this holistic interconnectedness is impossible to achieve, one can either believe in ecocentric interconnectedness, or be declared as being anthropocentric. In other words, by denying local particularisms, holism oversimplifies the world and risks silencing the cultural diversity that makes up human societies.

In response to this approximation and homogenizing simulacrum, a growing body of disciplines has begun to establish a new way of thinking. What I call relativist environmental attitudes break away from the utilitarianism of extractivist attitudes and from the abstractionism of protectivist attitudes, and instead favor a poststructuralist and postmodernist approach to the interaction of organism and environment, in other words, a relativist attitude towards the environment.

**1.3 Relativism**

Environmental relativism is a self-reflective attitude that emerges from the encounter between extractivism and protectivism. It encompasses discourses that posit that there is no unique Environment “out there” and that there is no unique environmental attitude that is inherently better than the other, but on the contrary that there as many environments as there are representations and perceptions of it. Consequently, there is no right way to manage the Environment, conceive of it and represent it, only different ways. Relativist environmental attitudes acknowledge the complexity of life systems and processes –
including their representation – and are often characterized by a certain distrust in universalist versions of positivist ecology, particularly the claims of all-knowingness and omnipotence. Some relativist views are skeptical of the feasibility of having a global institutional governance that would plan a sustainable and just way of life for all beings and things. More generally, acknowledging the multiplicity of living communities also means acknowledging the fact that these communities may have conflicting interests and practices that may remain irreconcilable.

The relativist environmental attitudes present in the literary works analyzed below do not deny the impact of humanity on local and global environments. Rather, they subvert scientism (monological and universalist views of science) and favor the dialogical conversation of situated knowledge systems. Furthermore, in these novels, relativist environmental attitudes take such different forms that, I argue, their representation is what gives each novel its particular ecopoetic metafictional characteristics. In A Discovery of Strangers, environmental relativism appears at the textual and diegetic levels: textually in the structuring of the novel as a dialogue between colonial history and indigenous storytelling, and diegetically as a dialogue between European and Dene communities. The novel produces two storyworlds, and it is only by adopting a relativist understanding of how knowledge systems fashion worlds that the reader can reconcile history and fiction, as well as the European and Dene epistemes. These reconciliations are facilitated by the dramatization of the craft of making snowshoes in the Ptarmigan story, which shows how different – and sometimes contradictory – entities and processes can be made into one through cooperation. In The Hungry Tide, environmental relativism is used to show how the protagonists hold – and embody – different knowledge systems and attitudes to the environment, and how, by interacting with the unfamiliar environment of the Sundarbans, they undergo a sociocultural transformation. In Ghosh’s novel, it is the aesthetic qualities of the ecosystem (the confluence of river and sea, the blurring of earth and water, and the liminality of the mangrove forest) that serve to bring coherence to these contradictory environmental attitudes. Finally, in Carpentaria, the overwhelming voice and presence of an inscribed Aboriginal storyteller assimilates scientific disciplines such as geology,
geography and ecology and refracts them through the medium of the written text to comment on the state’s environmental mismanagement of the land and the mining company’s ruthless capitalism. *Carpentaria* thus combines Aboriginal ecological knowledge, fight for land rights, oral storytelling techniques and written narratological elements to deliver a forceful statement about the sociocultural and ecological situation of the Gulf of Carpentaria, namely its desperate need for more environmental justice.

Although relativist environmental attitudes tend to destabilize positivist and universalist claims, they also share commonalities with other branches of knowledge. Indeed, they conceive of the earth as a system – although they acknowledge that the spatiotemporal limits of the system, and thus its very nature, are contingent on its observer – and they willingly embrace the interconnectedness, multilayeredness, polyvocalness, and polysemousness of its living communities. It is important to stress that what relativist environmental attitudes reject is the concept of a universalist, monological, univocal, monovalent explicability of the world. One way of escaping these positivist claims without rejecting the important developments of ecological and other sciences is to embrace transdisciplinarity and crossculturalism by considering systems of knowledge in relation to one another and thus by reading scientific ecological empirical knowledge in the light of artistic, narrative, poetic and traditional ecological discourses as well as in concert with experiential practices of space.

As can be seen in these novels, a corollary of the world’s complexity and heterogeneity perceived by relativist environmental attitudes is that there exist elements of the system that are covert to some and overt to others, and that ultimately there is no possibility of discovering the “true” meaning of the world-as-system. This quest for meaning is complicated by an acknowledgment that discourse is motivated and that this motivation is not necessarily manifest. Relativist environmental attitudes are thus critical of the power of language and discourse. In that sense, they are related to postmodernist, poststructuralist, feminist and postcolonial approaches to meaning, knowledge and world.

Relativist environmental attitudes are a crystallization of the epistemic shift of certain branches of sciences in the second part of the twentieth century. They form a new way of
looking at the world-as-process. In contemporary societies, particularly in Europe and Neo-Europes, this new way of conceiving the world emerged when branches of knowledge became aware of their own situatedness and of the relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence of human organisms with their surroundings. This view has affected ecology, psychology, anthropology, history, philosophy and critical and intellectual theory by putting trajectories of life back to the center of study and by undermining discrete and static concepts. The epistemic shift of the second part of the twentieth century is also characterized by a drastic intellectual reevaluation of a series of concepts central to scientific disciplines of knowledge. In relativist environmental attitudes, these concepts – among them mind, consciousness, body, organism, space, place, nation, environment, ecosystem, culture, art, language, text, reader and meaning – are understood as processes.

This general conceptual reevaluation is a departure and emancipation from, as well as a response against an understanding of the concepts cited above as static, autonomous, fixed, rigid, bounded and discrete, and a move towards a more dynamic view, where they are considered interconnected and interdependent, moving, permeable, open and continuous.13

The “Environment” as/in Discourse
Language plays a crucial role in all societies, but in contemporary democracies, decision-making is institutionalized to an extent that language becomes even more prominent. Environmental metaphors are metaphors of the Environment; they offer contemporary populations a way to conceive the physical world, to approach it and to understand certain of its principles to make concrete sense of it. In other words, environmental metaphors shape the way human societies and individuals interact with their environment, be it

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13 In this thesis, by considering narrative systems as processes belonging to ecological systems, I wish to embed the production and reception of literature in the systemic fabric of the world, and thus acknowledge the dynamism inherent in the act of reading. Literary systems offer their readerships a form of cognitive immersion in complex storyworlds. By dramatizing the contradictory aspects of contemporary societies, literature can become a tool to better make sense of relativist attitudes towards the environment and towards the world-as-system.
individual or collective. These metaphors constitute an important part of a discourse of the Environment.

As will be shown, environmental metaphors reflect historical attitudes towards the Environment as much as they shape them. For these reasons, it is important to look at environmental metaphors critically, for they constrain our understanding of and interaction with our surroundings in important ways. More precisely, environmental metaphors, instead of acknowledging the idiosyncrasies of our respective environments, project an understanding of the environment that can sometimes oversimplify the world and congeal the latter into stasis. Environmental metaphors, due to their structuring effect, therefore constitute a particular discourse of the Environment that can be challenged by environmental literature, whose complexity can destructure the too-neat metaphors imposed on Nature by contemporary societies.

In contemporary societies, various images of Nature, Environment and World circulate, interpenetrating one another, influencing small communities that in turn influence larger ones. This overlapping of concepts, ideas, and metaphors render environmental communication confusing and sometimes misleading. Yet, in the world of information technology and digital texts where ideas circulate faster than bodies, and where national boundaries may have dissolved, it is important to acknowledge the heterogeneity of our understanding of the world so that we can debate our impact upon it.

Recognizing that our understanding of Nature, Environment and World is influenced by discourse is to acknowledge that knowledge and language are nested within societies, cultures and institutions as much as they are nested within ecology. In that sense, Nature, Environment and World are as much physical entities as they are sociocultural constructs. Envisioning them as discursive allows us to reflect critically on the ability of language to fashion human mentalities, and by extension our environments. In this framework language and knowledge are processes of the earth-system; they are shaping it and are being shaped by it. The notion of system puts back the human in the biosphere, in the interaction of Life and Environment. In the same vein the notion of discourse puts language back in the biosphere. Literary texts shed light on the discursivity inherent in scientific endeavors, and
therefore by studying literary worlds one is made sensitive to the various forms of knowing that compose our complex societies.

In my consideration of Nature and Environment as discourses, I do not deny the existence of a world outside of human consciousness, nor do I deny the validity of these concepts. I do not advocate solipsism or self-centeredness. On the contrary, discerning the discursivity of Nature and Environment makes it possible to work out how competing views of our surroundings circulate and interact, how these views participate in the public debate about the relationship between humanity and the earth-system, and how these linguistic constructs subtend humanity’s decision-making processes and by extension human interaction with individual and collective environments. The notion of discourse does not oppose scientific knowledge per se, nor does it undermine it. Rather by claiming that scientific knowledge is discursive, I seek to reaffirm that science is contingent on the world it describes, and that the described world is contingent on the very method of observation underlying the description. Not only does scientific knowledge emerge from the observation of the world, it fashions the world as well. As discourse, environmental metaphors acquire effective power, and wielded by human agents, they affect the biosphere – the interaction of Life and Environment – as a whole. Acknowledging how environmental metaphors influence how we behave, how we experience and how we think is the first step towards a form of environmental thinking that respects the connection of epistemology and ontology.

The Ordered Environment
Whether based on belief or observation, the idea that the natural world – here understood as a synonym for the “physical world” or the “material world” – is ordered pervades many representations of the environment. This orderliness has been undermined in the twentieth century as the Environment began to appear “chaotic.” Two contradictory views emerged from this realization. In the first, disorder is caused by human interference: humans are perceived as outside of Nature, and are held responsible for the disequilibrium. Environmentalists who hold the view of a pristine benevolent natural world are sympathetic towards preservationist – i.e., non-interventionist – arguments that hold that Nature ought
to be left alone. In the second view, more sympathetic towards conservationist – *i.e.*, interventionist – arguments, disorder is perceived as caused by humans’ failed management of the natural world. In this view, the responsibility of humanity is to proactively conserve the *balance of Nature*. In the second view, the natural world is perceived as being in need of management, lest it becomes wild and dangerous. In the interventionist view, humans have a mission; they are the hand of a supreme being and must *manipulate* wilderness to create order. In the non-interventionist view, humans must not manipulate, but may *contemplate* the natural world. This latter conception is close to that of the Romantic poets Wordsworth and Coleridge, for whom the natural world was seen as “a locus of imaginative energy and … a potent source of intellectual ideas” (McKusick 28), and as “a place of vital sustenance and peaceful coexistence” (29).

**The Environment as Organism**

Another pervasive image of the natural world is that of a living organism that has a personality, a history, a unicity, and that develops along stages of life ranging from birth to death. The organism metaphor depicts the natural world as a living entity that is unique, valuable, imperfect and subject to decay. The agency assigned to Nature as a living creature makes it possible to explain powerful phenomena as expressions of its agency. Thus, a phenomenon that favors human undertakings will be understood as the benevolent action of a nurturing Mother Nature, whereas a phenomenon that impedes human undertakings will be understood as the malevolent action of a destructive Mother Catastrophe. It is easy to imagine how the order, regularity and stability of most natural processes may be understood as the beneficial actions of a supreme Mother Nature – *i.e.*, the cycle of seasons that allow agricultural practices – and on the contrary how the destabilizing chaos and extremeness of isolated phenomena – a destructive storm – may be understood as the harmful practice of a dangerous Mother Catastrophe.

The importance of the organic metaphor of Nature lies in its rhetorical power. This power is at the same time an advantage and an inconvenience. The notion that Nature is a living creature entails that it will necessarily die, with or without human intervention. This
realization may help rid some humans of their guilt, allowing them to perceive changes to their surroundings as an effect of passing from one stage of life to another, a natural step in the decaying process all living creatures go through. The dying Nature, like the non-interventionist view of the ordered Nature, provides argumentative strategies that consist in affirming that the world “out there” is ultimately beyond our control, and therefore human efforts should not be dedicated towards conserving an inexorably decaying being. On the other hand, the rhetoric of organic Nature also means that the latter can be wounded by human careless interference. If it can be wounded, it can also be healed, either by letting the rhythm of nature find its own balance (preservationist attitude) or by doing so proactively (conservationist attitude). It is to be noted that if Nature can be wounded, it can also wound human societies. The natural world as an enemy to be combatted and overcome then becomes a powerful political strategy in which human beings unite to survive the assaults of the natural enemy.\textsuperscript{14}

The rhetoric of a living nature may then be used both to argue that humans should care for their surroundings, defend themselves against it, or simply that they should let it live a life of its own. In a paradoxical way, the organic metaphor means that humans have the duty to nurture Nature, to combat it, or the possibility to let it die. The image of Nature as living creature is wielded by interventionist and non-interventionist groups alike. Like the metaphor of an orderly Nature, the idea of organic Nature cannot in itself advocate one course of action over another. Interventionist attitudes perceive Nature as vulnerable, whereas non-interventionist see its degradation as “natural.”

The Mechanical Environment
The metaphor of Nature as machine, born from the emergence of Cartesian metaphysics and Newtonian physics in the seventeenth century, became dominant thereafter. This image of an inanimate Nature is in stark contradiction with the organic view. If Nature-as-organism was unique, individual, evolving, whimsical, unpredictable, vulnerable and historical, mechanical Nature is the opposite, for as an inanimate \textit{thing}, a machine is not

\textsuperscript{14} Roland Emmerich’s film \textit{The Day After Tomorrow} is a good example of this.
subject to change and evolution. Nature as a machine is therefore subordinated to humanity; it is a tool. The image therefore operates a shift whereby Nature passes from an entity-as-subject to an entity-as-object. The animate being becomes an inanimate thing, and the caring human becomes an engineer. The shift operated by the metaphor therefore impacts what is deemed “proper knowledge.” Whereas the organismic view made care, empathy, values, emotion and morality matter, the mechanistic view renders these qualities obsolete and replaces them by calculation, measurement, reasoning and efficiency.

This reductionist view of the world as machine spreads to the characteristics of this world as well. The mechanistic world is understood to be generic, universal, static, predictable, and measurable. By understanding its principles, it is thought that humanity will be able to harness and manipulate it to suit human needs. It is thought that animal bodies, including the human body, plants, the landscape, and the cosmos, all are ruled by the same principles. Understanding these principles is the key to harnessing the power of the world-as-machine. This objectification implies a separate mind, or reason, which exists independently from the world it arises in. The metaphor of mechanical Nature therefore entails the image of an immaterial mind. The superiority of mind over matter, of the Human over the Natural, justifies the exploitation of the physical world. Through the mechanisms of cause and effect, humanity can affect the natural world in a way that favors human societies. Or so the theory goes…

Indeed the mechanistic view of Nature, if it works well with phenomena of infinitesimally small or large scales, is less useful when applied to the medium scale constituted by both the environment of an individual organism and the total environment of humanity. If rules that subtend cosmological or molecular systems can be found, principles that underlie the collective environment of humanity are less salient, not the least because the middle ground has been more and more perceived as the most complex systems of all. The more scientific progress allowed humanity to understand the workings of the total environment, the more it dawned on us that the metaphor of the world as machine was inappropriate, because simplistic, reductive and ineffective. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the managerial and engineering efficiency advocated by the mechanistic
worldview was fissured by the inability of humanity to *master* the machine “Nature” it had created. At this time a new kind of machine was being created, the computer, and according to Botkin, applying the metaphor of the cybernetic system to the world would be a paradigm shift in environmental thinking (114).

**The Systemic Environment**
In its most general form, the OED defines a system as a “group or set of related or associated things perceived or thought of as a unity or complex whole” (3.a). More precisely, the interconnectedness of the elements of a system means that “the removal or failure of one part may incapacitate the entity as a whole”, or in other words that the whole of the system possesses “properties that make it greater than the sum of the individual parts” (Allaby).

One of the epistemological shifts that brought about relativist attitudes towards the environment occurred in the field of ecology. The *new ecology* arose in the 1980s as a response to the popularization of environmentalism and particularly to its emphasis on the misleading concepts of equilibrium, or the *balance of nature*. New ecology broke from the traditional representations of the world and made use of systems theory to conceptualize it. Indeed, during the 1970s emerged a view that depicted ecology as a complex nonlinear dynamic system, where the biosphere is the term for the system at the planetary scale. The concepts that underlie this view define “nature as a set of probabilities” (Botkin 124) and as a “network [of] processes occurring simultaneously, interconnected yet independent” (129). In this view the natural world is a *system*, “an integrated whole whose properties cannot be reduced to those of its parts” (Capra 43). Moreover, “systems thinking is process thinking; form becomes associated with process, interrelation with interaction, and opposites are unified through oscillation” (267). Proponents of systems thinking advocate a change in the way humans conceive the earth, as they attempt to escape from the reductionist views of the world by delving into the metaphor of the complex and dynamic system.

This novel systemic understanding altered ecologists’ understanding of local ecosystems. More particularly, the new ecology’s definition of ecosystems shifted from
stasis and definiteness to dynamism and arbitrariness. Indeed it stressed the fact that an ecosystem is a constructed “model of ecological phenomena that reveals some things and hides others” and is also “a set of relationships or processes that take place at multiple spatial and temporal scales” (Warren 531). The new ecology of the 1980s and 1990s therefore worked against Frederic Clements’s notions of equilibrium and succession, as well as against holistic universalization of ecological laws. In other words, new ecology conceived of ecosystems as “indeterminate, unpredictable, nonlinear … constantly in flux [and conceived of their] behavior [as] highly dependent on context” (532).

The new conception of ecosystems relies on the physicists’ notion of complexity, notably the fact that systems are composed of “more than a few (but not astronomically large) number of parts [and are characterized by] extensive connectedness” (Slocombe 332). Each of the parts of the system – or subsystems – are themselves processes, and the system’s interconnectedness may vary in scale (from local to global), in nature (from sociocultural to ecological, including economic) and in structure (from individual to organizational). Moreover, the overall aspect of the system “may change in major, qualitative, and sudden ways, and exhibit patterns of change over time that are themselves very complicated or even complex … [These patterns] of change may seem completely random, or ‘chaotic,’ never repeating or showing any noticeable pattern at all” (332). The rise of complexity theory and nonlinear dynamic systems is a clear response to the myths of a balanced nature whose stability and equilibrium could be broken down into separate parts, studied and analyzed individually.15

This leads us to a crucial point in the application of systems theory to ecology. In a world conceived as an interconnected system, itself composed of subsystems, themselves composed of subsubsystems, etc., where does the individual human organism stand in all this? An answer lies in the differentiation between first-order and second-order systems theory. Whereas first-order cybernetics focuses on observed systems per se, thereby

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15 If new ecology moved on to more complex understandings, it is to be noted that popular consciousness, aided by flawed representations in the media, is still very much pervaded by metaphors of the world-as-machine.
excluding the human, second-order cybernetics acknowledges the fact that humans who
observe systems are "also ‘a part of’ the reality they [are] studying" (Bergthaller 220), and
therefore part of the system they observe. In that framework, the observer shifts “her interest
from the properties of the world as it is in itself … to the properties of the observer who has
brought it forth” (221). By defining human beings as part of the ecological system, and
therefore as one of its subsystems, second-order systems theory could spread to branches
of knowledge interested in the study of humans, such as psychology, anthropology, biology,
geography, and more important for this thesis, literary theory. Systems theory would allow
these disciplines to escape causal linearity and instead adopt systemic relationality.

The largest natural system referred to here and relevant for this thesis is the planet earth, also called the biosphere. The biosphere is composed of the earth-environment and
of life. In this vision of the earth-as-system, living beings are not apart from the system, but
belong to it, just like their collective environment. In other words the earth-environment –
\textit{i.e.}, the totality of abiotic entities – is as much composed of and influenced by Life – \textit{i.e.}, the
totality of biotic entities, the living organisms – as it composes and influences Life. Conceiving of the biosphere as a system entails thinking of environment and life as
interconnected, mutually influencing one another on a global scale. In this context, the
biosphere is dynamic: both the earth-environment and Life coevolve, shaping one another as various geological and biological events occur. In this last view, there is no preconceived
environment or preconceived organism, but rather a dynamic organism-environment
system.

This view of earth-as-system is different from the conception of the world as a
machine: a machine is composed of parts the behavior of which can be studied
independently, whereas a system must be studied as a whole, its parts being causes and
effects of one another. The other difference is that a machine exists in itself, as an object
separated from its wielder. A machine can be studied in isolation – spatial or temporal –
and can be measured independently, but a system necessarily encompasses its observer.
In other words the observer belongs to the system; an observer causes the system to
change, but is changed by it all the while.
The holistic simultaneity and relationality that characterize complex systems render any attempt at universalization irrelevant. Human systems are complex and dynamic, which makes them immeasurable as static objects. In this way, systems are better understood as evolving sets of processes that are continuously caught in a process of transformation. This complexity can be glimpsed intellectually and conceptually, but as Bateson shows, it will always elude consciousness, for an individual’s consciousness is part of the system. To put it differently, as soon as my consciousness attempts to grasp the meaning of the system, this act of making sense has already changed the system. The metaphor of the world-as-system thus operates a shift from the certain to the probable, from the absolute to the relative, from the orderly to the random, from the static to the dynamic.

Thinking of the world as a system composed of processes that are simultaneous, interconnected, interdependent, and that can appear random, offers a perspective that enables humans to reconnect with their surroundings and feel a sense of belonging that was severed by mechanistic materialism. Indeed, in the earth-as-system image, there is no radical ontological distinction between living and non-living. Moreover, the important lesson of second-order cybernetics is that the observer ought to be self-aware of her position and participation in the observed system. The move from the mechanic environment to the systemic environment was accompanied by a transformation of scientific disciplines.

**The Organism-Environment Relationship in Science**

Relativist attitudes towards the world co-emerged with new ways of speaking about the relationships between human communities and their surroundings. Acknowledging that human undertakings had an impact on the ecological processes that underlie the earth-as-system was an important step in reestablishing humankind as immanent in the fabric of the world, as enmeshed in the total environment. This shift of environmental consciousness spread in the second part of the twentieth-century. It triggered the need for new concepts and new scientific disciplines that would better explain this new epistemological position. Below I offer a broad yet brief overview of some of these transdisciplinary endeavors.
Cybernetic Anthropology: Gregory Bateson

One of the early proponents of the application of the findings derived from systems theory to the study of human beings was Gregory Bateson. More particularly, his collection of essays *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, published in 1972, is a synthesis of various concerns of the 1950s and 1960s; its framework is the concept of ecology and it draws inspiration from the interdisciplinarity of systems theory and the movements of the 1960s, notably the anti-war, civil rights and environmentalist movements (Gersdorf and Mayer 15).

Bateson tried applying cybernetic principles to the study of mind, which resulted in the elaboration of a “cybernetic epistemology” (Bateson 467) that rethought the place of humans, of their mind and of their consciousness in the world and in evolutionary processes. Reflecting on the basic unit of survival, Bateson argues that in the light of first-order cybernetics, “the flexible environment must also be included along with the flexible organism because … the organism which destroys its environment destroys itself. The unit of survival is a flexible organism-in-its-environment” (Bateson 457). The full extent of cybernetic thinking makes it possible to connect biological evolution to cultural evolution, both being part of the lives of every human organism-in-its-environment, themselves part of a broader ecological system. Bateson’s most important and perhaps his most extreme contribution is the notion that our minds reside in our interaction with the environment, or in his words, in “the relevant total information-processing, trial-and-error completing unit” (466). Indeed, by adding “trial-and-error” to the definition of mind-as-cybernetic-system, Bateson erases the dichotomy mind-matter, and instead embraces the organism-environment system as the basic unit for studying human behaviors and cultures.

Gregory Bateson also advanced the field of second-order cybernetics, by reflecting on human’s inability to know fully the system to which they belong without reducing it and thus denaturing it. Indeed, from a phenomenological perspective the interconnectedness of the organism-environment-as-system – and thus of the world-as-system – can never be accessible in its totality and is bound to remain incomprehensible. Bateson argues that consciousness is always a reduction of the ecological and mental system in which it exists. Being able to only perceive “arcs” of the system we belong in, as humans we are faced with
a puzzle that we cannot solve on our own for the simple reason that our consciousness of the cybernetic system is part of the latter’s process of becoming. In other words, since our mind is part of the environment, when we get to know our environment, automatically we know something that has already been transformed. When “partial truths” (144) are put together – in the case of a scientific discipline for instance – the result is a distorted view of the system, largely underlain by the very “phenomena we wish to understand or explain” (Bateson 464). Acknowledging one’s position in relation to the system one observes therefore becomes an important part of the scientific process of description: it is a necessary acknowledgement of one’s situatedness.

A necessary means, according to Bateson, of embracing the “systemic nature of mind” (145), and thus the systemic nature of organism-environment relationship, is artistic representation. Indeed, since “[a]rtistic skill is the combining of many levels of mind – unconscious, conscious, and external – to make a statement of their combination” (470), artistic representations can be a tool for “realizing – [for] making habitual – the other way of thinking [i.e., the systemic view of the world] – so that one naturally thinks that way when one reaches for a glass of water or cuts down a tree” (468). In Bateson’s writings, art “has a positive function … in correcting a too purposive view of life and making the view more systemic” (147). Many environmental degradations that threaten the biosphere-as-we-know-it – and particularly the conditions allowing human societies to thrive – come from humans’ difficulty to understand their belonging to a complex dynamic system. The emergence of a consciousness informed by ecology and its adoption by human communities is therefore contingent on the diffusion of artistic representation informed by, similar to or compatible with systems theory.

**Evolutionary Biology: Richard Lewontin**

This focus on the organism-environment has also been a central point in evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin’s thinking. It was already present in his article “Gene, Organism and Environment” published in 1983, but was fully developed in his 2000-book, *The Triple Helix*. Attempting to counter the growing importance of genes in explaining the human, and
particularly the way some scientific discourses tend to reinforce the metaphor of the world-as-machine, Lewontin uses systems thinking – although not without criticizing it – to better explain how organism and environment cannot be disentangled in evolutionary biological views.

Lewontin writes against the simplistic conception of evolution as a one way cause-and-effect process based on the metaphor of “adaptation.” Instead, he proposes the concept of “construction” (48), which is central to his argument. It leads him to reassert the meaning of the word “environment”:

> Just as there can be no organism without an environment, so there can be no environment without an organism. There is a confusion between the correct assertion that there is a physical world outside of an organism that would continue to exist in the absence of the species, and the incorrect claim that environments exist without species … An environment is something that surrounds or encircles, but for there to be a surrounding there must be something at the center to be surrounded. The environment of an organism is the penumbra of external conditions that are relevant to it because it has effective interactions with those aspects of the outer world. (48-49)

By stressing the distinction between the “physical world” and the “environment of an organism,” Lewontin makes an important point. First, an organism should always be envisioned in relation to the environment that surrounds it. Then, his use of the phrase “effective interactions” to name the connection between organism and environment is crucial, for it implies that this connection is reciprocal, as opposed to the one-way causality entailed by the notion of adaptation, and that the connections have to have an “effect.” In that sense, the environment of an organism is not static nor unchanging, but contingent on the organism. By taking the organism as point of reference Lewontin details what these “effective interactions” consist in, i.e., determination, construction, alteration, modulation and transduction. These five processes are used by Lewontin to escape the rigidity and objectification of the environment as envisioned by mechanistic materialism to instead offer a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between organism and environment. In this view, the environment is understood as relative: both organism and environment coevolve in a common process (51-63).
By acknowledging the mutual influence of organism and environment, Lewontin asserts the dynamism and complexity of evolution and critiques the oversimplification of causal and holistic theories of life. Lewontin's main argument against holism, and particularly holism that makes use of quantum and relativity physics is the scale and nature of the observed systems. In contrast with simple and homogeneous systems in chemistry and physics, “organisms are internally heterogeneous open systems” (113-114). Biological systems are more complex than physical systems, and are often not underlain by unchanging universal rules, which makes their prediction and study all the more complex. Lewontin however does not address the human system *per se*, and therefore we are left with a situation even more intricate. For as is clear, the complexity of human-environment systems is complicated by the overlapping subsystems of consciousness, language and art. This means, to borrow Lewontin's words, that when studying the human organism-environment system, we need to acknowledge that humans are as much *biologically* heterogeneous and open as they are *socioculturally* heterogeneous and open. In order to study human-environment processes, biology is not enough, and anthropology becomes necessary.

**Ecological Anthropology: Tim Ingold**

The notion of an organism-environment system coined by Bateson has been developed by Tim Ingold in the field of ecological anthropology. In his book *The Perception of the Environment*, Ingold's explicit aim is “to replace the stale dichotomy of nature and culture with the dynamic synergy of organism and environment, in order to regain a genuine ecology of life” (16). To do so, Ingold deconstructs the underlying Cartesian dualism present in social, cultural and cognitive anthropology, and offers a theory of ecological anthropology where processes such as “thinking, perceiving, remembering and learning have to be studied within the ecological contexts of people's interrelations with their environments” (171). Ingold calls for a transdiscipline that would tackle human perceptions, actions and cognition while at the same time considering humans as going through a process of becoming (or enminded embodiment) as organism-in-their-environment. In other words,
ecological anthropologists ought to study “how people perceive, act, think, know, learn and remember within the settings of their mutual, practical involvement in the lived-in world” (171). By focusing on human organisms, Ingold also includes skill, language and art in his analysis of the “whole-organism-in-its-environment” (19).

Ingold envisions skilled practice as the becomingness of an organism-environment: “the skilled practitioner consults the world, rather than representations (rules, propositions, beliefs) inside his or her head, for guidance on what to do next” (2002, 164), and therefore, “[m]ost cultural learning takes place through trial-and-error and practice” (164). Skills are central to Ingold’s argument; they represent the continuous interaction that takes place as humans engage with the world – he even describes them as “properties of the whole system of relations constituted by the presence of the practitioner in his or her environment” (401). Moreover skills allow Ingold to avoid the simplistic assumption that cultural learning is a simple one-way acquisition of preformed information. On the contrary, learning arises from “trial-and-error and practice” and an attentive engagement with the world.

Ingold details the notion of skills and applies it to language. Speaking is indeed “closely attuned and continually responsive to the gestures of others” (401). It should be considered a skilled practice, an “achievement of the whole organism-person in an environment” (401), for speakers “are forever improvising on the basis of past practice in their efforts to make themselves understood in a world which is never quite the same from one moment to the next” (401). Ingold’s inclusion of speaking as skilled practice allows him to bridge the dichotomy nature-culture, or mind-matter. By refusing to see speech as separated from the physical world, and by insisting on the notion of speaking as an organism-environment process, and not as a disembodied logocentric abstraction, Ingold recasts language in a new light, indeed in an ecological anthropological light. Ingold also includes writing as a skilled process of organism-environment (403). Whether handwriting or typewriting is considered, Ingold repositions writing as a skilled practice whose textual trace crystallizes the learning process that has led to the inscribing process itself. Relying on the etymology and metaphor of weaving, Ingold demonstrates that far from being anodyne, the writing process is on the contrary something that develops as an organism-
environment interaction. Ingold therefore understands language as *emergent* in the processes of speaking and writing, themselves products of the interaction of organism and environment. For Ingold, language is not disconnected from the world, nor does it stand on another ontological level. On the contrary, *languaging* (i.e., a hybrid of language and engaging) is very much a process, a linguistic engagement. In that sense, to go back to Ingold’s definition of skills, language is not learned through the acquisition of rules, but through trial-and-error, through imitation and improvisation, through the organism’s consultation of the world.

Ingold’s undertaking of shattering the nature-culture divide is complemented by his rethinking of the function of art. Drawing from anthropological studies of First Australians (Pintupi of the Gibson Desert of Western Australia) and Native American (Koyukon of Alaska), Ingold explains that Pintupi and Koyukon “songs, stories and designs serve to conduct the attention of performers *into* the world, deeper and deeper, as one proceeds from outward appearances to an ever more intense poetic involvement” (2002, 56). In this account of the Pintupi and Koyukon usage of “songs, stories and designs,” he argues that artistic representations, like speaking and writing, do not reside in a separate mental ontology, but are on the contrary very much part of the human-environment process of becoming. In other words, art participates in the organism’s skilled practice of the environment, by enhancing it and creating an “intense poetic involvement” with the world. Here, Ingold’s use of the term “poetic” is significant. The Greek root *poiein*, “to create, to make,” together with the organism’s intensified involvement with the world through art, blurs the distinction between perception and action. Indeed, the perception of artistic representation comes to be seen as a skilled practice blending the artwork, the organism and the environment. In that sense, “reading” art cannot be dissociated from “performing” the organism-environment process.

In his book *Perception of the Environment*, Ingold redefines important human processes in the light of Gregory Bateson (cybernetics), Richard Lewontin (biology), James Gibson (psychology) and Indigenous art (North American Koyukon and Australian Pintupi). This transdisciplinary approach allows Ingold to formulate a new account of life as “the
creative unfolding of an entire field of relations within which beings emerge and take on the particular forms they do, each in relation to the others” (19). Life is therefore “the very process wherein forms are generated and held in place” (19). The creative emergence of form is therefore the center of Ingold’s definition of the process of life. In this light, skills, art and language appear as spatiotemporal crystallizations of this “unfolding … field of relations.” Ingold’s commitment to reunifying the study of linguistic phenomena, ecological behaviors and artistic practices as subprocesses of the organism-environment interaction, makes his research a crux in the argument of this thesis.

After having explained the process of becoming of the individual organism-in-its-environment, Ingold’s next step would be to attempt explaining communities as an interweaving of life trajectories. As he puts it, the world is a “meshwork of entangled lines of life, growth and movement … what is commonly known as the ‘web of life’ is precisely that: not a network of connected points, but a meshwork of interwoven lines” (Ingold, 2011, 63). The metaphor of the meshwork allows Ingold to explain phenomena that are not directly perceptible by human organisms. Indeed, there is a point where in order to make sense of things they do not directly experience, humans need representation. In that sense, the meshwork is a crystallization of this continuous weaving of various processes of becoming. By adopting the metaphor of “lines” to describe the becomingness of the organism-environment process, Ingold acknowledges the latter’s dynamism and open-endedness.

When it comes to human beings, the direct environment of the organism not only exists as concrete perceived phenomena, but as imagined events as well. Representations – songs, stories, paintings, drawings, and so on – allow human beings to extend their field of engagement with the world, by allowing humans to create neural patterns of experiential processes they have never directly performed, but only recreated from linguistic or artistic representations. In some ways, the differentiation between environment and space is blurred because of that intrusion of semiotic representation into human consciousness. The same can be said of topographical maps: they help the human organism situate himself,

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16 Ingold steps away from the notion of “network” because of its apparent rigidity, where the emphasis is on distinct fixed coordinates.
and bring to his consciousness elements of his environment that he would not have been aware of. This is why, despite their shortcomings and often criticized dualistic positioning, cognitive sciences must be addressed when one studies the relationship between organism and environment. Cognitive science can help to bridge the gap between space and environment.

**Embodied Cognition**

In the introduction to their book *The Phenomenological Mind*, Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi retrace the emergence of cognitive sciences, and more particularly the rise of embodied approaches to cognition in the 1990s as a response to computational models (Gallagher and Zahavi 5). They explain that “behaviorism” – which emerged at the beginning of the 1910s, peaked in the 1950s and was abandoned in the 1970s – represented “a shift away from the interior life of the mind and the method of introspection [and a] shift to behavior and [to an] emphasis on the measurement of observable action” (Gallagher and Zahavi 3). More precisely, the proponents of methodological behaviorism “argued for scientific psychology as the experimental study of observable and measurable behavioural responses to external stimuli” (Rakova 115). However, behaviorism implied that there existed a simplistic causality linking stimulus and behavior. This naivety was criticized, and after 1950, “[b]ehaviourism [was] replaced by cognitive approaches that returned to the earlier interest in the interior processes of mental life, this time armed with computational models developed in computer science, and more recently, all of the scientific advancements in brain research” (Gallagher and Zahavi 3).

Notions of embodied cognition emerged as a response to the reinforcement of the Cartesian dichotomy operated by cognitive studies, with the effect that “in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, researchers again focused on attempts to understand and explain consciousness” (Gallagher and Zahavi 3). At the core of embodied cognition is the fact that cognition is always situated in a body and in an environment. More precisely, it is held that cognition arises from the very interaction of organism and environment.
Among the proponents of an embodied view of cognition, some like Gallagher and Zahavi have used phenomenology to avoid the pitfall of the subject-object and mind-matter dichotomies and offer a more fruitful application of cognitive studies to the study of experience and perception. The “overarching claim” of their book, as they put it, is that “phenomenological-based theoretical accounts and descriptions can complement and inform ongoing work in the cognitive sciences … [T]hey can do so in a far more productive manner than the standard metaphysical discussions of, say, the mind–body problem that we find in mainstream philosophy of mind” (Gallagher and Zahavi 10). By drawing on the long history of phenomenological accounts, Gallagher and Zahavi do not attempt to replace cognitive studies, but rather to enrich them (9). As an investigation of experience, phenomenology proves an interesting approach to the study of the reception of literary texts and environmental ideas.

The concepts of intentionality and embodiment are particularly useful in the case of the study of the organism-environment process, for they point to the situatedness of consciousness both in the body and in the environment. Gallagher and Zahavi define intentionality as “a generic term for the pointing-beyond-itself proper to consciousness … Intentionality has to do with the directedness or of-ness or aboutness of consciousness, i.e. with the fact that when one perceives or judges or feels or thinks, one’s mental state is about or of something” (109). This “pointing-beyond-itself” hints at the inseparability of organism-environment, and more precisely at the fact that consciousness itself is contingent upon this relation.

In order to better understand the notions of embodiment and embodied mind, Gallagher and Zahavi draw on Husserl and Merleau-Ponty’s distinction between the objective body and lived body. The objective body is the body perceived as an object, and usually from the rational point of view of neurology, physiology or anatomy. It is “the objectification of a body, which is also, nonetheless, lived” (136). They go on and say that “If we are taking this perspective on the body, we are taking a third-person perspective – examining the body as something that we, as subjects, can observe as an object” (136). It could be argued that the objective body is the one dealt with by the Cartesian tradition. It is
a body detached from consciousness, because of the object-subject gap. By contrast, phenomenology addresses the *lived body*, or the “body as subject, as experiencer, as agent, rather than the body as object, as thing experienced” (136). In that sense, the body “is not a screen between me and the world; rather, it shapes our primary way of being-in-the-world” (137). Indeed, perception and cognition are situated, which means that “the lived body with which I perceive and act … is in constant connection with the world … [M]y body is integrated with the world. To be situated in the world means not simply to be located someplace in a physical environment, but to be in rapport with circumstances that are bodily meaningful” (137). By addressing two perspectives on the body – the body as object, the body as subject – phenomenology takes as intellectual origin the situatedness of consciousness, and thus opens up a new way of understanding the organism-environment relationship. Indeed, as they put it, “the notion of embodiment, the notion of an embodied mind or a minded body, is meant to replace the ordinary notions of mind and body, both of which are derivations and abstractions” (135). By stepping away from the abstract derivations established by Cartesian dualism, the phenomenology of minded embodiment and embodied mind has placed subjective experience back to the center of academic scope in the twentieth century. It can therefore be said to have played an important role in the emergence of the study of the organism-environment entity as process.

The relationship between language and embodied cognition is the core of Rolf Zwaan’s research. With the study of how language can trigger situational memories, including perceptual, emotional and motor recollections, Zwaan and Pecher show that “[w]ords and grammar are viewed as a set of cues that activate and combine experiential traces in the mental simulation of the described events” (2005, 224), or in other words that language acts as a set of cues to recreate a fictional experience. This view posits that sound patterns (in relation to speaking) or visual patterns (in relation to writing) be associated with experience. Considering linguistic environments as cues that activate experiential traces of past interactions necessarily entails a connection between language, body and world. If one considers that linguistic constructs are experiential, then it means that they belong to the
organism-environment process. In this light, reading and listening are not disembedded and disembodied, but situated in the interaction of organism and environment.

If embodied cognition accounts for individual organisms, it leaves out social relations. Phenomenology can be of help when it comes to explaining intersubjectivity. Gallagher and Zahavi, as they discuss the relevance of simulation theory – how “our understanding of others exploits our own motivational and emotional resources” (174). Gallagher and Zahavi argue that the meaning of the term “simulation” does not capture the intersubjective quality of the perception of others, for it seems to confine simulation and empathy within the cognitive system whereas it should be considered an intersubjective process (179). By contrast, they explain that perception – at the phenomenological level, it is important to clarify – is already meaningful. Indeed, as they put it, “[e]xpressive behaviour is saturated with the meaning of the mind; it reveals the mind to us” (185). Therefore, when one perceives someone else’s actions, one also perceives their meaning without needing to interpret it (185).

When it comes to the study of intersubjectivity, cognitive views that focus on the cognitive system as dissociated from the environment – although open to it – fail to grasp the importance of the meaning-saturated world and meaning-saturated actions of its subjects in relation to the development of cognitive systems. In that sense, phenomenology and cognitive studies should both strive to better understand the incorporation of various cognitive systems in a community, or socioecological environments, if they want to pretend to explain cognition. Therefore, in agreement with Gregory Bateson, Tim Ingold, Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, I believe that the proposition that “the environment is part of the cognitive system” is a necessary and useful step to take in order to better understand the organism-environment process. Ultimately, to understand how a multiplicity of organism-environment processes make up the meshwork of life, phenomenology and ecology must be brought together. This is what Ingold’s ecological anthropological undertaking is all about; and in a way, it is also what explains the resurgence of traditional ecological knowledge as a valid way of investigating human-world relations at the end of the twentieth century.
Traditional Ecological Knowledge

One way of integrating the organism-environment process is to look at the notions of intersubjectivity and community. In this context, indigenous ways of knowing have become an example of this way of understanding the human-world relationship. The ecologist Fikret Berkes defines it in *Sacred Ecology*:

> traditional ecological knowledge [ought to be understood] as a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment. … Traditional ecological knowledge is a way of knowing; it is dynamic, building on experience and adapting to changes. It is an attribute of societies with historical continuity in resource use on a particular land. (7–8)

Though there exist competing definitions of traditional ecological knowledge, as well as debates about the very terminology used to refer to it, and even a controversy about the possibility to generalize heterogeneous and spatially unrelated practices, beliefs and knowledge, Berkes’s definition captures its essence. What is crucial when one deals with traditional ecological knowledge is to acknowledge that there is no clear separating boundary between knowledge, belief, and practice, or between sociocultural and ecological systems: traditional ecological knowledge (including belief and practice) is attached to a specific place, i.e., the environment with which belief, knowledge and practice have coevolved. Moreover, traditional ecological knowledge is not instrumental in nature.

Berkes identifies the emergence of traditional ecological knowledge as a recognized method of ecological investigation and management in the 1980s. As he puts it, the “[g]rowing interest in traditional ecological knowledge since the 1980s is perhaps indicative of two things: the need for ecological insights from indigenous practices of resource use, and the need to develop a new ecological ethic in part by learning from the wisdom of traditional knowledge holders” (19). However it is only in the 1990s that it “transcended academic circles and spilled into the popular media” (21). He explains that this popularization is the result of a variety of factors (21-22), and among these possible causes, he cites as the driving forces the “[d]issatisfaction with a science that places an artificial divide between mind and nature … and a reaction to the materialist tradition in ecology, economics, and resource management” (30-31). In this sense, the *renaissance* of traditional
ecological knowledge may be understood as a counter-discourse of resistance against colonial and capitalist sciences of environmental management. The growing audibility and visibility of indigenous land rights in the second part of the century coincided with the emergence of environmentalism. Similarly, a second phase of acknowledgment of indigenous epistemology and ontology, when traditional ecological knowledge became popular outside of academic circles, coincided in the 1990s with the rise of new ecology.

The important features of traditional ecological knowledge are that it is situated locally and that it usually blurs the boundaries between human, land and animals, as well as between knowledge, practice and culture. In that sense, traditional ecological knowledge provides an alternative way of thinking the relation between the organism-environment process and intersubjective communities, and it is an example of a re-appropriation of space by local communities (Murphet 132). The worldwide indigenous reclamation of space taken from the original owners by colonialism and capitalism can therefore serve as an example for non-indigenous communities to reclaim a sense of the local in the globalized world.

**Dwelling as Organism-Environment Relationship: Towards Literature and Literary Analysis**

I would like to conclude this section on relativist attitudes towards the environment and this review of environmental awareness with the notion of “dwelling.” In my opinion, dwelling embodies the confluence of phenomenology and ecology, but also of discourse analysis and systems theory. Dwelling, however, is more than a simple reference to habitation. When understood as a verb in the context of phenomenology, dwelling denotes a specific way of living that does not separate being, knowing and doing, but rather integrates them in one process. Dwelling arises when one considers that life is the skilled practice of the emerging material world.

It was Martin Heidegger who made the notion of “dwelling” central in his seminal essay “Building Dwelling Thinking.” He makes the case through etymology that “to be” really means “to dwell” and explains that “[t]he way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is buan, dwelling. To be a human being means to be
on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell” (Heidegger 349). Later, Heidegger explains that “[t]he relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, thought essentially” (359). In this context, “dwellling” also entails an acknowledgment of one’s environment for what it is, without projecting one’s mind onto it: it is a “staying with things” (353), in the sense of “saving,” “sparing,” “preserving,” “caring for,” and “looking after” the environment without “mastering” or “subjugating” it (352-353). Sometimes, Heidegger’s essay is cryptic, and it is not the aim of this section to dwell too much upon it. However, suffice to say that Heidegger was influential on two scholars who themselves exert an important influence in this thesis: Tim Ingold and Jonathan Bate.

Ingold explains that the dwelling perspective is a way of investigating the organism-and-environment as one totality, as one being-in-a-lifeworld (2011, 11). Bate extends this view to the study of literary texts. He explains that to read ecopoetically is to enter in a dialogical relationship with the work; it is a way of investigating the reading-organism-and-the-linguistic-environment as one totality (266). Both scholars have in common their rejection of Cartesian dualism and mechanistic materialism. Dwelling is therefore to be read as an alternative way of being, knowing and living. Far from separating the organism from its environment, far from dissociating knowing from being and doing, dwelling seeks to reestablish a sense of co-emergence that reconciles cognition, physiology and ecology.

Ultimately, the dwelling perspective allows scholars and non-scholars to move away from a dissociated self and towards an integrated organism-and-environment process. This shift in perception and conception is an important step towards solving several sociocultural and ecological issues that have begun to plague contemporary societies (Capra). Whether the diffusion of the dwelling perspective ultimately proves effective to remedy the ecological alterations brought upon our collective habitat remains to be seen. For now, the self-aware, critically acute, and dynamic perspective of dwelling is but a peripheral counterdiscourse working against the still dominant discourse of individualism, instrumentalism, progress and growth.
1.4 Environmental Attitudes in Environmental Fiction

The complexity, scope, breadth, and enmeshment of extractivist, protectivist and relativist theories and practices in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries make them difficult to apprehend. Studying literature can yield a good insight into how environmental attitudes have intertwined in the twentieth century to ultimately lead to the emergence of environmental fiction. I will finish this chapter with a short survey of the epistemic shift in Australian literature, followed by a short commentary on a Canadian novel.

Australian Literature: An Epistemic Shift

During the twentieth century, alongside the advent of ecology and environmental history, Australian literature and historiography have undergone a major epistemic shift. They have set themselves to rethinking the relationship between organism and environment. The effects of colonialism, notably the oppression, marginalization and alienation it had caused to both settler and indigenous communities, allied with the rise of ecology, climate studies and environmentalism would transform the historical and literary landscapes in a profound way. Tom Griffiths explains that the ecological perspective has offered the possibility of critically rethinking the language, metaphors and narratives inherited from the settler’s encounter with the “strange land” of Australia (Griffiths, 2013, n.p.). This rethinking has manifested itself in various ways. For instance, the colonists’ “cultural disdain” for indigenous ecosystems has been replaced by a form of “cultural pride in the evolutionary sophistication and fragility of a long-isolated biota” (n.p.). In the same vein, the racist ideology of the social evolutionary framework, in which Aboriginals were considered primitives, has given way to the recognition that Australian Aboriginal societies are “ancient, innovative and adaptive” (n.p.). All in all, the ecological perspective has increased the time-scale of human history in Australia by a factor of ten and has provided contemporary Australians with new narratives of and insights into their society’s interaction with the environment. The reasons behind this epistemic shift are multiple and cannot be reduced to the “western scholarly agenda and [to] the global ecological crisis” (n.p.), for, as Griffiths argues, the shift is also the result of the “settler culture’s slow and fitful adaptation to a
unique ecology and a profoundly Aboriginal place" (n.p.). Therefore, the specificity of Australia, its juxtaposition of local particularisms, its patchwork of histories, places and ecosystems, are at the core of a unique form of environmental history, for after all, “Australian history is like a giant experiment in ecological crisis and management,” (Griffiths, 2007, n.p.) and investigating it can shed light on the relationship between place and knowledge systems.

Alongside the academic reevaluation of Australian history, twentieth century poets, novelists and non-fiction writers also began reimagining the configuration of the main themes of Australian “identity” and “nationhood” – colonization, indigeneity and modernity – in larger spatial and temporal frames, but also in the light of the environmentalist movement and the rise of ecological sciences. Twentieth-century novels, poems and works of non-fiction have contributed to reassess the very nature of Australia as a place by crystallizing the scientific and social changes into literary works that would then be diffused widely throughout the Australian population.

The second half of twentieth-century Australian literature is therefore characterized by a revisiting of the themes of colonization, indigeneity and modernity and their respective influence on the relationship between organism and environment. In the nineteenth century and until the Second World War, the Australian literary imaginary was pervaded by discourses of imperialism and nationalism, where the building of the Nation was the focus, and often was seen in a positive light. A telling example is the myth that surrounds the “frontier”; this myth consisted in describing the settlement of the frontier as a peaceful process. Since the 1980s, however, this narrative was countered by historians¹⁷ who sought to “step outside the imperial, European view of the past in order to embrace a cross-cultural history” (Griffiths, 2003, 136). Borrowing a phrase from W.E.H. Stanner, the “great Australian silence,” Tom Griffiths analyzes this phase of denial of the devastating effects of colonization: the denial, he says, was not fully conscious, for it was “embedded in metaphor and language and in habits of commemoration” (Griffiths, 2003, 138), thereby making it...

¹⁷ Among them, Griffiths cites Greg Dening, Inga Clendinnen, Paul Carter and Anne Salmond.
“discernible and palpable” (138). Griffiths explains that the “euphemisms of the frontier, laconic and sharp, entered Australian language. Aborigines were ‘civilised’ or ‘dispersed’ or ‘pacified’, white settlers went on a ‘spree’ and boasted of the ‘black crows’ they had shot” (138). With the advent of postcolonial counterdiscourses, this narrative of the building of the Nation, however, was challenged.

From the infancy of Australian literature and the accounts of the first explorers and settlers at the end of the nineteenth century, critical literary debates have been influenced by the continent’s environments (Clark, 2007, 429). More precisely, the peculiar temporality (seasons for instance are quite different from European seasons), spatiality (it is a huge antipodean island), and ecology (Australia is a red desert surrounded by temperate zones in the South and subtropical and tropical zones in the North, but it is also the habitat of unique plants, trees, animals and a unique set of Aboriginal cultures and ways of life) have given a particular color to colonial discourses of Australia as a place and as a Nation. Literary texts of the second part of the twentieth century however counter the initial colonial appraisal of Australia; these texts are characterized by a critical reevaluation of three components of Australia as a place: its relationship with the British Empire, with the Indigenous population, and with the continent’s ecologies.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the genre of the novel began challenging the “undermined confidence in the powers of democratic order and the future promised by technology” (Lever 498). The First World War, the Depression and the Second World War transformed the intellectual landscape in Australia and cast doubts on modernity by instigating a rethinking of the “Nation.” One writer was particularly influential in this criticism of national Australia: Patrick White. If the novel was an important source of counterdiscursive practices, one must not forget that poetry, notably the poems of Judith Wright, was just as influential in rethinking Australian history and society.

In the same vein non-fiction writing already provided a criticism of colonialism and pastoralism. The example of Francis Ratcliffe is telling. Ratcliffe was an economic biologist, or applied ecologist, according to his Oxford mentor Julian Huxley. In the epilogue of his “narrative” (Ratcliffe 314) *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand* (first published in 1938), Ratcliffe...
stated that “the fodder reserve of the semi-desert country is nowhere sufficient to stand up indefinitely to the strain that must be placed on it by pastoral settlement” (322). It was followed by an implacable statement that the “essential features of white pastoral settlement – a stable home, a circumscribed area of land, and a flock or herd maintained on this land year-in and year-out – are a heritage of life in the reliable kindly climate of Europe. In the drought-risky semi-desert Australian inland they tend to make settlement self-destructive” (Ratcliffe 323). Ratcliffe’s pessimism foreshadowed the reevaluation of the ability of modernity to provide the tools to carry out the development of Australia.

Ratcliffe provided an ecological reassessment of the pastoral industry. A historical and discursive reevaluation of the European settlement of Australia would follow later in the twentieth-century, when the settlers began to be perceived as a “colonising force, the frontier workers of the British Empire [who] were not only the progressive bearers of civilised democracy and rebels against imperial culture, but also the displacers and destroyers of another colonised society – the Indigenous people” (Lever 513). This was a radical shift in the perception of the nation. Now the “conquest” of Indigenous Australia was twofold; it was as much sociocultural as it was ecological. Moreover, Aboriginal cultures and ways of life were now perceived as being enmeshed so fully with their ecosystems that the effects of colonization on one was almost immediately transmitted to the other.

In Australia, and up until the 1930s, professional anthropology was embedded in a social evolutionary paradigm that saw Aboriginal communities as representative of a primeval and primitive human way of life. This discourse, which would now be deemed racist, nonetheless remained prevalent in popular culture up until the 1960s, as Indigenous Australians were still represented and perceived as a less advanced type of human, who had remained on a lower stage of the evolutionary ladder (Cowlishaw 62), whereas the superiority of the European culture had enabled it to evolve. The goal of professional anthropologists, then, was to study the evolutionary history of Aboriginal communities to better understand the origins of humanity. But from the 1920s, in conjunction with the

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18 An early example of this view is perhaps Eleanor Dark’s *The Timeless Land*, first published in 1941.
gradual emergence of the academic discipline of anthropology, this paradigm slowly began changing and “Aboriginal ways of life [came to be seen as] a paradigm of the relations between people and nature” (Petersen). Instead of studying Australian Indigenous groups as tokens of evolutionary processes, academic anthropologists sought instead to describe the way they functioned, their internal principles, and more interestingly for this thesis, their interaction with their environment.

This shift in perspective was clear in Donald Thomson ecological research on Cape York peninsula in the 1920s and 1930s, and in Arnhem Land in the 1930s (Keen 307; Morphy, 2016, n.p.). It would become even more manifest after the Second World War with the contributions of a new group of scholars, among which T.G.H. Strehlow, and Ronald and Catherine Berndt. Strehlow indeed participated in the theorization of landscape “as both integral to the development of concepts of Self and Other [in Indigenous Australian communities] and as part of the way in which adaptive relations between people and land have been maintained” (Morphy and Morphy 121). Strehlow’s work *Songs of Central Australia*, published in 1971, was an attempt to “preserve and translate the great heritage of sacred Aboriginal song and story, including its essential and constitutive relation to, and celebration of, place” (Mead 560). As for the Berndts, if their interest in the relationships between Aboriginal communities and their environments is evident in their work, in which they reflect on the heavy acculturative pressures upon Aboriginal groups who had recently made contact with Europeans (Tonkinson), it is more particularly so in Ronald Berndt’s *Australian Aboriginal Religion*, in which he describes the relationship between humans and the environment as one of the three main components of Australian Aboriginal religious systems, along with the relationship between “man and man” and “man and gods/spirits/supernatural beings” (Berndt 4).

Howard and Frances Morphy, in their article “The Spirits of the Plains Kangaroo”, explain that “Indigenous people have played a far more active role in outsiders’ constructions of their societies than some theorists have allowed” (Morphy and Morphy 121), and, indeed, as the approach to Aboriginal people shifted in Australian anthropology, it did so in literature as well. The poet Judith Wright exemplifies this shift, for if anthropology
brought Aboriginal ways of interacting with the environment to the fore, Judith Wright politicized this twofold concern of Euro-Australians regarding their own relationship with the land they had invaded and settled upon.

The reevaluation of Australian history and anthropology brought about a rethinking of Australian geography. “A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 8-9). In the case of Australia, Philip Mead explains that in the literature of the contact and settlement periods, the continent was considered “place-less, time-less, and people-less” (Mead 554). This view changed when the scale of Australian human history was reevaluated, and a new Australian “spatial consciousness … profoundly influenced by Aboriginal being” (554) began emerging. Indeed, the rethinking of Australian colonial history also meant reassessing the place of Aboriginal communities in modern Australia. Timeless, placeless and people-less Australia was the Australia of colonialism as represented at the time of terra nullius, but postwar and postcolonial Australia knew better. If precolonial ecologies and cultures were perceived as meaningless in a modern world, with the advent of postcolonial studies, Aboriginal Australia became full of meaning: about time, about space and more importantly, about ecology. The arrival of the First Fleet, the heroic failures of the explorers, the establishment of a pastoral industry, and the development of urbanization, all these historical processes were reassessed by scholars and writers in the light of the invasion, dislocation, oppression, alienation and assimilation of Aboriginal peoples and ways of life. This critical reevaluation, and its conclusion that the European cultural and philosophical heritage may well be dysfunctional when “applied” to Australia, paved the way for “experimentation with adapted modes of being in the world of matter and meaning” inspired by the cultures already present in Australia (R. Gibson 471). In this sense, the epistemic shift brought about by ecology and mentioned by Griffiths at the beginning of this section was also caused by the acknowledgment that Euro-Australians were strangers in Australia.
Euro-Australians as “Strangers”
The reevaluation of Australia as an ecology (instead of as a Nation), as a territory inhabited by myriads of non-European lifeforms, naturally began changing the vision that Euro-Australians had of themselves. Deborah Rose writes that Australian settlers “are paradoxically situated” (Rose, 2004, 5) in that they are building a new society out of hope while destroying the hope of the indigenous inhabitants. Moreover, Australia, is “[f]ounded in disjunction” (5), for she argues, “New World settler societies loosen moral accountability from the powerful constraints of place and time” (5), effectively “detaching people from place” (5) while stripping them of the “feedback of time” (5). On a large scale, according to Rose, this disjunction generates social and ecological catastrophe. On the scale of the organism, it generates a sense of disconnection: the human organism perceives itself as a stranger to the land of which its Nation claims ownership. This ambivalence in the representation of the Euro-Australian stranger-settler is present in the works of Eleanor Dark and the duo M. Barnard Eldershaw, but it reaches an environmentalist climax in the work of Judith Wright, which is imbued with a deep sense of accountability for the impact of colonization on two core elements of Australia: its environment and its Aboriginal people.

*The Timeless Land* by Eleanor Dark was published in 1941 and was the first of a trilogy of historiographic fiction. The novel examines the period of first contact (1788-1792) between the settlers and convicts of the first fleets and the Aboriginal peoples of the region of what is now called Sydney. What is most striking in a novel of the 1940s is that the novel presents the voices and thoughts of Aboriginal people and recasts the arrival of the strangers of the First Fleet as a *shattering interference*, rather than as a peaceful settlement. Moreover, the text acknowledges Indigenous Australians as human beings, with their idiosyncrasies, their internal contradictions, their qualities and their flaws.

The 1940s were a period of reevaluation of the history of colonization, but also of the urbanization and modernization of Australia. This reexamination of the impact of urbanization on Euro-Australian society is manifest in M. Barnard Eldershaw’s novel *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, especially in its embedded narrative that depicts people’s life in the Depression and in the pre- and post-WWII periods, their struggle to
survive a difficult era, and the doubts that sweep Sydney society regarding its place in a rapidly changing and highly competitive world. The text makes clear on several occasions that the main principle that characterizes the life of twentieth-century people is competition, tainted by a capitalist ideology of profit and growth whose most potent symbol is the city. This pervading greed provokes an alienation not only of humans from their environments, but also of cities from the country, and of Australia from the world. The novel therefore functions as a critique of the myth that modernity brings about a better life.

Judith Wright (1915-2000) was a poet, activist and she was a pioneer in environmental philosophy. Two major concerns pervade her creative work: the impact of colonialism and settler society on Australian Aboriginal communities and on the environment (Clark, 2006, 156). From the 1950s onwards, Wright’s poetry and essays helped to shape Australian environmental consciousness by critiquing colonialism and by asserting that the Australian territory was not for Neo-European societies to exploit, but primarily belonged to Australian Indigenous peoples (Plumwood, 2000, 44). In her writings, she “combined powerful rejection of the disaster of [Australian] colonial land culture and its projects of conquest with powerful insights into the sacred aspects of our experience of the natural world” (44). Wright’s poetic perspective therefore constitutes a major postcolonial critique of the ecological and social effects of the European invasion/settlement of Australia. She formalizes her stance in the essay “Landscape and Dreaming,” where she explains the difficulty for European descendants in understanding Aboriginal cultures. In this essay, she suggests that European languages are somehow incompatible with Aboriginal ways of knowing and being. This difference of conception of the meaning of the land, she argues, is the foundation of terrible socioecological alterations. In the essay, Wright’s deliberate and repeated use of the word “invasion” to describe the interaction of settlers and the Australian land is telling of the interactional episteme that underlies her poems: as a non-Aboriginal person, she cannot forget that she is a stranger to the Australian land, but as the descendent of a European settlers, she cannot but think of Australia as her home. If she makes plain the conflicted relationship between Euro-Australians and the Aboriginal land and its inhabitants, her most important contribution is perhaps to have linked so forcefully
environmentalism and Aboriginal entitlements and issues, thereby making these two threads of her work inseparable, and making clear to the Euro-Australian public the need to reform the Australian episteme.

The Stranger's Interaction with the Environment

The work of Judith Wright signals a significant shift in the way environmental attitudes in Australian literatures are portrayed. The estrangement of Euro-Australian bodies from their environment is taken up in the works of Patrick White and Randolph Stow to the point that the relationship between the stranger’s body and the Australian environment takes center stage. More particularly, their novels shed a sharp light on the inadequacy of Euro-Australians’ interaction with the environment, whether the latter be constructed as awkward in Patrick White, or alienated in Randolph Stow. For these reasons, the two texts belong to the genre of environmental fiction, in which the “nonhuman environment [is] not merely … a framing device but … an active presence” (Buell 25).

For instance, in Voss (1957), which is Patrick White’s fifth novel, the relationship between the protagonist Voss’s organism and his environment is unilateral; it is underlain by a poetics of the ego where “that which surrounds” is objectified and exists only in relation to the subject, as a projection of the subject. In Voss, exploring the landscape amounts to discovering one’s own ego (35), and the country functions as a repository for the mind (41). The relationship between organism and environment is at first idealized as a unilateral projection of the ego onto the landscape, and then materialized as a revelation of the fallibility, ephemerality and materiality of human bodies. In all cases, the environment functions as a catalyst for understanding the self, and this peculiar organism-environment relationship becomes a way of rewriting the Australian national myth of the frontier men, those explorers who allegedly made the territory of the Nation as it is.

Almost twenty years after the publication of Voss, in 1976 White continues his forays into the inadequacy of the European body in Australian environments. In A Fringe of Leaves,
his tenth novel, the awkward body of the stranger is not dramatized through the topic of exploration, but through that of the shipwreck and the ordeal of its main protagonist, Mrs. Roxburgh’s (also known as Ellen Gluyas) along the coast of eastern Australia (her adoption by Aboriginal people, her escape with the convict Jack Chance and her difficult return to Australian “civilized” society). The interaction of Ellen’s organism with the environment – notably that of Fraser Island – evolves throughout the novel, as her body and behavior gradually adapt to the environments – social or physical – she is thrown into. However, Ellen is always in between worlds, always in a process of adapting to new circumstances, forcefully and awkwardly trying to blend in with the community she happens to cross, and often failing to do so. She is never “at home” anywhere; she is a stranger everywhere, and reminiscences of previous social positions frequently come back to haunt her.

In *A Fringe of Leaves*, Patrick White uses the oscillation of the protagonist between two subject positions, Ellen Gluyas and Mrs. Roxburgh, to illustrate the dialogical nature of adaptation. The interaction of Ellen with her environment is one of awkward adaptation and mimicry, and it responds to the assimilative processes she is subjected to. After her departure from Gluyas’s, she is always in a position of inferiority, asked to comply with rules she has not chosen, subjected to circumstances she does not appreciate, uneasy with the situation she is placed in. This awkwardness in adaptation is enacted by her interaction with the environment, which creates a particular narratological effect: the character seems to become more than a literary figure; she emerges as a full-fledged fictional organism who evolves in four-dimensions and in her environment. This is the genius of Patrick White in *A Fringe of Leaves*: not only does he capture the ambivalence of the European stranger in Australia, he is able to make a linguistic construct appear as an organism with agency, and in a way is able to breathe life into Ellen.

The estranged body present in White’s work is a trope that also appears in Randolph Stow’s work *To The Islands* (1958), whose plot revolves around the 67-year-old Heriot, the

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19 The story of Eliza Fraser and her shipwreck in 1836, on which the story is loosely based, seems to have been in Patrick White’s mind since the 1950s, when he first witnessed Sidney Nolan’s paintings depicting the shipwrecked woman (Ungari 2).
leader of a Mission in the North Kimberley, and consists of two parts: Heriot's life in the Mission and his journey of expiation “to the islands” to die after he believes he has accidentally killed an Aboriginal named Rex. The book is named after “the islands of the dead” (19), which are, in the beliefs of the Aboriginal community, both death itself and a resting place for the spirit of the dead. Heriot's interaction with the environment during his journey in the second part of the novel is characterized by an alienation of the organism of the stranger from its environment: in the first part Heriot has alienated himself from the Mission, has lost all prospect of a future; in the second part, during his journey “to the islands” he seeks – yet fails – to dissolve the feeling that he will never be at home in the Australian environment. Heriot’s organism is indeed shut out of the environment. The country is closed to Heriot, and too many of its aspects are inaccessible and unknowable to Heriot’s consciousness. As a result of this interaction with the environment tainted by a sense of melancholic alienation, the journey becomes solitary and inwards. The silence, lack of action and absence of shelter are disturbing, drawing Heriot into himself and forcing him to keep moving and to speak to himself (96). The interaction of Heriot and the territory of the Kimberley is consistently described throughout the novel as unrewarding and unsatisfying, despite the fact that the landscape is perceived as beautiful and majestic. During his journey, Heriot does not manage to reintegrate the material world. Instead, his pattern of interaction only reasserts the alienation he desperately attempts to overcome.

The organism’s alienation from the environment is also represented in *Tourmaline* (1963), Randolph Stow’s fourth novel, which is about life in a small Western Australian community. The novel itself takes its title from the town in which the story takes place. The town of Tourmaline is a small city in Western Australia, isolated from the rest of the world except for the truck that comes once a month to refurnish it with “food and liquor and kerosene” (Stow 14). It is a dying town characterized by blazing heat, drought and water shortage. It is a formerly prosperous mining town now abandoned, whose inhabitants are stuck in a desolate torpor as future prospects are inexistent. The aridity of the regional environment reduces organisms to stillness and silence, rendering them the passive observers of their own dissolution as a community.
The lethargic community is transformed with the arrival of the stranger Michael Random, a water diviner and religious zealot. Random soon takes over the leadership of the town and promises its inhabitants he can find water and reestablish the past grandeur Tourmaline possessed when it was a region for mining gold. However, the transformation that he brings about is short-lived, and when he fails in his attempt to find water, the interaction of the inhabitants of Tourmaline with their region shift back to its previous comatose state.

In their works, Patrick White and Randolph Stow dramatize the inadequacy of the stranger’s interactional pattern and episteme in the Australian environment. Whether due to its awkwardness or to its alienation, to its arrogance or to its melancholy, the stranger’s body is never at ease, at home, or at peace; rather, the interaction of the stranger shows a form of ambiguity in which the body and its environment are discordant. This discordance is reminiscent of Judith Wright’s ambivalent attitude towards the settlement/invasion of Australia, although in White’s and Stow’s novels it is not voiced as such. Instead, the two novelists seem to have integrated Wright’s concerns in the very ecopoetics of their works.

**The Stranger’s Interaction as Trope**

This concern for the relationship between organism and environment is taken up in David Malouf’s work. The specificity of the main fictional organisms of David Malouf’s novels *An Imaginary Life* and *Harland’s Half Acre* is that they are aware of the organism-environment relationship in ways that exceed other characters’ awareness in Stow’s and White’s novels. This can be explained by the nature of Malouf’s protagonists, who are artists who pay particular attention to their surroundings, are aware of their interaction with them, and reflect on it willfully in their art practice. In Malouf, and due to this reflexivity, the organism-environment relationship of the stranger becomes an artistic trope that enables to better understand the evolution of the relationship between Europeans and the Australian environment.

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20 In AIL Ovid is a poet who reflects on his exile; in HHA, Frank Harland is a painter who seeks to reconstitute his father’s estate.
An Imaginary Life, published in 1978, is David Malouf’s second novel. It tells of the Roman poet Ovid during his exile to the outpost of Tomis on the Black Sea, and focuses on Ovid’s life with the barbarian Getae, his adoption of a “wild” child, his attempts at teaching the Child how to be a social being, and finally his departure from Tomis and his journey northward with the Child. The narrative, told from the first-person perspective of Ovid, is about the exiled man’s adaptation to his new socioecological environment, about his rediscovery of what it means to dwell on earth, what it means to be a human organism. Paradoxically, it is a story of both exile and integration, respectively societal and environmental.

In the novel, the relationship between organism and environment is underlain by a poetics of exile that gradually becomes one of dwelling. At the beginning of the novel, the Poet’s interaction with the environment is tainted by sadness and malaise. Exiled from his social environment, Ovid gloomily reflects on his status as stranger, and in the text, the apparently bleak land functions as an externalized projection of the narrator’s mind. In narratological terms, space functions as an objective correlative that helps to characterize the state of mind of the narrator. What is striking, however, is the narrator’s awareness of the link between organism and environment and his deliberate use of language to show that what he is really describing is not the environment, nor the organism, but really the organism-environment relationship. This relationship evolves with time, and Ovid becomes more emplaced. His relationship with his surroundings shifts from being one of exile and becomes one of dwelling: the environment is no longer perceived as a projection of the Poet’s self, but in conjunction with the body, the environment becomes the source of the latter (92-93). By acknowledging the presence of the environment not as a separate reflection of the spirit, but as an integral part of the organism’s individuality, the Poet’s worldview has truly undergone metamorphosis: the inner self is no longer exiled from external objects, but joined to them.

David Malouf’s Harland’s Half Acre was published in 1984. It is the story of a place, the region of Brisbane from the 1900s to the 1970s, and how it is conceived, imagined and perceived by its protagonist Frank Harland, a painter. A child during the First World War,
Frank’s dream is to reclaim the estate lost by his ancestors in the nineteenth century. The narrative presents his years spent on his aunt’s farm, his youth spent in poverty with his father, his years of transiency as a swagman, his life as an artist in Brisbane and his old days on an island of Batemans’ Bay. In his youth, Frank Harland’s estrangement from his environment in Queensland is threefold. He is permeated with a sense of loss for the home of his ancestors in Ireland, is made aware of his position as a stranger in Australia by the presence of Aboriginal sites, and is feeling dispossessed by the loss of the Harland estate in Queensland, gambled, drunk away or simply stolen from his forebears in their short stay on the Australian continent.

From early on in the narrative and in his childhood, Frank Harland’s interaction with the environment is dedicated to recording his perceptions visually. In An Imaginary Life, the interaction of Ovid with his environment was mostly poetic and cognitive, a form of verbalization of his worldview. By contrast, in Harland’s Half Acre, the artist moves away from verbalization and instead embraces a form of aestheticization, which is really the literary representation of his painterly rendering of an organism-environment interaction. This aestheticization is at first informed by his will to reclaim the lost estate of his family, to reconstruct it in artistic form to then win it back. If Frank’s paintings are a record of his ancestor’s estate, it is also a record of his trajectory of life, of his gradual epistemic transformation and realization that if he belongs anywhere, it is “with those who were outside” (43). His estrangement therefore becomes the underlying principle behind his art practice.

In the last section of the novel, Frank’s artistic practice has changed. He no longer seeks to reconstruct a lost estate, but simply to ground his organism in the environment. In many ways, Malouf’s rendering of Frank Harland’s evolution as an artist mirrors the development of the stranger figure in Australian literature. Beginning with nostalgia for the lost environments of Europe, Harland acquires the need to recreate a sense of belonging in Australia by possessing the environment around. But this will to possess is a futile undertaking, Harland finds out, and it is not and will never be enough to truly feel at home. Indeed, it is only in producing an artwork that is “a new emergent form out of the island itself
[] as if it there were continuity in essence, but also in the movement of a real hand over paper, between all the individual parts of this world, and each made object had to be judged first against the natural objects it rose from and among which he now set it down” (187) – it is only in producing such artworks that the organism can be in tune with its surroundings, and can stop thinking of itself as an outsider, but as an insider.

Through the historical figure of Ovid the Poet and of the fictional figure of Frank Harland the painter and plastic artist, Malouf’s texts provide a good example of the evolution of the stranger-figure in Australia. Initially an exile, the Malouf Stranger is made to overcome the feeling of nostalgia and then the temptation of ownership to seek out a new form of interaction with the environment through art. In Malouf’s work, the interaction of the estranged organism with the unfamiliar environment becomes a trope that enables us not only to reflect critically on the history of colonization, invasion and settlement, but also to reimagine the future prospects of the Australian postcolonial society, and the function of art in it.

Environmental Philosophy and the Dialogism of the Organism-Environment Relationship
In the twentieth century, Australian anthropology, history and literature have undergone a significant epistemic shift that acknowledges the deleterious effects of colonization on Australian ecologies and Indigenous populations. This shift was formalized by Judith Wright’s poetry, and it culminates in the environmental philosophy of Val Plumwood, in the anthropological research of Deborah Rose, and in the fictional works of Alexis Wright, who all show the necessity of recognizing the common roots that connect the Othering of the natural world and the Othering of indigenous populations. Plumwood envisions ecofeminism as a movement arising from the critique of patriarchal, imperialist, and anthropocentric modes of thinking. She argues that these modes of thinking use “reason” as a discursive strategy to separate men from women, Europeans from indigenous peoples, and humans from nature (1993, 42). More than a mere separation, this dualism creates what Plumwood calls a “hyperseparation” (49), which is really a system of Othering based
on a radical exclusion of the other, the latter being always constructed as inferior. Hyperseparation “establishes separate ‘natures’” (49) between self and other, and thus “prevent[s] their being seen as continuous or contiguous” (49). Hyperseparation does not only create “a difference of degree within a sphere of overall similarity, but [it produces] a major difference in kind, even a bifurcation or division in reality” (emphasis added; 50). Building on Plumwood, Deborah Rose explains that ecofeminism criticizes those types of discourse that create a “matrix of hierarchical oppositions … where the ‘other’ is effectively an absence” (2002, 176). In this rather perverse discursive strategy, inferiority, absence, and silence are used as justification for monologism. In monologism, Rose explains, “communication is all one way, and the pole of power refuses to receive the feedback that would cause it to change itself, or to open itself to dialogue” (176-177). In that way, Rose continues, “[p]ower lies in the ability not to hear what is being said, not to experience the consequences of one’s actions, but rather to go one’s own self-centric and insulated way” (176-177). In their critique of dualism, Plumwood and Rose propose to adopt a form of empathetic dialogism – where the descendants of European colonizers and settlers ought not to background Aboriginal knowledges, but rather should integrate traditional ecological insights – and where human organisms should not only acknowledge their interconnectedness with the surrounding environmental conditions that enable them to thrive, but should also recognize its communicative potential.

This overview of the epistemic shift in Australian literature has focused on several works of literature that exemplify the estrangement of Euro-Australians from the social and physical environments of the continent. In the next section, I will do the same thing, but instead I will look at how one novel can dramatize this evolution of environmental awareness by making sense of this juxtaposition of environmental attitudes. Following Bate’s statement that a poem can be a revelation of dwelling, and Bateson’s view that art may reveal the systemic nature of our societies, I argue that a complex literary narrative can be a revelation of the entanglement of various environmental attitudes – including dwelling – in an ecosystem. A literary narrative can indeed present complex juxtapositions of contradictory discourses, worldviews and behaviors.
Canadian Environmental History in Jane Urquhart’s *A Map of Glass*

In the 1960s, Gregory Bateson suggested that *art* can aid consciousness in appreciating the systemic nature of mind and its embeddedness in ecology (Bateson 145). This is precisely what the Canadian novel *A Map of Glass* does. In her 2005 novel, Jane Urquhart represents the systemic nature of the region between Lake Ontario and Montreal by dramatizing the entanglement of economy, ecology and ecopoiesis (organism-environment interactions) as a transformative interplay between protectivist, extractivist and relativist attitudes towards the environment. The *oikos*, be it an economic regime, an ecological habitat, or an organism-environment system, then becomes the *topos* (both *conceptual*, as in topic, and *spatial*, as in place) where the plasticity21 of the traces left by human existence is revealed, and where the interactions of organisms, society and environment play themselves out.

In the storyworld of *A Map of Glass*, changes in the economy, changes in the ecology, and changes in the individual interactions of organisms and their environment are *co-constitutive*. Each system (economic, ecological, organism-environment) at the same time gives form to the others and receives form from the others. The narrative illustrates this entanglement of economy, ecology and ecopoiesis by conflating several spatiotemporal scales by means of metafiction and an embedded narrative. By doing so, the text offers its readers an *environmental historicist perspective* where traces of economic exploitation manifest themselves as traces of ecological destruction, as traces of psychological and physiological trauma, and as artistic creations (especially land art). The novel makes plain

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21 Plasticity is a term that is mostly used in neurosciences to talk about the adaptive capabilities of the brain. In *What Should We Do With Our Brain*, Catherine Malabou explains that plasticity is the antonym of rigidity, and that etymologically it refers to the “capacity to receive form” and the “capacity to give form” (5). Talking about the plasticity of something is thinking of it as “modifiable, ‘formable,’ and formative at the same time” (5). Moreover, she says, “plasticity is also the capacity to annihilate the very form it is able to receive or create” (5). If Malabou is here talking about the plasticity of the brain, of the neural system, I believe it can be applied to the plasticity of the oikos, or ecosystem, for as Gregory Bateson puts it, the “mental world – the mind – the world of information processing – is not limited by the skin” (460) but consists in “the relevant total information-processing, trial-and-error completing unit” (466). In this context, “to talk about the plasticity of [a system] means to see in it not only the creator and receiver of form but also an agency of disobedience to every constituted form, a refusal to submit to a model” (Malabou 6). The notion of ecosystemic plasticity is therefore in line with the dynamism and uncertainty that characterize nonlinear complex systems in new ecology (Botkin).
that the depicted world, far from fitting nicely into an economic or ecological model, is in constant transformation, continuously in a process of receiving form from human existence and of giving form to human existence.

In the novel, extractivist environmental attitudes are manifested in the timber, barley and mining industries of 19th and 20th century Canada. These economic undertakings deplete the forest, erode the soil, and overall leave important traces of destruction on the environments of the protagonists. But when these economies collapse, they provoke social disintegration, unemployment and alcoholism, which in turn leave psychological and physiological traces of trauma on the organism of the protagonists. The traces of destruction and trauma generate protectivist responses that often take the form of artistic creations, or poiesis: landscape painting in the case of Branwell Woodman, a scrapbook in the case of Annabelle Woodman, historical geographical accounts in the case of Andrew Woodman, tactile maps in the case of Sylvia Bradle, and land art in the case of Jerome McNaughton.

The peculiarity of A Map of Glass is that it draws attention to the interconnectedness of economy, ecology and ecopoiesis in a certain region by making its protagonists produce ecopoetic art. Ecopoetic art makes manifest and aesthetic (perceivable by the senses) the connections between economy, ecology, physiology and psychology by intertwining the various traces of human existence that are present in a complex socioecosystem. Moreover, the characters’ realization of ecopoetic art lays bare the organism’s entanglement with the system and reveals how the plasticity of this system can alleviate the pressure felt by an individual. By recombining the traces of destruction left by human existence with traces of creation, the figure of the ecopoetic artist participates in the undermining of the deleterious effects of economic exploitation.

Urquhart’s novel traces a new path towards a self-aware organism-environment relationship, thereby making crystal clear the value of ecopoetic metafiction and the value of environmental art in general. By representing how characters, through art, make sense of apparent chaos and find cohesion in collapse, the novel enables its readers to do the

22 In this view, cohesion resides in the process of plasticity and dynamism, whereas chaos lies in the stasis of destruction and closure.
same. The novel as a whole can then be understood as a model for thinking the complexity and nonlinear dynamism of a region’s ecosystem. The individual artists in the novel, especially Andrew Woodman and Jerome McNaughton, who make sense of the plasticity of the traces left by human systems on ecosystems, offer a constructive way of conceiving anthropogenic ecological change: not as a pure trace of destruction, but also as an incentive to produce beneficial relationships for future generations.
2. Econarratology and Postcolonial Ecopoetic Metafiction

In this chapter I argue that the emergence of literary texts with postcolonial, postmodernist and environmentalist undertones, such as *A Discovery of Strangers, The Hungry Tide* and *Carpentaria*, demands new ways of studying the literary representation of the relationships between human organisms, societies, and their environments. To do so, I have developed a form of *postcolonial econarratology*. Postcolonial econarratology is partly a reaction against classical narratology, which sometimes seems to hold that the “universal forms of narrative are … geometric in nature” (A. Gibson 5). I am wary of this tendency of classical narratology to perceive narratives in geometrical terms; it reminds me of colonial attempts at mapping unknown territories on the basis that Euclidian space is the universal basis for the study of geography. If classical narratology does enlighten the structure of certain texts, allowing readers to see the work in a different light, it usually fails to provide an appropriate approach to the ecological dynamism, organicity and unruliness that pervade postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction informed by indigenous epistemologies. In my formulation and application of postcolonial econarratology, by contrast, I put the foundation of narrative analysis not in geometry, but rather in the organism-environment relationship *as depicted in the text*.

I see postcolonial econarratology as an approach to narratives that shifts the emphasis from structure to process and that investigates the interaction of organism and environment in literature as well as the dynamic relation between stories and societies as represented in works of fiction. Postcolonial econarratology is a response to the intellectual shift in the study of narratives, but it is also an approach that responds to an evolution in the fabric of narratives themselves. Monika Fludernik’s work *Towards a Natural Narratology* and Daniel Punday’s *Narrative Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Narratology* attest to the increasing importance that experience, body and consciousness have had in the investigation of literary texts. David Herman also explains that the inability of classical and structuralist narratologists to analyze the “world-creating properties of narrative” (106) has
led narratologists, from the 1990s onwards to focus on how readers “use textual cues to build up representations of the worlds evoked by stories, or storyworlds” (106).23

My assumption in this thesis is that the text can be understood as an ecopoetic process that consists in the fashioning of the storyworld and of the reader’s world. I argue that reading a text is an organism-environment interaction, and I consider that the task of the skilled reader is to use the organism-environment relationships of the diegetic world as cues to self-consciously engage in relating the experience of the work to the experience of the world. This unconventional approach to the study of text is informed by the three texts of this study, and it necessitates that I explain in more details the modalities of this organism-environment interaction. More precisely, the question remains as to how the creation of a storyworld is related to the transformation of the reading organism’s material environment.

In order to account for the link between the fictive and the real, narratology usually uses notions that distinguish the world of the story from the world of the reader, such as character vs. person, dialogue vs. conversation, internal focalization vs. thoughts, and storyworld vs. world. As I will demonstrate, the three main texts of this thesis however unsettle this radical separation between the diegetic world and the extradiegetic world. On the contrary, the novels in their very form make use of the ontological connection between stories and audiences. All the terms of classical narratology cited above denote that the fictional creation initiated by the reader-work interaction is in some ways similar but definitely not identical with the creation initiated by the organism-environment interaction. In my formulation of postcolonial econarratology, the storyworld is inextricably linked to and influential in the creation of the reader’s world. This has for corollary that the storyworld is integrally part of the reader’s world. In other words, each storyworld becomes a subsystem of the reader’s world. The entanglement of storyworld and reader’s world signifies that diegetic ecological processes are entangled with extradiegetic ecological processes. The separation of story and world realized by classical narratology establishes stories and fiction

23 Storyworlds, Marie-Laure Ryan explains, are not “static containers for the objects mentioned in a story but rather dynamic models of evolving situations” (364).
as less able to describe the world than science and facts. Postcolonial econarratology is embodied; it subverts this dissociative view and instead offers an integrative one.

I contend that the poetic creation of the storyworld is connected to the ecological creation of the reader’s world through three main ecopoetic processes: the enactment of organism-environment processes through interactional patterns, the articulation of ecological knowledge through interactional epistemes, and the substantiation of a storyworld through chronotoping. An interactional pattern is a sequence of interactions that permit the imagination of an experiential line of becoming that connects organism and environment. An interactional episteme is a system of ecological knowledge shared by a community; it underlies a human organism’s interactions with their environment. Chronotoping is the process whereby the storyworld acquires cognitive substance, which in turn allows the reader to juxtapose and fuse this substantiated diegetic world with the experiential extradiegetic world. Before delving more into these co-emergent narrative processes, I would like to define more precisely postcolonial environmental literature and postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction.

2.1 Postcolonial Environmental Fiction and Ecopoetic Metafiction

In her novel *A Map of Glass*, Jane Urquhart shows well how, in the passage from colonialism to modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, different environmental attitudes have co-emerged and interacted, and how artistic creation can make sense of this entanglement by providing a systemic view of consciousness, body, environment, art and culture. Urquhart’s novel is a good example of how literary works, between the 1990s and the 2000s, have begun integrating the dialogism of organism and environment as a major component of the storyworld through a thematization of environmental history and historical geography. *A Map of Glass* belongs to the genre of environmental fiction, in which the notion of “environment” is dramatized in an aesthetic way, and in which the “nonhuman
environment [is] not merely … a framing device but … an active presence” (Buell 25). In *A Map of Glass*, however, there is no mention of indigenous peoples. Oddly, the text is not so much concerned with this aspect of colonialism, and rather it focuses on the settlement of Canada without integrating the voices of First Nations people in its texture. In this sense, if Urquhart’s novel belongs to environmental literature, it is not what I would call “postcolonial environmental literature.”

I consider postcolonial environmental fiction as a *poetic reflection on the relationships between organism and environment realized through the prism of postcolonialism*. It is characterized by a critical reflection on the nature and impact of exploration, colonization and modernization (including urbanization, industrialization and globalization) on settler societies and on indigenous socioecosystems. As such, postcolonial environmental texts are characterized by an ecopoetics that is specific to their history, geography and relationship with indigenous peoples.

Postcolonial environmental literature draws heavily on environmental history, and more particularly on the unfolding of the triadic relationship between indigeneity, colonialism and modernity. This historical and counterdiscursive ecopoetics allows us to define the genre of postcolonial environmental literature more precisely: it is concerned (1) with the similarities, differences and contacts between indigenous, colonial and modern ideas,
discourses and metaphors of Nature, Land, Environment, and so on; (2) with indigenous, colonial and modern societies’ attitudes towards the environment; (3) with the similarities and differences between indigenous, colonial and modern ecological behaviors and practices, and their respective impact on one another; and (4) with the contrasts between indigenous, colonial and modern bodies and consciousness as medium to access the environment.

The combination of environmentalism with postmodernist and poststructuralist literary techniques has given a particular spin to some works of postcolonial environmental fiction. These literary works not only dramatize the interaction of organism and environment, but they also aestheticize the connection between indigenous practices, storytelling, organism and environment. When narratives are self-reflexive, they are said to be metafictional. When narratives reflect on the connection between stories and world, between language and experience, between narrative processes and ecological processes, they belong to a genre that I call “ecopoetic metafiction.”

The genre of ecopoetic metafiction dramatizes the interaction of reader and text as much as it reveals the interaction of organism and environment. In this framework, the storyworld comes to life in reading about organisms’ fictional lines of life (interactional patterns) and in making sense of the ecological relations that subtend their environment (interactional epistemes). Ecopoetic metafiction makes use of inscribed readers to draw together the act of reading and the act of living. It emphasizes their connection, and therefore sheds light on the interplay of storytelling, hermeneutics and ontology.

The place given to the environment in postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction unsettles classic narratological notions as well as the whole practice of literary criticism. In this genre, the environment is not in the background, considered only a setting for the scene to unfold. The environment is *even more* than an “active presence” in Buell’s sense (25): the environment is an indispensable entity that is always caught up in a process of interaction with fictional organisms. Indeed, the texts of *ADOS*, *THT* and *Carpentaria* repeatedly signal that fictional organisms and their environment co-emerge, and that this co-emergence is what drives the *transformations of the storyworld* (i.e., the plot). Characters, plot and setting
are therefore co-constitutive and the notion of interactional pattern (as a textual model of an organism-environment line of becoming) best captures this connection.

Finally, the indispensable and active presence of the environment in ecopoetic metafiction, combined with metafictional elements and a postcolonial aesthetics, constitutes a shift in narrative representation and in the way the interaction of organism and environment is represented in literature: it embodies the passage from plot-oriented narratives (narratives whose coherence is founded on sequences of events) to chronotope-oriented ones (narratives whose coherence is achieved in the connection of space and time through an element of the described ecosystem).

In the main novels of this thesis, the primacy of metafiction and indigenous epistemologies, in which the difference between storyworld and “real” world are blurred, engages a hermeneutic loop that draws the reader into a closer engagement with the storyworld. By combining an ecological thought, a postcolonial perspective, indigenous epistemologies and metafiction, postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction interferes with classic notions of the novel and of narratology, of the body and of the self, of the reader and of the text. This interference can be summed up in several principles (situatedness, plurality, relationality, interactionality and openness), which I will describe in more detail now.

Postcolonial environmental literature partly arises as a reaction against universalist versions of the European episteme in which needs and demands of “the West” ought to be realized at all cost and throughout the globe, often to the detriment of indigenous populations. For instance, imperialist versions of environmental consciousness work in absolutes, in either/or propositions. Under the guise of “the greater good” – the greater Western good – they seek to impose Western practices and ways of life to non-Western contexts. Throughout the history of colonialism, these imposed practices have provoked devastating social, cultural, political and ecological damages.

By contrast, I argue that postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction recognizes the situatedness of ecological knowledge, consciousness and practice. Instead of arguing for an automatic diffusion of a transcendental and universalist environmentalism based on American and European attitudes towards the world, postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction
shows that ecological knowledge, consciousness and practices are embedded in local contexts and immanent in the world. For instance, in *A Discovery of Strangers*, the knowledge of the land held by the indigenous Tetsot’ine comes from the “stories the land told” (Wiebe, 1995a, 24). The ecological knowledge of this Dene people is therefore situated in the very ecology their knowledge system pertains to. In *The Hungry Tide*, the syncretic story of Bon Bibi that informs the local inhabitants’ interactions with the mangrove ecosystem and its animals is inherently local, with elements of its storyworld clearly identified in the character’s world (Ghosh, 2004, 223-224). In the same way, in *Carpentaria*, the Law of Country, which emerges during the ancestral serpent’s creation of the Gulf of Carpentaria and which is at the basis of the Aboriginal people’s ecological knowledge, is enmeshed with the ecosystem of the Gulf and is said to reside in the geological terrain (Wright, 2006, 2). In all three texts, the situated knowledge systems of local populations are destabilized by the universalism inherent in colonialism.

The principle of situatedness entails that ecological propositions may be valid or invalid depending on the ecological system they belong to. In other words, what is ecologically good or bad, harmful or beneficial, true or false, and so on, has to be decided within the local context in which it takes place. Situatedness thus refutes absolutes, but *this does not entail that all is relative*. On the contrary, the principle of situatedness makes plain that epistemological differences are not necessary incompatible, which allows for contradicting parties willing to debate about environmental issues to do it in a constructive way. The principle of situatedness therefore has the potential to destabilize static and unilateral structures of power and authority while at the same time opening up an intersubjective field of dialogue and debate. In my readings, I wield the principle of situatedness to reverse the colonial hierarchy of decision-making by giving as much importance to the local voices as to the global ones. In my version of postcolonial environmentalism, science is only one voice amidst a polyphonic concert of environmental attitudes.

27 Of course, it is to be noted that situatedness falls apart when one party refuses all dialogue and is adamant about imposing its way, as in imperialist or totalitarian regimes.
A corollary of the principle of situatedness is that there exist various situated entities as well as various contexts for them to be situated in. The scale and type of entities and contexts, as well as the motivations of the observer determine their limits. In this thesis I begin my investigation with the interaction of organism and environment, but there are two sets of entities and contexts that overlap. The first encompasses the organism’s consciousness in relation to its body and environment, and the second deals with the collective situatedness of a community in relation to its society, episteme and ecosystem. In this framework, consciousness is spatially situated within a body, which is itself situated within a material environment. However, because the individual organism’s environment is also composed of its social acquaintances, of its cultural background and of its ecological relations, drawing a discrete boundary between organism and community is pointless. It is indeed to be noted that consciousness and body are also situated within a social community made up of other humans (an intersubjective community, a society), within a cultural community made up of statements, discourses, propositions, artistic artefacts, and so on (an episteme), and within an ecological community made up of other organisms, of fluxes of energy, of nonliving matter, and so on (an ecosystem). Alongside the organism’s physical surroundings, the social, cultural and ecological communities of which the organism is part compose its environment. The reverse is also true: as a community is formed of individual members, it cannot be separated from their individual consciousness and body. Therefore, instead of thinking of situatedness as linear and hierarchical (where consciousness is situated within a body, which is situated within an environment), I think it is more appropriate to think of situatedness as relational and transversal.

28 In the case of social, cultural and ecological communities, the scale chosen by to determine the boundaries of the observed system is crucial. Indeed, deep ecology argues that all the particles of the universe are interconnected, which therefore entails that the community of a human being is at least composed of all other forms of life and of their respective environments. This extreme statement makes use of quantum physics and relativity theory to justify including the whole of the biosphere into the individual ecosystem of each human, as well as all other forms of life into his social system. In the framework of deep ecology, protective measures towards preserving the biosphere – including biodiversity and wilderness – are therefore emphasized as more important than local measures towards ameliorating the way of life of a remote indigenous community. This universalist approach is incompatible with postcolonial environmentalism as envisioned in this thesis.
There is no right way to start investigating the entanglement of entities and contexts, nor is there any stable center to the structure of relations thus created. It is perhaps the most important point to be made: The observer of a system is situated within the observed system, a fact which will impact their investigation of the system. Moreover, the observed system too is situated, and the situated observer is bound to take this into account. Therefore, universalizing an ecological system into transcendental propositions can easily become a reductive practice that strips a place of its complexity. In postcolonial contexts where contradicting modes of life and ways of knowing cohabit, often in conflict, this denial will almost always marginalize local populations to the profit of the hegemonic “Western” stranger. Possessing self-awareness of one’s own situatedness as a scholar is therefore a crucial step in the study of ecological systems from a postcolonial standpoint.

A corollary of the situatedness of ecological knowledge is that in a place there exists a plurality of knowledge systems, ecological practices and environmental attitudes. If each individual is uniquely situated, and each group of individuals is as well, it follows that in a location there exists a rich assemblage of overlapping and sometimes contradictory socioecological processes, behaviors and attitudes. This plurality is far from being harmful in itself. On the contrary, this multiplicity can be a richness when it triggers a cooperative and creative engagement of each party towards achieving a common goal. As I have already said, the challenge posed to environmentalism resides in the acceptation of plurality and cooperation, instead of their denial and of the imposition of unicity and unilateralism. In A Discovery of Strangers, Franklin and most of his explorers seek to impose their views on the indigenous Tetsot’ine by exporting their European episteme; in The Hungry Tide, the state’s Forest Department imposes their conservation policies, even if there is some doubt they actually believe in them, on the local inhabitants of the Sundarbans; in Carpentaria, the colonial town of Desperance and the transnational company Gurfurritt marginalizes the local Aboriginal population. Recognizing the plurality of knowledge systems, ecological practices and environmental attitudes works against the colonial attempt to export imperialist culture and homogenize indigenous cultures. It also stands in opposition to the
capitalist developments of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries that seek to impose a unique consumerist way of life.

The acceptance of the plurality of knowledge systems, ecological practices and environmental attitudes in a community (ecological, social or cultural) means that if we took a temporal slice of a community’s collective environment, it would not be a homogeneous plane, but a heterogeneous assemblage resulting from the community’s inherent intersubjectivity. Therefore, in order to represent (mentally, verbally, or artistically) a community’s environment at one moment in time, one needs to consider both the polyvocal community and the collective environment’s multilayeredness and polysemousness. In other words, in order to account for the fact that an environmental feature is always perceived and conceived from different perspectives, I need myself to perceive and conceive of that environmental feature as having several meanings. In the same vein, because an environment always has different levels of meaning that depend on the organism’s perspective and motivation, I need to take account of that and attempt to discern the various overlapping levels assigned by the perspectival plurality. Acknowledging the heterogeneity and plurality of ecological, social and cultural systems therefore allows to shift from an environmentalist discourse that imposes to an environmentalist discourse that debates.

Following the intellectual rapprochement in the 1980s of systems theory and traditional ecological knowledge, postcolonial environmentalism has to a large extent been influenced by the principle of relationality. In this view, the multiple social, cultural and ecological processes are not isolated from each other. In a socioecosystem, ecological practices, spatial features, environmental attitudes and knowledge systems exist in relation to each other. The term “relationality” refers to the interconnectedness of things, beings and concepts within a defined ecological system. In A Discovery of Strangers, the relationality of language and world is evoked when the Dene elder Keskarrah states that stories are like

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29 As will be shown later, a community’s collective environment is not frozen in time, which means that the heterogeneous and multilayered assemblage of voices and meanings is dynamic and in a process of continuous interaction (see page 104).
ropes that can tangle one up so much that one will be irremediably altered (Wiebe, 1995a, 126). In *The Hungry Tide*, relationality is present in the “superstition” that one should not mention — verbally or not — tigers, lest one summons them (Ghosh, 2004, 108). In *Carpentaria*, relationality is visible in the metonymic connection laid out at the beginning of the novel in the form of the Law of Country, where stories of creation, features of the environment and Aboriginal bodies are said to be interconnected (Wright, 2006, 1-3).

In the relational view, consciousness, organism, environment; society, episteme and ecosystem are always to be understood as being in relation to each other. For instance, consciousness cannot be understood completely without taking into consideration its relation to the body in/with/through which it occurs, as well as the environment within which this body is situated. In the same vein, the consciousness of an individual organism is also influenced by the community of organisms that surround.

Acknowledging the relationality of organism, consciousness and environment enables me to avoid the dualisms of mind and matter, man and nature, as well as the progressive linearity of past and future, and instead allows me to embrace the plurality inherent in postcolonial contexts, where the cultural and social aspects of life are explicitly understood as part of the ecology of a place, and vice and versa.

The configuration of relations within an ecosystem is not static. Underlying postcolonial environmentalism is an acknowledgement of the dynamic exchange between the various situated and interrelated entities of an ecosystem. An ecological system is a *dynamic and complex set of interactions between consciousness, organism, environment*,

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30 This does not mean that each particle of the universe is to be studied in relation to all other particles of the universe, for the undertaking would be so unfathomable that it would render its findings at the best obscure. What matters is to be aware that within an observed system (social, cultural or ecological), entities and processes are seldom independent, but on the contrary that they are most frequently interrelated. With that in mind, one can then draw the boundaries of the observed system more accurately and make sure not to miss on effective interactions.

31 This pluralistic understanding of the relationality of individual, culture, community and ecology is well exemplified by Australian Aboriginal conceptions of Country, which stands for matrix of relationships that connect the multiple sites and centers of subjectivity, be they human, animal, mineral or spiritual (Rose, 2002, 177–178). For other examples of relationality, see Chapter 2 “All Things Are Connected – Communities as Both Ecological and Social Entities in Indigenous American Thought” in (Pierotti 26–48), and Chapter Nine “Culture, perception and cognition” in (Ingold, 2002, 157–171).
society and episteme. The relations that connect the various elements of an ecological system are more than simple conceptual links; they are communicative interactions, where “‘Inter-action’ denotes action undertaken in a participatory field of actors all or many of whom are actively paying attention” (Rose, 2013, 103). Consciousness is therefore as much influenced by the community as it is influencing it. In the same vein, a sociocultural community shapes the perception of the collective environment of its organisms as much as it is very strongly influenced by the very environment it participates in shaping. The notion of interactionality seeks to capture this two-way process between entities of a system, this mutual engagement of each entity with other entities, this continuous exchange of information and creation of meaning. Interactionality allows us to conceive of cultures in a more dynamic way. In that sense, as Rose puts it, “culture is not something you have, but rather is the way you live, and by implication, the way your knowledge arises and is worked with” (2013, 100).

Most ecosystems inhabited by humans involve a plurality of ecological processes as well as a multiplicity of knowledge systems. Human ecological systems are not linear and causal. In causal linear systems, a certain action causes a certain effect, and by referencing the various causes and effects, one can measure the overall progress of the system. Causal linearity therefore implies progress and predictability. By contrast, interactional relationality is nonlinear and it posits that each element of the ecological system exists in interaction with several other elements. Through a mechanism of feedback loops, each process is both cause and effect of other processes, influencing the overall system — and its subsystems — while at the same time being influenced by it. In an interactional system — a nonlinear dynamic system — there is no clear linear progression, but constant, complex and unpredictable transformation. The principle of interactionality entails that ecological processes and knowledge systems are interconnected and are mutually influencing each other, each acting as cause and effect of the other at all times. In that sense, knowledge of
the land and practice of the land are to be envisioned together as a single process, not separately as two distinct entities.\footnote{The physicist and philosopher Karen Barad coins the term “intra-action” to refer to this entanglement of entities and processes (ix, 33).}

The interactionality – or entanglement – of consciousness, organism, environment, society, episteme and ecosystem entails that these entities are not discrete. The visual effect that forms are distinct from their surroundings is an illusion. Rather, \textit{the entities of an ecological system are open and their spatial and temporal boundaries are merely a conceptual reduction, a shortcut that facilitates communication}. Consider the semantic distinction between a cell and its liquid surroundings. Frequently the cell as an entity is visually represented as closed. However, a cell’s boundary is a semi-permeable membrane that allows some molecules to move in or out, thereby regulating the cell’s content. Although visually the cell might appear spatially closed, it is physiologically open. The illusion of boundedness results from the visual aspect of the cell, but by shifting to an ecological perspective and putting the visual aside in favor of the ecological, the cell is now understood as unbounded. Spatiotemporally, the cell is indeed part of its environment, but the environment is also part of the cell. The notion of time is therefore crucial when it comes to understanding ecological entities. Ultimately, acknowledging the openness of the cell is to perceive the entity as a process – an interaction – in space and time.

Now consider the human organism. If it might appear discrete and visually distinguishable from its surroundings, the human body is in fact ecologically open to its environment, and thus inseparable from it in spacetime. For instance, the oxygen contained in the air penetrates our body through our mouth and nose, and in our lungs it is transferred into our red blood cells to be distributed to our various organ to convert nutrients into energy. In the same vein, human beings constantly need to absorb elements from their environment (water, food). If one looks at the human organism as frozen in time – as enclosed in time – it might be conceived as closed, but as soon as the human body is understood as a process in spacetime (like the cell), it is necessarily perceived as open. Even the notion of
consciousness may be understood as an open cognitive system in interaction with – at the same time effect and cause of – body and environment.

With these examples from science in mind, the body of a living being cannot be considered ecologically as a closed spatial system, but ought to be seen as an open process of interaction – i.e., between body and consciousness, between body and environment, between consciousness and environment. From a postcolonial perspective, however, science is not necessarily the best approach to investigate the openness of ecological entities. Because of the fact that some beliefs held by indigenous communities are seemingly incompatible with the scientific knowledge exported to the colonies during the colonial era, postcolonial environmentalism ought to accept contradicting epistemologies and read them in relation to one another to create a creative dialogue. In order to do so, cultural systems also need be considered open to each other, so that dialogue may be realized in effect. In a postcolonial framework, both European and Indigenous epistemologies can cohabit if they accept dialoguing with the other, if they accept entering a relation of interaction instead of imposition.

The principles of situatedness, plurality, relationality, interactionality and openness often overlap, which renders difficult to lay out a linear theorizing of their effects on postcolonial regions. What is striking however is that accepting these principles implies a reassessment of our investigation of ecological, social and cultural systems. In the same vein, acknowledging the situatedness, plurality, relationality, interactionality and openness of socioecosystems also entails a reevaluation of narrative systems. Econarratology is one way of doing so, and the identification of the genre of postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction is another. In both, stories do not exist in a separate plane of existence, but interact with

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33 For instance, in Aboriginal Australian epistemology, the essence of the ancestral beings is believed to reside in features of the landscape (Morphy, 1998; Ingold, 2002; Rose, 1996). Moreover, their essence is believed to pervade the living beings of the region and be the source of knowledge. In that sense, in Aboriginal epistemologies, the bodies, cultures and minds of humans are open to the creative essence of Dreamings and Country. In the case of Aboriginal knowledge, using biology and ecology to demonstrate the openness of ecological entities may seem irrelevant, for a rigid version of scientific discourse would exclude Aboriginal knowledge as invalid. However, this does not mean that Aboriginal epistemology and Western ecology should remain closed to one another.
socioecosystems. In the following sections, I reevaluate the place of narrative texts as processes immanent and influential in the socioecological system.

2.2 Grounding Reading, Text and Interpretation

My understanding of reading is inscribed in a theory of reception, in which “one must take into account not only the actual text but also, and in equal measure, the actions involved in responding to that text” (Iser, 1972, 279). In this view, a literary text will “engage the reader’s imagination in the task of working things out for himself, for reading is only a pleasure when it is active and creative” (280). Moreover, my reading of the three novels is informed by theories of language comprehension that claim that “people understand linguistic descriptions actions by mentally simulating these actions” (Zwaan and Taylor 2) and that “language is a set of cues to the comprehender [or the reader] to construct an experiential (perception plus action) simulation of the described situation” (Zwaan 36). To use a

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34 In 1970, in response to New Criticism and to the popularity of Wimsatt and Beardsley’s article “The Affective Fallacy,” Stanley Fish had to explain that “reading is an activity, something you do” (123). He explained that a “sentence as an utterance … is no longer an object, a thing-in-itself, but an event, something that happens to, and with the participation of, the reader. And it is this event, this happening [that is] the meaning of the sentence” (125). By equating meaning with experience – more precisely the meaning of a linguistic work with the experiencing of the work – Fish was grounding the act of interpreting in the physical interaction of a reader and a literary work. Moreover, he was explicitly embracing the notion that meaning consists in the “psychological effects” of the utterance (123). Fish’s controversial thesis was part of a broader movement that advocated new ways of conceiving texts. Roland Barthes’s formulates that “a text is … a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (146). Barthes’s use of the term “writing” is peculiar, as it is conceived as the performative act of uttering and is to be contrasted with the rigid operation of recording. If a text is a collection of writings, and if writings are acts of uttering, this means that a text is a collection of utterances. Moreover, Barthes places the constitution of the text in the act of reading, which is paradoxically described as a holding together of the traces of writing (148). He thus operates a shift from the static rigidity of the text as record to the dynamics of text as enunciation. This performance is acted out by the reader, who becomes the locus where the various centers of culture interact.

Julia Kristeva, like Barthes, claims that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations” (Kristeva 37). However, while Barthes stated that these quotations came from “centers of culture,” Kristeva affirms that “any text is the absorption and transformation of another [text]” (37). She coins the term “intertextuality” to denote how “every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems” (111). Thus, she does not conceive of the text as a passive structure. On the contrary, by referring to “signifying practices” as intertextual transpositions, she implies that texts are dynamic processes. In the light of the propositions made by Stanley Fish, Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva, a text can therefore be rethought as an unbounded and situated event, performance or practice.
metaphor, these theories claim that the reader’s cognitive system *resonates* with the linguistic system.\(^{35}\) Finally, my conception of reading is grounded in the fact that, as ecotheorist Tim Morton explains, “Text dismantles distinctions between a ‘within’ and a ‘without’” (Morton, 2010a, 2). Morton brings back some dynamism to the text, for if one assumes (1) that experience is a life process situated within an ecological community, itself part of an ecosystem, and (2) that the text is the actual reader-work interaction, then the location of meaning in experience entails that *a text is in effect an ecological process*. This proposition has far-reaching consequences in our conception of literature: it dissolves the boundary between diegetic and extradiegetic worlds, and instead offers a transdiegetic definition of reading literary texts. By taking into account *the numerous non-verbal loci of situatedness involved in the (re)constitution of a text*, one can see that “the text has no thin, rigid boundary, [and] what it includes, what it touches, must also consist of life forms, Earth itself, and so on” (Morton 2010a, 2). In order to account for that unboundedness, I argue that reading should be understood as an embodied and embedded practice inserted within a process of becoming that connects the reader and their environment. This means that the text emerges from within an organism-environment interaction, which is itself one of the many processes that compose an ecosystem. Combining the poststructuralist view with the notions of embodiment and embeddedness allows me to perceive the text as enmeshed in the total set of processes of an ecological community.

The cognitive operations that underlie the embodied process of reading mainly involve the recall of experiential traces of past interactions (Zwaan). The endless intertextual regression so famously theorized by Julia Kristeva – *i.e.*, the continuous transposition of other texts that constitutes intertextuality (Kristeva 111) – can therefore be rethought in the light of embodied cognition and ecopoetics. In the embodied cognitive perspective, what is transposed anew in the signifying practice is not only textual, but experiential. Because of

\(^{35}\) If these theories of embodied language comprehension have made me conscious of the importance of representations of the body, of bodily actions, gestures and movements in reading, in my analysis, however, I will not investigate the physiological mechanisms behind language comprehension. Rather, I use the metaphor of resonance to account for the feelings of immersion and intimacy that poetic language sometimes produces in me. I am more interested in my phenomenological response to the text than in the unconscious cognitive mechanisms that allow it.
the fact that signs, words and sentences are neurologically linked to experiences, I argue that text is a transposition of one or several experiential processes into another. As it draws from memory, reading brings back to consciousness traces of past experience and recombines these traces to fashion the reader’s experience of the storyworld. Reading is therefore the practice of transposing one experiential process (past experiences) into another (vicarious experience), and this transposition can in turn alter the reader’s sets of cultural prejudices.

The operations involved in the process of reading are interactions occurring in the material world and they are affecting the reader intellectually, socially, culturally and politically. One must not forget that these operations are also physiological, and that as such they are affecting the reader’s environment by modifying and modulating their interaction with it, albeit minutely and in a way that cannot be measured. Acknowledging that a text is an open segment of the organism-environment process of becoming thus entails that the text has actual effects on the ecological community and system of which the reader partakes. A possible issue with the latter proposition is that it renders findings produced by the empirical study of texts nearly impossible to generalize. Indeed because of its situatedness, the interaction of reading is always individual and its effects will vary depending on the reader’s idiosyncrasies and motivations. Moreover, the experiential traces associated with a linguistic element are continuously being updated as the individual organism-environment process of becoming unfolds. Therefore, similarly to the observation that semiotic meaning is always deferred in language, ecological meaning is always deferred in experience. Finally if reading is situated within the ecosystem, it means that the interaction of reading organism and linguistic environment operates on various spatiotemporal scales and in a complex and dynamic way. This entails that the explanations below have to be understood as theoretical formulations that ought to be actualized by individual readers as they reflect on their own interaction of reading.

36 These operations are constituted involuntary series of actions (micro eye movements, pupil dilatation, respiration), but they also comprise deliberate actions involving bodily movements (hand gestures, body posture) as well as an intentional cognitive and linguistic engagement with the signs on the page.
Despite the apparent impossibility to pinpoint with certainty the process whereby semiotic meaning is associated with experience, combining poststructuralism and theories of embodied cognition allows me to better understand the nature of a text: it is at the same time a process of *reading* (with its psychological and affective effects), a process of *writing* (as it recourses to reader’s and author’s external propositional references), an embodied *performance* (Zwaan’s account of the neurological re-forming of vicarious experience through the combination of past experiential traces), and finally a transformative and reformative *ecological process*. All in all, these processes overlap and are not separated in the act of reading, but are interrelated.

Scott Slovic explains that “[e]cocritics, in forgetting the worldly context of their reading, of their thinking, do so at the peril of their own language. Language without context, without grounding in the world, means next to nothing” (Slovic 31). What I argue in this thesis is on the contrary that texts are grounded in the “dynamic and rich [world] devised of a continuum of interrelations” (Bristow 156). From this perspective, the poetic interaction between the reader and the work can be transposed to the ecological interaction between the organism and the environment: texts are both poetic and ecological processes! Texts are a creation of a fictional storyworld and the creation of an ecological process that contributes to the continuous transformation of the material world. In my view, this process of storyworld-creation and ecosystem-creation are one and the same in texts. It is in this way that texts ought to be understood, I believe, as ecopoetic processes.

Assuming that a text is indeed an ecopoetic process that consists in the creation of an ecological world and the creation of a poetic world – in the co-emergence of semiotic and ecological meaning – then correlating the semiotic *poiein* with the ecological *poiein* demands self-consciousness and skill. I argue that in a postcolonial environmental context, interpretation cannot simply be understood as a deliberate action of an agent towards a narrative object that would reveal the ecological meaning of the ecosystem. Interpretation cannot be taken for granted, but has to be understood as a skilled practice that allows the organism to interact with the work and the world both poetically and ecologically.
Tim Ingold argues that in Pintupi and Koyukon ecological communities, art and stories are used to draw the practitioner into the world, to make him see hidden processes and meanings, and therefore they allow him to attune to the ecology of a place (2002, 56). In this context, interpreting the various meanings of an artwork demands a certain knowledge of the place and of the relations between the work and the world. Similarly, I argue that interpreting with a work is a skilled practice. In order to fully immerse in this world-of-the-work and notice its connections with the world-of-the-reader – in order to read ecopoetically rather than automatically – one must engage with the textual system as one would with the ecological system; one must indeed fuse the two worlds, merge their horizons of signification and significance. Only then can the artwork be an integral part of the becoming of the organism-environment relationship.

Interpreting with a work is not so different from working with a material. Interpretation should not be projected onto the textual object; rather interpretation ought to arise from an interaction between reading organism and textual environment. It is similar to the craft of the carpenter, in which the carved object arises out of the interaction of the wood practitioner and the wood material. In this configuration, the reader works with the work to create the interpretation, following the grain of the textual environment, rather than projecting and imposing their interpretation onto it. Of course it is possible to read onto the work a preconceived meaning of the text. Doing so, however, the reader risks being stuck after hitting a knot that resists the preconceived and imposed interpretation. In these cases, the preconceived interpretation falls prey to its own rigidity, collapsing under the weight of its assumptions, and losing credibility in the process.

Interpreting with the work also entails that text is not enclosed in the event of reading, but spills out of it, flooding the reader’s interaction with the environment. Although interpretation is a skilled practice that engages the reading organism fully, it is not bounded

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37 The phrase “interpreting with the work” might sound odd. It is inspired by the phrase “working with the material” (Ingold, 2011, 30), which points out how the skilled practitioner does not objectify the material, but rather works with it, adjusting to it constantly.

38 The metaphor of reading and writing as skills is borrowed from Ingold, 2002, 393.
by the surface of the page, the volume of the book, or the skin of the body. Interpreting with the work means accepting the embeddedness of the text into its ecology. The carpenter’s carved object is not part of the ecological system in itself; it belongs to the ecological system as a potentiality, as “affordance” (J. J. Gibson). The carved object may be used to build houses, which themselves participate in a way of life (ownership), a way of life heavily influential in terms of energy consumption and resource depletion. The carved object exists in the possible relations and interactions it will have in the ecosystem, and it is what the community will do with the carpenter’s crafted material that matters ecologically. In the same vein, the interpretation of a work belongs to the ecological system through the potential effects it has on the reader’s interaction with her environment. Some works, for instance, lay out the foundations of paradigm shifts, for their interpretation produces shifts in interaction that propagate to the whole ecosystem. Some works become the bases of new modes of life.

Interpreting ecopoetically means interpreting with the work and with the world. In other words, it means interpreting with the work in relation to the world while interpreting with the world in relation to the work. Suggesting that it is a skilled practice implies that interpretive abilities – and more particularly the ability to fuse the world-of-the-work with the world-of-the-reader – are acquired over time in a trial-and-error process. My work as a scholar is to learn how to relate text to context, how to relate work to world, how to relate poiein to ecology without violating either of these, without falling prey to a form of simplistic homology. It is not a process that can simply be engaged by sheer will; it is a way of conceiving text that needs to be honed into existence by practice. It is an attitude towards texts, a willingness to connect one’s experience of a work with one’s experience of the world; it is a manifesto to the unboundedness of text and an acknowledgement of the spatiotemporal activity of reading, writing, performing and reforming.

Here it is interesting to bear in mind Gregory Bateson’s proposition that the “mental world – the mind – the world of information processing – is not limited by the skin” (Bateson 460) and is therefore “immanent in the large biological system – the ecosystem” (466).

It is not unlike the Extended Ecology Hypothesis, which attempts to rethink reader and text as organism and environment (Steffensen and Fill; Järvilehto; Kravchenko; Cowley)
Mikhail Bakhtin writes of the necessity of linking the chronotope of the text with that of the context, for there exists a “mutual interaction between the world represented in the work and the world outside the work” (254). Only by acknowledging “the work in the totality of all its events, including the external material givenness of the work, and its text, and the world represented in the text, and the author-creator and the listener or reader” can one “perceive the fullness of the work in all its wholeness and indivisibility [while] understand[ing] the diversity of the elements that constitute it” (255). The role of the critic of environmental metafiction is to identify those “elementary features of composition” (254) that allow “the mutual interaction” (254) of storyworld and reader’s world, that is the entanglement of semantic content, poetic form and ecological context. In ecopoetic metafiction, the quality shared by the “narrated events” and the “event of narration” (254) is the fact that both are infused with a particular understanding of the organism-environment relationship. In addition, ecopoetic metafiction makes use of the connection between form-content-context in order to reinforce the artistic power of the text by achieving “the fullness of the work in all its wholeness … indivisibility [and] diversity” (255). Because of the conscious connection drawn between reader’s world and storyworld, reading becomes a way of interacting.

Wolfgang Iser offers some clues as to what processes must be understood if one is to understand the relationship between reading organism, textual environment and material environment. As he puts it, the text “functions to bring into view the interplay among the fictive, the real and the imaginary” (Iser, 1993, 3-4). What he calls “the act of fictionalizing … crosses the boundaries both of what it organizes (external reality) and of what it converts into a gestalt (the diffuseness of the imaginary)” (4). This act of fictionalizing “leads the real to the imaginary and the imaginary to the real, and it thus conditions the extent to which a given world is to be transcoded, a nongiven world is to be conceived, and the reshuffled worlds are to be made accessible to the reader’s experience” (3-4). According to Iser, the connection between the world represented by the work and the world imagined by the reader is organized by the fictionalizing acts of selection, combination and self-disclosure.

Analyzing the fictionalizing acts of selection and combination consists in identifying what sociocultural systems existing outside of the text are integrated in the text (4-5), and
how they are arranged (9). Mapping the absence, presence and arrangement of these external fields of reference is creative of extratextual meaning, for it encourages the interpreter to make connections between the storyworld and his own world. The fictionalizing acts of selection and combination thus trigger a creative act of correlation, whereby the reader proactively confronts her knowledge of reality with the selection and configuration of reality operated by the text.

The fictional text’s disclosure of its fictionality is even more important, for it underlies the acts of selection and combination (11) and makes plain that the storyworld is an “as-if construction” (13). In turn, the fact of “suspend[ing] all natural attitudes adopted toward the ‘real’ world once … confronted with the represented world” (13) allows readers to perceive the material world in a new light (16).

Metafictionality – the text’s disclosure of its own fictionality – forces the reader to reflect on the function of texts while keeping in mind the text’s situatedness in and relationality with the extratextual reality. Metafictionality places the reader in the position of interpreter of the meaning of the work in relation to the world. Metafictionality allows the reader to envision their movement as that of a skilled interpreter following a Deleuzian line of flight, a line of becoming that runs alongside the work and the world (Colebrook 57). By doing so, metafictionality transgresses the boundaries of the work, and allows the text to pervade the reader’s imaginary as well as their world. Together with the selection and combination of real-world processes, the metafictional quality of texts transgresses the reader-work-world categories, thereby allowing them to become a unique ecopoetic process of interpretation. This ecopoetic process ultimately allows for a re-emplacement of the reader in the world through the bringing forth of their own relationality within the ecosystem. Because, as the biosemiotic approach suggests, literature and ecology are part of the same “creative evolution” (Wheeler, 2011, 273), by attending to the semiotic patterns of the literary work, the reader learns to attend to the biological, or ecological, patterns of the real world, and vice and versa. In the same vein, by attending to the ecology of reading, the reader learns to attend to the semiotics of biology and ecology.
Allowing the text to reform one’s interaction with the environment is however conditioned on a self-aware acceptance that the organism is unbounded, and it remains to be seen how the majority of the reading community may come to adopt such an extreme view of life and texts. Biosemiotics and ecopoetics could be one way of bridging the gap between work, reader and world, between text, reading/writing and context. If academic communities might be influenced by this approach through theory, for the non-professional readers, this can however only be realized if narratives themselves draw attention to the interactionality of and inherent in the fictional and material worlds, and to the biosemiotic and ecopoetic loops that subtend postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction. I argue in this thesis that A Discovery of Strangers, The Hungry Tide and Carpentaria do just that.

2.3 Interactional Patterns

As I have said above, the principles of situatedness, plurality, relationality, interactionality and openness, which lie at the core of postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction, demand a new way of studying literary narratives. For instance, the notion of “character” does not capture the dynamic nature of a fictional organism situated in an environment, open to it, in relation and interaction with it. Seeing the protagonists of A Discovery of Strangers, The Hungry Tide, and Carpentaria as closed and discrete entities would be reductive and would make it difficult for the reader to relate with them. I argue that the notion of interactional pattern is more suited for the analysis of these texts.

An “interactional pattern” is a textual model of an organism-environment interaction, and “all modeling (in fact, all understanding) is a simplification of the complexity of real systems” (Bonta and Protevi 17). The world described in texts is always a reduction of the material world, an arranged selection of its infinite components (Iser, 1993, 1). The material world we live in is unbounded; each of its components expressed in the diegetic world is implicitly embedded in a quasi-infinite number of other processes, selected out by the writer so as not to overload the reader’s cognitive abilities. The text is counting on the reader’s
imagination to fill the gaps and omissions in the spatiotemporal fabric of the storyworld and to make it coherent and plausible.

Before going on to define what an interactional pattern is, it is useful to explain what it is not. An interactional pattern is not a sequence of points of view. The connotation of the term “point of view” is too reductive to account for the rich and complex texturing of storyworlds. It creates the illusion that only sight matters when imagining storyworlds – de facto making other senses merely accessory – and strips the interaction of organism and environment of its dynamism by silencing the constant movement of the body. An interactional pattern is not a line of life either; the latter is the total sum of the organism’s interaction with its environment (Ingold, 2011, 63, 83), and therefore it is too broad to describe a textual representation. An interactional pattern is not the same as a character, for the latter tends to be viewed as an independent and disembodied textual figure, which exists independently from the world it is said to inhabit. Moreover, the notion of character simplifies the social identity of a being – who the organism is – whereas an interactional pattern simplifies segments of the line of becoming of a being – what the organism is doing, where it is doing it, and how it is doing it. The interactional pattern really represents a four-dimensional fictional organism-in-its-environment, i.e. an organism evolving in spacetime, and as such the interactional pattern accounts for the individual perceptions, emotions and actions of a fictional organism. An interactional pattern is also different from focalization. Focalization is a useful term because it enables to connect the character to the narrative space, while at the same time addressing the reader’s ability to “see” what the character sees or what the narrator describes. However, focalization and its siblings point-of-view and perspective betray an emphasis on the visual aspect of the relationships between character/space and reader/space.

Classic narratological notions of “point of view,” “character” and “focalization” connote a disembodiment and disembeddedness of the fictional organism. They exemplify the fact that narratology breaks down the world into analyzable units. It is not necessarily a bad thing, but in classical narratology this fragmentation is done on the basis of specifically “Western” conventions, representations and understandings of reality (the emphasis on
sight, on beings as social subjects, on space as topographical). Assuming that narratology and the tools for analyzing a narrative need to be attuned to the analyzed text therefore entails that a genre based on ecology rather than society, on embodiment and embeddedness rather than Cartesian dissociation, a genre underlain by situatedness rather than identity or topography, or a genre that points towards a postcolonial world that has abandoned or never adopted pretensions of “Western” realism, necessitates a new narratology that accounts for the createdness of the storyworld in a different way. In works of postcolonial eco-poetic metafiction that establish the embodiment-and-embeddedness of consciousness and the ecological situation in which the former arises as main elements of the narrative, one often cannot consider the organism without its environment, and vice versa. Hence the need for a new postcolonial econarratology that destabilizes static and discrete categories and replaces them by dynamic and open processes. The interactional pattern does just that: as a simulation of the organism-environment interaction and of its line of becoming, it is an incomplete representation, but it nonetheless allows to imagine a trajectory of life in movement, a field of experiencing, an embodied-and-embedded consciousness.

Note that the use of the word “pattern” is not anodyne; on the contrary, its polysemy helps to make sense of an ability of language to represent embodiment and embeddedness. A pattern is first something “shaped or designed to serve as a model from which a thing is to be made” (OED). In the case of literature, the interactional pattern is a linguistic model

41 The notion of interactional pattern does not necessitate complete abandonment of notions of character and focalization. First the notion of three-dimensional, or round, character allows to analyze beings in dynamic terms, as evolving and developing agents who can be unpredictable. In the genre of social realism, where space is primarily a setting for the development of social relations, the notion of three-dimensional character is sufficient, for the focus of the action lies not on the materiality of space and time, but on the subjects who populate this societal space. However, in postcolonial eco-poetic metafiction, where material features acquire prominence, dynamism and sometimes life, analyzing described beings as characters tends to marginalize the importance of the environment and of the body to the profit of society and subjectivity. The notion of focalization works well when the described world is familiar to the reader so that other sensuous perceptions play a marginal role in the narration. In postcolonial narratives, however, where the fictional organism is often plunged into unfamiliar environments, then smells, tastes, sounds and textures are bound to be unfamiliar, and therefore more emphasized by narration. In these cases, the notion of focalization loses its appeal, for it strips the vicarious experience produced in reading of its sensuous diversity and thus is unable to faithfully describe it.
that takes the form of a string of words and that allows the reader to imagine the interaction of organism and environment. In other words, the reader uses the model of the work – the interactional pattern – to experience an as-if interaction.\textsuperscript{42} The interactional pattern is to be understood as the set of cues that allows the reader to simulate the actions, perceptions, emotions and imaginations of a fictional organism.\textsuperscript{43}

One cannot separate the described interactions from the language used to describe them. In reading, the brain calls forth memories of the visual aspect of words, their meaning and grammar, the way they sound to the ears, the way they are produced by the mouth, and the way they are written by the hand (Zwaan 38). This is a very important element in relation to the notion of interactional pattern. Indeed, another meaning of the word “pattern” is that it is a “natural or chance arrangement of shapes or markings having a decorative or striking effect” (OED). In that sense, the interactional pattern should also be understood as an aesthetic arrangement of words. The fact that reading triggers memories of how words sound, how they look and how they are written by the hand, goes well with the poetic and aesthetic qualities generally associated with literary works. The notion of pattern, here, emphasizes that words serve as models for constructing an as-if interaction and that strings of words have the potential to create aesthetic effects.

\textsuperscript{42} A growing body of studies tend to demonstrate that meaning emerges when the reading organism simulates what the work describes. Rolf Zwaan, Professor of Biological and Cognitive Psychology, explains in his 2004 study that “language is a set of cues to the comprehender to construct an experiential (perception plus action) simulation of the described situation” (Zwaan 36). He explains that reading activates “experiential representations of [the words’] referents – motor, perceptual, and emotional representations, and often combinations of these … These traces can be activated by verbal input and as such enable the reconstitution of experience” (83). In other terms, reading a word calls forth memories of its referent. Very basically, it means that reading the word “hand” will activate memories of one’s using one’s hand (motor representations), of the sensation created by the action of touching (perceptual representations) and of the feelings associated with the hand, such as the happiness of using one’s hand to stroke one’s puppy (emotional representations). Obviously, the precise “experiential representations” activated during the act of reading really depends on both the work’s configuration of the interactional pattern and on the reader’s idiosyncratic cognitive system.

\textsuperscript{43} It is important to keep in mind the difference between the automatic simulation of the described organism’s experience and the proactive recalling of the fictional organism’s experience. If the former occurs at a preconscious level during the act of reading and involves a fusion of the reader and fictional organism (Miall 292), the latter is a more intentional imagining that takes place after the actual act of reading, and usually connects the experience to the embodiment-character. In other words, Zwaan’s account of the embodied nature of reading contributes to explaining the underlying cognitive mechanisms involved in the construction of texts, but it cannot make without the active imagination and participation of the reader.
Finally, the fact that the notion of pattern has a behavioral connotation makes it well adapted to describing the interaction of organism and environment. Indeed, a pattern is also a “regular and intelligible form or sequence discernible in certain actions or situations” (OED). In other terms, an interactional pattern is also the series of interactions between the organism and its environment – as made intelligible by the work.

Although a unique process, the interactional pattern is always dual, constituted of both a fictional organism and a fictional environment. The characterization of each can be minimal, merely mentioned as a background, but each is always present in one way or another. I consider that each instance of language describing a living being necessitates and implies an environment, and each instance of language describing an environment necessitates and implies an organism. The contention here is that in linguistic articulations, the presence of the one entails the presence of the other. The importance of this assertion resides in the fact that it shows that the narratological distinction between elements of the storyworld into characters, narrative space and narrative time is hardly compatible with the fictional organisms depicted in postcolonial environmental narrative. In other words, a character can be envisioned as possessing a discrete identity only if it is assumed that the character exists on its own, as a verbal entity, without the need for an environment. My postcolonial econarratological frame of analysis deliberately operates a shift from the discreteness of character, space and time, to the interactionality of organism and environment so as to better account for the postcolonial environmental reality it describes.

This new focus is necessary to enable me to investigate works where the embodied-and-embedded consciousness is a central part of the narration, where the fictional organism’s experience is paramount, as in postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction for instance. The subject matter of the latter is often a meeting with unfamiliar environments, cultures,
communities, behaviors, ecological practices, and so on. In this context, fictional organisms’ experience of their environment becomes a way into an unknown world, into an unknown way of being and of knowing; it becomes a common denominator between the fictional world and the material world.

Ideally, the interactional pattern ought to be constructed in such a way that in reading one may cognitively imagine the dynamism, embodiment and embeddedness of the line of becoming.\(^{45}\) An interactional pattern is thus a selection and combination of verbal units of interaction that are experienced by the reading organism.\(^{46}\) The arrangement of these units enables the reconstitution in reading of a vicarious organism-environment interaction. This interaction is really a movement of the organism-in-its-environment, a four-dimensional transformation of organism-environment line of becoming.

I identify several types of units of interaction: action, perception, emotion and imagination.\(^{47}\) They are not given equal importance in narratives, and they are selected, omitted and arranged to produce various aesthetic effects.\(^{48}\) Therefore understanding the notion of interactional pattern necessitates an extended awareness of cognitive, physiological and ecological processes. It also demands an acknowledgement of their interrelatedness. Indeed, action, perception, emotion and imagination are processes that

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\(^{45}\) There are of course exceptions, such as when the fictional organism suffers from cognitive impairment, as in Jane Urquhart’s *A Map of Glass*, or when the line of becoming is stylized in an extreme manner, such as in Beckett’s novel *Watt* for instance.

\(^{46}\) The units of interaction that compose the interactional pattern are distinguished from one another in language, but it is important to keep in mind that in real life, the organism-environment interaction is but one process. As such real-world trajectories of life cannot be envisioned as fragmented, but are on the contrary continuous.

\(^{47}\) In real life, they should be understood as processes that are interrelated, that overlap, and that are causes and effects of each other.

\(^{48}\) For instance, the text can focus on one unit of interaction to facilitate the imagination of the situation, or on the contrary to impede it. Consider the sentence *I WALK OUT OF MY APARTMENT*. In this sentence, the action-unit predominates, but in locomotion, perception is at least as important as action. The sentence above implies that the walking organism perceives the door through which he is able to exit his apartment. It also implies that the organism be able to perceive the ground on which he walks, the position of his feet in relation to his body, the movement of his limbs in relation to the stasis of the room, and be able to react at the moment of impact. This reaction might take the form of a tensing of the muscles of the upper legs for instance. If these other units of interaction are not mentioned, they are nonetheless present in the imagination of the movement by the reading organism.
involve the organism-in-its-environment, or in other words they involve a dynamic embodied and embedded consciousness, a four-dimensional trajectory of life.

Perceptions refer to the organism’s acknowledgement of a feature of its environment (exteroception) or of its body (interoception). Perception involves the senses and can be visual (sense of sight), aural (of hearing), tactile (of touch), olfactive (of smell), proprioceptive (of the position of the body), kinesthetic (of the movement of the body) and nociceptive (of pain). Perception is rarely a passive process. Rather, most of the time it involves an active engagement with the surroundings, a movement of the organism-in-its-environment. Rarely does an organism wait passively, attentive only to its perceptual engagement with the world. Usually perception is embedded within a motivated and dynamic process of life, such as foraging, locomotion, or crafting.49

Emotions here denote “a collection of [bodily] responses” (Damasio, 1999, 42) triggered by the perception—or recollection—of a stimulus. Some emotionally induced responses are visible—facial gestures are well known for expressing emotional responses for instance—while others remain below the surface of the skin—the quickening of the heartbeat or breathing, for instance. Among those emotionally induced responses that are not made public by the body, the “change of cognitive state” (Damasio, 1999, 281) alters the organism in its ensuing interaction with the environment.50 In effect, because emotions modulate the cognitive state of the organisms; they make organisms experience the world differently. Emotions are therefore manifestations to the body of the organism’s process of becoming. There is no consensus over the list of human emotions, but one categorization is the following: (1) the basic emotions of fear, anger, disgust, surprise, sadness, or happiness; (2) the social emotions of sympathy, embarrassment, shame, guilt, pride, jealousy, envy, gratitude, admiration, indignation, or contempt; and (3) the background emotions of malaise, tension, well-being or calm (Damasio, 2010, 123-5). Underlying these

49 For a more detailed explanation of how perception is a process that equally involves the organism and the environment, see page 117 of Ingold’s Being Alive.
50 Damasio lists these major cognitive changes as the triggering of behaviors such as bonding, nurturing, playing and exploring, the inhibition or enhancement of stimuli and their modulation as pleasant or unpleasant, and the acceleration or deceleration of the production of images (1999, 282).
three categories are pain and pleasure, depending on the negative or positive connotation of each emotion.

By action is here meant physiological actions; in humans, the latter term encompasses movements of the limbs for locomotion or manipulation, and the series of bodily processes that allow the metabolism to function, such as breathing, circulation, and the absorption and transformation of energy. Actions are contingent on perception and emotion. How could a human reach for an apple without seeing or smelling that apple? How would he know that he touches the apple without sensing the apple with his fingers? Besides, how would a human know that he should reach for the apple, without knowing that the apple will provide him with pleasure and joy, emotions associated with the fulfilling of one’s basic need for energy? Actions of the present are therefore underlain by perceptions and emotions of the past, as well as directed towards achieving perceptions and emotions in the future. In this view, past, present and future cannot be disentangled from each other, for in cognition the past is always present under the form of memories of past interaction, whereas the future always exists as intentions of future interactions. However, in literary representations, actions are not necessarily explicitly connected to emotions and perceptions – the latter are often implicit. Likewise, past, present and future are not always manifestly linked to each other.

The last unit of interaction is that of imagination, and in this thesis I define it as the operation of forming, juxtaposing and sequencing mental images of interactions. An

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51 In this context, images are physiological processes, patterns of activity in the brain that map what happens inside and outside of our body (Damasio, 2010, 70), and consciousness is thus the result of this process of mapping the fluxes of our lifeworld (71). The sequence in which these images arise and the degree of attention given to them is determined in terms of their evolutionary value, which has been selected through history (72). The images that form our consciousness are selected and given a certain emphasis depending on their evolutionary value in the long term. The metaphor used by Damasio to characterize this process of image-making is the “cinemalike editing choices that our pervasive system of biological value has promoted” (72). In that sense, conscious imagination is a narrative that evolution has written. Damasio however mentions that language also shapes our neural mapping of our lifeworld (70). The reading of words therefore activates verbal images that themselves evoke nonverbal images. While reading, one therefore creates a sequence of images, whose arrangement and importance is determined by a tiny portion of the reader’s lifeworld, i.e. the material work. In reading, the work acts as a substitute for the world and therefore functions as metonym for the lifeworld.
image is also a cognitive copy of an interaction, an imagined interaction, indeed an as-if interaction.⁵² Imagination is therefore the act of forming these as-if interactions, whether they be perceptions, actions or emotions,⁵³ and whether they are directed towards the past or the future.⁵⁴ When in a narrative, a fictional organism is represented as imagining, then it accomplishes the very same action as the reading organism: representations of imaginary interactions consist in the fusion of the reader’s imaginary with the described organism’s imaginary, which in a way allows the former to vicariously experience what the latter is said to experience. This enables the reader to connect the described organism’s perceptions, actions and emotions to their causes in the past, their effects in the present, and their outcome in the future, thereby cohering the units of interaction of the described organism into an ersatz of line of life.

There are three main forms that the interactional pattern may take to represent the organism-environment relationship. In the first form, the direction is from the organism to the environment. In this form of organism-environment relationship, the environment is a projection of the psyche as in Patrick White’s Voss, or in Randolf Stow’s To the Islands, in which the feeling of sociocultural alienation felt by the protagonist is projected onto the landscape. This form of interactional pattern may for example take the form of an objective correlative. This form is monological (it is one-way) and active.

The second form of interactional pattern is the opposite of the first: the direction is from the environment to the organism. In this environment-to-organism relationship, the organism’s consciousness is mostly affected by an external situation. Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow, in which the competitive economy crushes the individual, or Tourmaline, in which the scorching heat of the Australian desert incapacitates the organism,

⁵² In Latin, the term “image” shares the same base as “imitate,” where the latter means to copy (OED).
⁵³ The advantage of considering imagination as the mental reconstruction of as-if interactions is that it does not place imagination over bodily processes but amongst them. Thus, the unit of interaction of imagination is not conceived as a transcendental process where the fictional organism creates “mental pictures” out of nothing. On the contrary, imagination is very much the combination of past interactions into a composite as-if interaction. Imagining is therefore a process of constant reconstruction, where the images may be attached to the past, to the future or to fictional worlds, depending on the purpose of the imagining organism.
⁵⁴ Imagined interactions of the past are commonly referred to in English as memories or recollections; imagined interactions about the future are intentions.
are good examples. This organism-environment relationship may for example take the form of an epiphany, or of the Sublime. This form of organism-environment is monological and passive.

The third form of organism-environment relationship is dialogical and interactive. It is not a relationship congealed in space and time, but an ongoing process. It is neither represented as the result of a simple organism-to-environment projection, nor is it depicted as a simple environment-to-organism stimulus. On the contrary, the dialogical and interactive interactional pattern is to be thought of as a dynamic and four-dimensional process. It exists only in fluid space. It is really the representation of a trajectory of becoming.

To conclude this section, the interactional pattern is a verbal reduction of the organism-environment process. The interactional pattern allows the reader to construe the organism-environment’s line of becoming by making them enact and vicariously experience a series of as-if units of interaction. These units of interaction consist in perceptions, emotions, actions and imaginations, and they always involve an organism-in-its-environment. The reading organism is not conscious that she is enacting the described organism-environment interaction; it is an underlying cognitive process that allows to bring to consciousness a fictional organism-environment process. From a narratological perspective, the notion of interactional pattern enables the reader to conceive of a described being not as a disembodied/disembedded character, but as an embodied/embedded consciousness. In the context of postcolonial environmental works that transgress so-called “Western” dichotomies, this inclusion of the described environment in the narratological account of the organism is crucial, for it brings dynamism to the construction of the storyworld – as opposed to the stasis of linear and topographical representations. Finally, the interactional pattern allows the scholar to map more precisely the narrative representation of the process of life, thereby enabling him to better investigate the affective resonance that some literary works may trigger in their audience. Literary storyworlds are also constituted of less experiential elements: interactional epistemes.
2.4 Interactional Epistememes

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault explains that the episteme is “the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems” (Foucault, 2002, 212). In other words, the Foucauldian episteme is the set of circumstances and processes that makes possible the emergence of formalized systems of knowledge at a certain time; it is a sort of *environment for knowledge*, and it can be material as well as textual. In his book, Foucault focuses on time and does not define the spatial and cultural limits of an episteme, which can be problematical seen from a postcolonial perspective. Indeed, it would be ridiculous – imperialistic even – to affirm that in the nineteenth century the episteme of French intellectuals is the same as the episteme of, say, Indigenous Australians. Clearly, the total set of relations that unite discursive practices and give rise to formalized systems of knowledge is contingent on the material and sociocultural environment too, and not only on the historical period. For this reason, the study of postcolonial societies demands a slightly different notion of episteme, an extended version of Foucault's concept that is not reduced to branches of Western science and that encompasses both discursive practices and material, physical and ecological practices. An “interactional episteme” does that: it is the total set of relations that unite, *in an ecosystem*, the practice of and attitude to the environment by a group of organism. Instead of focusing on “a given period” and on the "discursive practices" only, the interactional episteme informs the organism-environment interactions within a temporal, spatial and ecological context.\(^{56}\)

Another issue with using Foucault’s notion of the episteme in a postcolonial context is that, as shown by his reliance on historical periodization and in formalized knowledge systems such as sciences, the Foucauldian episteme is based on a study of European societies and therefore denotes more a Western episteme grounded in literacy and reason

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\(^{55}\) In French: “l'ensemble des relations pouvant unir, à une époque donnée, les pratiques discursives qui donnent lieu à des figures épistémologiques, à des sciences, éventuellement à des systèmes formalisés” (Foucault, 1969, 250).

\(^{56}\) It seems reductive to think that there exists only one episteme for the whole global world. On the contrary, it seems more constructive to think of a multiplicity of interactional epistememes linked to different ecosystems at different periods of time.
rather than an indigenous episteme grounded in orality and skilled practice. With its focus on socioecological situatedness, my notion of interactional episteme, I argue, is more appropriate to the study of postcolonial texts that integrate indigenous epistemologies.

Applied to literature, I define an interactional episteme as the intersubjective system of ecological knowledge, both experiential and propositional, that enables the reader to articulate the principles underlying the ecological relations and processes of the storyworld. Interactional epistemes are reductions and models of the knowledge systems they denote. The interactional episteme of a fictional community will therefore always be constituted through a selective representation of the knowledge system of this community. The interactional episteme grounds the interactional pattern in a sociocultural fabric, in an intersubjective convention between members of a community. An interactional episteme can be implicit and thus perceived indirectly through the behaviors of its holders (their interactional patterns), or explicit and embodied in images, stories, verbal and non-verbal representations, but also in material objects and features of the environment.

There is a difference between an interactional episteme and ideology. The interactional episteme informs the reader’s reconstitution of interactional patterns, but it is also informed by them. Interactional episteme and interactional pattern emerge together; they are entwined and coevolve in the narrative. Because interactional patterns of the fictional community allow the reader to reconstitute a part of the interactional episteme of that same community, an interactional episteme is unstable and open, and it is constantly updated in reading. It is updated by both the arrival of new verbal declarations that feed the system, by the modification of the limits and boundaries of the fictional community, but also by the experience of fictional organisms as well as independent ecological events. In the case of postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction, which often stages the disruptive sociocultural and environmental effects of colonization on indigenous communities, the notion of interactional episteme allows the interpreter to investigate this fictional encounter in its

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57 Foucault also explains that an episteme is not simply a worldview (2002, 212).
complexity without necessarily creating two discrete and distinct groups with two distinct and discrete ideologies.

By contrast, ideology, understood in the sense of a “set of beliefs, convictions or ideas which both binds a particular group of people together and determines the actions they take [and which] serv[es] to create rules or regimes of inclusion and exclusion” (Buchanan) is not open and evolving, but stable, static and closed. Ideology may be a contested concept, but overall it entails that sets of beliefs predate behavior, are the cause of the latter and constrain it. Moreover, the term “ideology” is oppositional: it is a tool for separating various social groups into discrete categories. I argue that ideology, as a compartmentalizing and oppositional notion may not be suited to the investigation of open, plural and interactional socioecosystems.

The notion of interactional episteme as the open and evolving system of ecological knowledge of a fictional community entails that the limits given by the text to the said community – or the evolutions of the limits as staged by the narrative – have an influence on the very composition of its respective interactional episteme. In other words, because the fictional community is itself potentially open and in flux, investigating the evolution of the interactional episteme in the narrative is preferable to studying it at one point in time. In a sense, an interactional episteme should be studied like an interactional pattern, that is, as a process rather than as a state.  

As an interactional episteme is contingent on the definition of the fictional community it is connected to, it follows that the number and nature of interactional epistemes in a narrative is subject to variation. Three configurations are possible, although this number is not definite. In the first, a unique and well-delimited community is represented in the whole of the narrative, which means that there is a unique interactional episteme that evolves in the course of reading. This evolution takes place as the various described organism-environment processes coevolve and feed the community’s system of ecological knowledge. In the second configuration, several communities are represented, but they are well-delimited, discrete and separated from one another in the narrative. They are connected only through their presence in the process of reading. The second configuration entails that there is a number of interactional epistemes equal to the number of communities. In the third configuration, several communities are represented, but they are not separated from each other. Their borders are semi-porous and allow for inter-community exchanges. In this case the interactional patterns of different communities enter in resonance or clash as the communities are made to interact with one another. In this third configuration, several scenarios may take place. In the first scenario, the interacting communities merge and create a new hypercommunity with a hybrid interactional episteme. In the second scenario, one community is assimilated into the other, in which case the interactional episteme of the assimilated community is silenced as the latter collapses. In
There may be many interactional epistemes cohabiting in a certain region. It is thus important to know what sort of knowledge systems may be found in postcolonial environmental literature. For the purpose of this thesis, I will here discuss only two generic knowledge systems: traditional ecological knowledge and colonial scientific knowledge. The main line of demarcation lies in the acknowledgement of situatedness in the case of traditional ecological knowledge and the will to universalism in the case of colonial scientific knowledge (Berkes 10). A knowledge system deems itself universal when its worldview is disentangled from the material world, and thus applicable to any situation, to any community anywhere in the world. In this case, the colonial worldview establishes the knowledge system’s independence from the socioecosystem, and attempts to attenuate the feedback from organism-environment processes as much as possible without collapsing on itself. Knowledge systems underlain by a universalist worldview are by definition semi-rigid, homogeneous, resistant to change, intolerant of external intrusions and willing to expand territorially. In other words, they do not appear to coevolve with the described organism-environment processes but project themselves onto living beings by pretending that ecological practices are merely expressions of ecological knowledge. Universalist knowledge systems are not immutable, but they pretend and attempt to be.

In contrast with universalist worldviews, knowledge systems underlain by a situated worldview acknowledge that they are valid only locally, applicable only to the region and community they have coevolved with. In this case, the knowledge system is dependent on the socioecosystem, much influenced by the feedback of organism-environment processes, often making no difference between the latter and itself. By definition, these situated knowledge systems are flexible, heterogeneous, highly reactive to change, wary yet tolerant of external intrusion and willing to remain rooted territorially. In other words, they appear to

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the third scenario, the encountering of communities creates different altercommunities that do not merge but separate. In that third scenario, alter-interactional epistemes begin evolving their own way. A storyworld may contain a combination of the second and third configurations. In this case, several communities are represented, but some remain separated from others, while some enter in interplay with others.
be an expression of the described organism-environment processes – and not the reverse as in universalist knowledge systems – and thus coevolve with them.

In the case of postcolonial environmental literatures in English, the representation of indigenous systems of ecological knowledge is a difficult task. Postcolonial works are indeed situated within societies that combine scientific knowledge and indigenous knowledge, the written style and the oral style, the universal and the situated, the colonizer and the colonized. If the question of authenticity may appear crucial to some, I argue that it should be avoided in postcolonial perspectives by looking instead at the poetic construction of interactional epistemes, and at their transformations as they enter in resonance or clash with other fictional knowledge systems. The question to be asked is not so much “Is this described knowledge system authentic?” but “How is this interactional episteme verbally constructed?” The reader of postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction should therefore focus on the createdness of the system of ecological knowledge of a work, as well as its interplay with the ecological practices of the fictional organisms. The interplay of interactional pattern and interactional episteme is indeed crucial in the substantiation of the storyworld.

Alongside the enactment of vicarious organism-environment interactions, the reconstitution of the storyworld in reading is heavily influenced by the epistemological principles underlying the materiality of the spatiotemporal fabric. Sometimes this dominance of knowledge over practice is misleading. Indeed in the twenty-first century, readers are used to envisioning universal scientific principles as more important (influential) than situated ecological practices. In the same vein, if interactional epistemes may be valued by some as more important than interactional patterns, I argue that this should be avoided in the study of postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction, and I propose on the contrary that both be treated as equally important in the creation of the storyworld. The question of how interactional epistemes come into being during the process of reading is central to understanding texts as ecopoetic processes and the interpreter as a skilled practitioner. Two possibilities may occur: either a universalist knowledge system emerges separately

59 To read more on ecological knowledge and practice, and how they are entwined in the unfolding process of life, see Ingold’s *The Perception of the Environment*. 108
from the fictional storyworld, or a situated knowledge system emerges with and within the storyworld, in relation to the ecological practices of the fictional organisms – their interactional patterns. In the context of postcolonial environmental literature, the disembeddedness of knowledge tends to be seen critically, while their situatedness is favored.

In reading, an interactional episteme may come into existence in two ways. First the work may make explicit references to the ecological knowledge system it denotes, for instance by naming it during a character description\textsuperscript{60} – in this case the reader draws on their preexisting knowledge or is asked implicitly to search for explanation outside of the work – or by using metaphorical language or parables. Secondly the work does not make explicit references to the ecological knowledge system it denotes. Instead of telling, the work performs the behavioral expression of organisms. In this second case, the reader is asked to reconstitute the interactional episteme by piecing together the ecological practices and actively imagine what is the knowledge system that subtends them.

When an interactional pattern is familiar to the reader, the latter may simply use their extratextual knowledge system and apply it to the described organism’s ecological practice. In this situation, the reader’s ecological knowledge and the fictional organism’s interactional episteme are fused. However, when the described situation is unfamiliar, rendered imaginable only through the power of language to combine experiential traces of past interaction, then the reader is made to reflect on the difference between the fictional organism’s interactional pattern and their own ecological practice, between the fictional organism’s interactional episteme and their own system of ecological knowledge. Incomprehension may trigger the reader’s consciousness, making them wonder about the motivation driving the interactional pattern and the principles ruling the interactional episteme. In these cases, the reader’s level of empathy with and sympathy for the fictional organism will modulate the reader’s acceptation or rejection of the former’s interactional

\textsuperscript{60} Consider the sentences, “John was devout Christian” or “Mark was teaching physics in college”. In these cases, the reader is made to assume that John’s way of behaving will be underlain by Christian principles, and that Mark’s education in physics will make him see the material world very specifically.
episteme. In rich and complex narratives, interactional epistemes arise both explicitly and implicitly. More frequently, in the act of reading, the interactional pattern transforms the reader’s understanding of the interactional episteme. In these cases meaning does not so much reside in the actual reconstitution of the interactional episteme, but in the study of its transformation.

It seems logical that universalist interactional epistemes would be constructed explicitly as abstract propositions, rather than implicitly through interactional patterns. Indeed the nature of universalist knowledge systems is that they exist independently from the situation they arise in. On the contrary, the nature of situated knowledge systems is precisely that they coevolve with the situation, notably with the organism-environment processes of a socioecological community. Situated interactional epistemes therefore would tend to be constructed organically through interactional patterns.

An important characteristic of interactional epistemes is that they are dispersed throughout the narrative system, and therefore they are difficult to grasp intellectually as a whole. One of the roles of the reader is to piece together the various ecological principles underlying interactional patterns as well as the ecological propositions underlying the spatiotemporal fabric of the storyworld so as to bring cohesion to fictional organisms’ behaviors. This task is complicated by the fact that in richly textured narrative worlds, and more particularly in descriptions of postcolonial worlds told from an environmentalist perspective, interactional epistemes often encounter each other, transforming, assimilating, hybridizing each other in the process. Metonymic and metaphoric transpositions of interactional epistemes into **embodiments** are therefore frequently used in the text to make more tangible the transformations of knowledge systems and ecological practices.\(^{61}\)

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\(^{61}\) In Australian literature for example, these embodiments can be *conceptual*, as in the Australian Aboriginal concept of *Law*, or *material* as in the totemic entities of *ancestral beings*. In the case of Australian Aboriginal epistemology, concepts are not dissociated from matter, which means that the separation between the Law and the Ancestral Being from whose journeys the Law emerges is nonexistent. In the same vein, the embodiment of an interactional episteme can be *textual*, like the oral narratives of the Dreaming.
Finally, in narrative systems making use of situated knowledge systems, the fact that the interactional episteme and interactional patterns are in a constant process of interaction means that in the process of reading, the reader’s mental reconstitution of the text is always oscillating between experience (interactional pattern) and representation (interactional episteme). As the reader makes sense of the ecological principles underlying a fictional epistemic community, the interactional patterns of that community are read in a new light. In the same vein, as the reader makes sense of the interactional patterns of an epistemic community, the interactional episteme of that community is read in a new light. I will argue that this constant to and fro between interactional pattern and interactional episteme is the basis of the substantiation of the world-of-the-story in postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction. The literary device by which this interaction is made manifest I call the “interactional chronotope.”

2.5 Interactional Chronotopes

In reading, the storyworld of postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction partly acquires substance – takes flesh – through the enactment of lines of life via interactional patterns and through the articulation of systems of ecological knowledge via interactional epistememes. Interactional patterns are therefore chronotoping processes based on experience, and interactional epistememes are chronotoping processes based on knowledge. This substantiation of the world of the story via language is a process of creation, it is a performance where the reader writes – in Barthes’s sense – a poetic world that in turn subtly – and often covertly – reforms their ecological world. Due to the multiplicity of interactional patterns and sometimes of interactional epistememes, the storyworld of postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction is hardly ever homogeneous. Rather postcolonial storyworlds are plural, heterogeneous, polymorphic, polyvocal, multilayered, polysemous, but most of all, they are interactional. Gibson remarks:

[n]arrative space is now [in the postmodern age] plastic and manipulable. It has become heterogenous, ambiguous, pluralised. Its inhabitants no longer appear to have an irrefutable or essential relation to any particular space. Rather, space opens up as a variable and finally indeterminate feature of any given narrative ‘world.’ (A. Gibson 12).
The notions of interactional pattern and interactional episteme are well adjusted to the relativist indeterminacy of the storyworld, to what Doreen Massey calls the "chance of space" (111). She explains that space "entails the unexpected," where "otherwise unconnected narratives may be brought into contact, or previously connected ones may be wrenched apart" (111). In this chaotic spatiality, "different temporalities and different voices must work out means of accommodation" (111) and the chaotic arrangement of trajectories of life "must be responded to" (111). One way of doing this is to arrange interactional patterns and epistemes in a coherent relational whole, for in themselves, these two narrative processes fall short of explaining how in certain cases the world of the story acquires aesthetic and poetic coherence. There is indeed a third narrative process of storyworld substantiation taking place in postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction, imbuing the act of reading with a unique ecopoetic quality, and rendering the novel's chronotope interactional. This narrative process consists in the organization through topic (ecological and rhetoric/poetic) of interactional patterns and interactional epistemes in a coherent whole that accommodates "different temporalities and different voices" (Massey 111).

In “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” Mikhail Bakhtin lays out the historical stages of the novel by using the novelistic representation of the relationship between space and time. To achieve this “historical poetics,” Bakhtin coins the term “chronotope,” which, he explains refers “to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84).62

I argue that chronotope of postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction is interactional. Postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction demarcates itself from other environmental narratives by its use of a non-Western approach to the cohesion of space and time. In other words, the substantiation of a storyworld is underlain by interactionality instead of topography. More precisely, in an interactional chronotope, the storyworld is reconstructed through a feature

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62 In his historical poetics, Bakhtin identifies various chronotopes, ranging from the Greek romance, the ancient autobiography, the chivalric romances, the folkloric chronotope, the Rabelaisian chronotope and the idyllic chronotope. Each of these genres link time and space differently, and although they provide an interesting study, a detailed account of each of these chronotopes will not be done here.
of the described ecosystem (a topos, a topic feature), and by extension through the interactional patterns and interactional epistemes arranged by that topos. In *A Discovery of Strangers*, the topical feature is the Dene practice of weaving the frame and center of snowshoes; in *The Hungry Tide*, it is the tidal, mangrove and confluent ecosystem of the Sundarbans; and in *Carpentaria*, it is the line of life of the Aboriginal ancestral serpent (its Dreaming), embodied in the river and pervading the terrain of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Interactional chronotopes are therefore always unique, for they are based on the very sociocultural and ecological situation they describe. The storyworld of an interactional chronotope is therefore always situated in relation to the world it denotes, thereby reinforcing the transdietic quality of the storyworld.

In this context, it is interesting to reflect on the etymology of chronotope, and more particularly on the connotations of the word “topic,” which as Donna Haraway reminds us denotes not only a physical place, but a “rhetorical site” as well (Haraway 241). In that sense a chronotope may be understood as the narrative organization of time, space and topic. Building on this definition, I would like to argue that the interactional chronotope of postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction is rather a disorganization of Cartesian space, time and matter and a reorganization of them through topic. This phenomenon of reorganization through topic is what Andrew Gibson calls “metaphoric substitution,” where narratives “are conceptualized in terms of a reservoir of metaphors internal to them” (A. Gibson 15). In interactional chronotopes, the spatiotemporal fabric of the storyworld is subtended by an evolving topic internal to the storyworld. Instead of being underlain by a heterodiegetic, static, stable, universal and disembedded frame of reference such as topography or geometry, the storyworld of the interactional chronotope is underlain by a diegetic, dynamic, embodied, evolving and embedded process of referencing. This process of referencing is itself a metonymic or metaphoric reduction of an element of the described ecosystem. This peculiarity means that elements of the storyworld are not rigidly attached to a transcendental plane, but are continuously interacting within a dynamic matrix of immanence, and therefore an interactional chronotope can never claim totality, for it is constantly in flux, constantly in a process of becoming. Interactional chronotopes resist an
easy definition, and should therefore be defined in relation to the work they emerge from as well as to the world they depict.

Finally, the notion of interactional chronotope implies an interpretive loop, an oscillating movement of interpretation, where the storyworld is always being rethought in relation to the metonymic/metaphoric reduction. As Gibson puts it, and in the light of Michel Serres,63 “[t]he text is both flow and eddy or backwash, pulling its elements forwards in a single direction but also redistributing them backwards into new compounds, vortices, turbulences” (A. Gibson 16). Indeed the fact that interactional chronotopes are grounded in a constitutive element of the ecosystem they describe means that the reader is constantly asked to interpret the described world as both an embodied reduction and an unfolding process. Because the embodied reduction (the topos) is itself an agent in the described world it subtends, the chronotope is interactional in the mind of the interpreter, always both cause and effect of itself. This constant “pulling forward while distributing backward” (A. Gibson 16) constitutes a to-and-fro movement between the embodied chronotope and the chronotoping embodiment. This movement of metaphoric/metonymic reduction and chronotopic expansion creates an oscillation, a literary vibration that gives its peculiar voice to the postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction.

One must not forget that if the interactional chronotope of a text organizes the interactional patterns and interactional epistemes and may indeed bring cohesion to the narrative in terms of topic, this does not mean that its storyworld is a homogeneous fabric or that its formal quality is monovalent. One of the crucial aspects of postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction is its hybrid nature due to its staging of the encounter of communities and the resulting hypercommunity, altercommunities or silenced community. The postcolonial reevaluation of the colonial encounter consists partly in a counter-appropriation of the colonial discourse, and therefore entails the presence of a multiplicity of contradictory statements, of contradictory interactional patterns and contradictory interactional epistemes. This presencing does not simply take place in the content, but also in the form of the

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narrative. The plural quality of the storyworld of postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction is not incompatible with the topical substantiation through chronotoping, for the metaphoric/metonymic reduction is itself interactional, dialogic, in resonance with its surroundings. I would suggest on the contrary that the plural quality of the storyworld is necessary to the interactional chronotope, for homogeneity does not necessitate cohesion; it is already cohered into itself. The polyvocalness of postcolonialism and environmentalism, by contrast, necessitates a topical cohesion if it is to be understood as something else than noise.

It is not surprising that chronotopes be interactional in postcolonial environment fiction. As Daniel Punday reminds us, in “suggesting that the raw story outline of a narrative ‘takes on flesh’ Bakhtin rightly implies that the way that a narrative will imagine space and time is inherently linked to the way that it positions bodies within that space” (Punday 94). As I have already explained, postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction posits a novel conception – novel in terms of Western epistemology – of bodies as organisms-in-their-environment and of situated knowledge. Following Punday, it is logical that the interactionality inherent in the representation of bodies and environments be applied to the fabric of the storyworld, now considered a dynamic weaving, an ecopoetic process that engages the reader in a self-conscious involvement with the fictional world and the ecological world. Indeed, the study of chronotopes should not be confined to the fictional world, for as Deborah Rose explains when she comments on Bakhtin’s notion, “[e]very culture develops its own manner of fashioning time and space into social and symbolic configurations [i.e., chronotopes], and these configurations become part of the ‘common sense’ social knowledge of a given group” (Rose, 2004, 37). Postcolonial econarratology is particularly aware of the outpouring of poiein into ecology, of the breaking down of the boundaries between reader, text and context that follows the collapse of the boundaries between cognition, physiology and ecology. In this framework, being confronted with interactional chronotopes can help the reader redefine the function of literary works as medium through which they can then rethink their own enmeshment in the ecological system, an enmeshment that is really an organism-
environment process. This rethinking is more than a rearrangement of time and space, it is a rearrangement of time and space through topic (both ecological and rhetorical).

2.6 Towards a Hermeneutics of Interaction

The move of placing the organism-environment process as the organizing principle behind the analysis of literary works is not without consequence. To accommodate this change of approach, the notions of text, reader, interpretation, character, focalization, ideology and plot need to be rethought, redefined or replaced. Postcolonial econarratology offers the possibility to study texts in relation both to the world they depict and to the reader who encounters them. Postcolonial econarratology sees works as being situated in biosemiotic and ecopoetic loops; from this dynamic situatedness, texts arise. Works of postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction are more than simple portals into imaginary worlds; they are agents of decompartmentalization that dissolve epistemological and ontological boundaries. They are transgressive yet coherent. They are transdiegetic, because they cut across the world/storyworld barrier set up by classic narratology.

My version of postcolonial econarratology may seem paradoxical at first sight. On the one hand, it articulates a structuralist explanation of the various components of a narrative system (interactional patterns, epistemes and chronotopes) and on the other hand it argues for a poststructuralist decompartmentalization of the text, the act of reading and the act of interpreting. I embrace this paradoxical nature. Postcolonial econarratology is indeed twofold: it seeks to destabilize structuralist narratology, but it also seeks to provide new tools for investigating the interrelatedness of work, world and reader.

Postcolonial econarratology is part of a hermeneutics of interaction, a method of interpretation whose initial assumption is that meaning consists in the interaction of a reading organism and a textual environment. In reading, one enacts lines of experience cognitively, articulates ecological knowledge and principles, and operates metaphoric and metonymic substitutions guided by the work. Ultimately it is not imperative to use the concepts of interactional patterns, interactional epistemes and interactional chronotopes.
These phrases are not explanations in themselves; they are tools that allow the reading organism to interact more consciously with the textual environment; they are tools for explaining how in reading one connects the diegetic world with the material world. Indeed whether the reader is encountering an interactional pattern, an interactional episteme, or an interactional chronotope, they are always in the process of relating the poetic world to the ecological world, the semiotic field to the biological field. The poetic world created by language intermingles with the ecological world created by experience. This is explained by the fact that language is always experiential in some ways, always pointing to the process of trial-and-error undergone by the human organisms which has allowed signs and groupings of signs to make sense in the real world.

The hermeneutics of interaction does not seek to explain in detail the relationship of causality between reading a literary work and interacting in the ecological world. This would deny the act of reading its individuality, its uniqueness, its situatedness. Asserting an explicable link of causality between poetic world and ecological world would be based on the assumption that one can measure the influence of what one reads on how one lives. Doing so would necessarily be a crude simplification of both the act of reading and the act of living. The hermeneutics of interaction instead seeks to render readers attentive to the similarities and connections between reading and living. The function of postcolonial econarratology is not to empirically measure the interaction of reader, work and world, but to operate a shift in reading communities, a shift from considering reading, work and text as isolated practices to considering reading, work and text as situated and entangled practices.

Why is it so important to adopt such a perspective on literature? One answer lies in the nature of contemporary societies, and more particularly on their reliance on democracy, or in other words on communication, to function. Indeed, in our contemporary interconnected communities, where democracy (given it is left out of the hands of demagogues) has become a prominent social and ecological agent, decision-making has become a skill. By fashioning interactional chronotopes – chronotopes representing the co-emergence of a plurality of interacting lines of becoming with a plurality of interacting systems of ecological knowledge – postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction allows readers to
figure out for themselves how to think about important ecological decisions, and how to understand the place of human embedded/embodied consciousness in the world. Postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction hones the readers’ skill at decision-making, by replacing the real and risky trial-and-error process by a fictional trial-and-error. In that sense, reading these works is very much akin to developing, expanding and diversifying a community’s system of ecological knowledge. This laboratory is crucial in a context where more and more political decisions concerning ecology are only with difficulty understood by non-experts, and where at the same time the population is asked to step up and offer its thoughts. By offering readers complex ways of thinking about ecology and humanity – ways of thinking that are plural, relational, open, situated and interactional – postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction functions as a laboratory for decision-making.

It is well documented that the physical environment impacts human societies and public health in strong ways. It has also been demonstrated that the sociocultural environment affects a person’s development into an adult. In the same vein, my claim is that literary environments shape humans and human communities by offering the population new ways of thinking and behaving and by placing readers in those complex worlds. Literary reading – when its themes and forms are informed by ecological reflection – may therefore be considered as practice of the complexity and plurality of our world, as rehearsal of a gigantic play in which humans have to make ecological decisions every day. The choreography of a play, however, is not learnt in one practice or rehearsal session, but in the repetition of these sessions. Similarly, reading one novel is not enough to teach a human how to behave in a complex world, it is only a minute portion of it. It is where the genre of postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction and the notion of interactional chronotope become important, because both offer a consistent and relatively similar way of looking at the world as an interconnected heterogeneous whole.

In other words, by making readers substantiate a complex and plural storyworld made up of situated patterns of interaction and contradictory systems of ecological knowledge, the interactional chronotopes of ecopoetic metafiction train the reader to do the same in the real world – to acknowledge the complex and pluralistic nature of contemporary and
globalized ecologies. Literature becomes a way of reconciling traditional ecological knowledge and western-scientific ecological knowledge. In the Anthropocene, decision-making is a skill that is to a large extent thought to be acquired through education, and to a much smaller extent through literary reading. Understanding the importance of literature in fashioning ecological practices could therefore reinstate literary narratives as driving agents and cultural tools in the shaping of contemporary societies.

In order for narratives to function as agents and tools of cultural evolution, readerships must internalize a particular hermeneutics, a particular understanding of what it means to read and interpret a literary work. The hermeneutics of interaction is therefore first and foremost an interpretive attitude towards artistic works and towards life. It acknowledges the openness of both the artwork and the audience. It investigates the relationality within the fictional world, within the real world and across them. It accepts the interactionality of the acts of reading and living. And finally it reflects on the transformations that occur during these interactions. The hermeneutics of interaction is not dedicated to measuring the empirical impact of reading on the individual or on society – one must not forget that in nonlinear dynamic systems, there is no stable result to measure, but always a relation to understand. Rather the hermeneutics of interaction seeks to change readerships’ attitudes towards literary texts. It is crucial however to understand that interpretation always depends on representation. The fictive always plays a role in the fashioning of the imaginary, as Iser would say. The hermeneutics of interaction can only be a valid approach to literary texts if the latter are compatible with its principles. In the three following chapters, I will endeavor to demonstrate this claim.
3. History, Fiction and Dialogism in A Discovery of Strangers

Published in 1994, A Discovery of Strangers (ADOS) deals with the social and ecological relationships between a group of explorers and a Dene community, the Tetsot’ine. It features the attempt of the explorers of the 1819-1821 Franklin expedition to map, depict and describe the Canadian Arctic, and their decimation due to arrogance, bad planning and lack of foresight. However, the official narrative retained by the empire is different, and instead of chastising Franklin for his failure, the empire promoted him to Captain and elected him fellow of the Royal Society: “He went home a hero,” B.A. Riffenburgh explains, and this is what has been promoted by the Empire using the journals of the explorers. Franklin’s heroism however is not what ADOS is about. The text instead focuses on another story that has never been told, at least not in this way: it is the story of how the indigenous Tetsot’ine offered the English explorers their hospitality, how they experienced the arrival of these strangers obsessed with recording, writing, drawing the world as if to freeze it, and how they witnessed the slow death of their community due to illness and social and ecological devastations. ADOS is concerned with the ways contemporary writers and readers necessarily have to negotiate the problematic postcolonial situation of the settler colony that we now call “Canada.” So another question that subtends the narrative system of ADOS is the following: How can one hear the voice of those who live, know, and do differently and who are now long gone? In a postcolonial context, writing, reading and interpreting this novel are not as clear-cut as they may seem.

Tim Morton affirms that literary criticism has not concerned itself enough with the ways the environment is geared into the form of literature (2010, 11). He also proposes a model for thinking the interaction of organism and environment: the mesh, in which all living and non-living things, their habitats, their relations are interconnected (2011, 28-29). Finally, Morton explains that text and context are separated only by convenience, that text dissolves

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64 A preliminary version of this chapter was published in the article “From a Poetics of Collision to a Hermeneutics of Discovery” (Barras, 2015).
the boundaries between inside and outside, between within and without, that text is “precisely the word for [the] fractal weaving of boundaries that open onto the unbounded” and that as a result, what text “includes, what it touches, must also consist of life forms, Earth itself, and so on” (2010a, 2). Morton’s notion of the mesh can be used as a framework for better understanding the storyworld of ADOS: namely the dialogical enmeshment, in the novel’s form and content, of Dene lands and animals, Indigenous Tetsot’ine, European explorers, their histories, stories, as well as their interactional epistemes and interactional patterns.

Wiebe’s achievement in ADOS, I argue, is that the text manages to reconcile two radically different constructions of the events – two contradictory interpretations of the storyworld – by combining them through historiographic metafiction and principles of the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme. Indeed, I argue that the storyworld of ADOS emerges from the constant oscillation between two radically different attitudes towards the mesh: the socioecological monologism of the explorers and the socioecological dialogism of the Tetsot’ine. In other words, the chronotope of ADOS is grounded in a dialogue between indigenous and non-indigenous modes of knowing and being. This dialogue is literal – the English and the Tetsot’ine speak to one another – and metaphorical – the two groups observe the other’s way of being and knowing. It is diegetic – it takes place within the storyworld – and transdiegetic – it cuts across the text/context boundary, unsettles it, and dissolves it to form a dialogical chronotope.

This dialogical chronotope is formally enacted by the historiographic metafictional features of the novel, that is, the juxtaposition of the historical journals of the explorers and Wiebe’s reconstruction of Indigenous voices. But this dialogical storyworld is given even more materiality as it is dramatized in the storyworld with the process of snowshoe-making, a Tetsot’ine craft that reveals the entanglement of frame and center (environment and organism, history and fiction, knowing and being) in the process of meaning-making. By emphasizing the practice of snowshoe-making as a foundational principle of the storyworld

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65 Here the terms “monological” and “dialogical” are used in the Plumwoodian sense.
as opposed to the image of the gunshot, a colonial practice that obliterates without contact, and separates with violence – *ADOS* inverses the epistemic hierarchy so long held throughout history, wherein scientific knowledge is deemed more proper than traditional ecological knowledge to describe the ecosystem.

After contextualizing the novel in the tradition of Canadian historiographic metafiction, I open this chapter with a discussion of the status of historiographic metafiction as dialogism, and of the peculiarity of *ADOS* of being a process of historiographic metafiction (embodying a Bakthinian dialogism) inspired by a Dene worldview (embodying a Plumwoodian dialogism). I then discuss how the opening chapter of *ADOS* defamiliarizes the narrative voice, makes audible the ecology of the Dene lands and plunges the reader into alterity. This defamiliarization clears the ground and opens the possibility of rethinking the events of the 1820s. Indeed I argue that there is an evolution in the way the text constructs the encounter of indigenous peoples and explorers, for the text provides two topics (snowshoes and gunshots) to reify the encounter of interactional epistemes. At first the encounter is presented as a *collision*, but in the course of reading it becomes a *discovery*. Finally, after explaining in more detail the features of the colonial interactional episteme and of the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme and how they participate in the construction of two different storyworlds, I conclude with the way the text enables these two interpretations of the storyworld to become one in reading.

### 3.1 Canadian Historiographic Metafiction

*ADOS* comes from a long list of Canadian novels that dramatize the relationship between fiction and history by reflecting on the “impossibility of knowing the past in unmediated forms” (Hammill 134). In Canadian contemporary creative writing, this impossibility has provoked an intense reflection on “the shaping and distorting role of memory and nostalgia, [on] the politicisation and ideological charge of narratives of the past, and [on] the significance of documents, images and research, and the ways in which such evidence is used in reconstructing – or censoring – the past” (Hammill 134).
The phrase “historiographic metafiction” was coined by Linda Hutcheon in 1984 to respond to this new trend in Canadian literature of the 1970s and 1980s that had become especially concerned about the role of the past in shaping the present. She explains that this genre "shows fiction to be historically conditioned and history to be discursively structured" (1988, 120). Hutcheon clarifies that *metafiction* is fiction that is “self-referential and auto-representational” (1984, 228); it works on the level of process and gives the reader the task to “make the link between life and art, between the processes of the reception and the creation of texts” (228). Drawing on the French poststructuralist notion of *énonciation*, Hutcheon therefore brings together the production and reception of text, and thus involves the reader actively in the generation of meaning. Reading becomes dynamic, and the novel leaks out of its linguistic container to become a generative process of knowing.

The specificity of *historiographic* metafiction is that it sheds reflexive light not only on the process of meaning-making in fiction, but also in history. It thematizes the processes behind the production and reception of history. Commenting on Rudy Wiebe’s work *The Temptations of Big Bear* (first published in 1973), Hutcheon explains that the novel uses many overt narrating voices, which leaves the reader “to pull together the various and fragmentary points of view she has been given and ... must make an evaluation and interpretation of all that she has been told” (1984, 230-231). But in the postcolonial situation of Canada, in which a major part of the events of history have not been recorded, and worse, have been more or less deliberately silenced, it is a problem and a difficulty to evaluate the past and its influence on the present. Hutcheon explains that the “relationship between historical fact and the act (and permanence) of writing is a common theme in historiographic metafiction” (233), especially in *The Temptations of Big Bear*, because “the fixed permanence and arid factuality [of historical documents] of the white world are pitted against the oral, unrecorded, and thus undefendable, discourse of the Indian world” (233). In this context, she emphasizes the challenges faced by the novelist, and by Wiebe in particular, in order to capture in writing the oral presence of an indigenous historical personage (233-234). One strategy is of course to draw attention to the constructed nature of both the novel and the history out of which the novel is produced. From this double attention to fictionality
and historicity, the work of historiographic metafiction makes clear firstly “that a work of fiction is never only an autonomous linguistic and narrative construct, but is always also conditioned by contextual forces (such as society, history, and ideology) that cannot or should not be ignored in our critical discussions” (236-237); and secondly that these novels signal “a need to investigate both the ontological nature and the function of their literary products and of the processes that created them and keep them alive” (236).

The challenge, identified by Hutcheon, of reconciling the oral history of the indigenous populations with the written history of the explorers and later on the settlers is echoed by Diana Brydon in her 1988 essay “Troppo Agitato: Writing and Reading Cultures,” in which she explains that when dealing with texts from different cultures, the critic must reflect attentively on the means to create intercultural and intertextual dialogue and to “achieve ‘heterology,’ which makes understood the difference of voices … while avoiding the twin perils of insipidity and self-parody” (13). Brydon reads Rudy Wiebe’s The Temptations of Big Bear in light of Australian writer Randolph Stow’s Visitants, in which the protagonist “Alistair Cawdor, imagines a piece of music marked troppo agitato” (Brydon 13-14) that makes manifest an “apocalyptic vision of time moving backwards from art into nature, from wholeness into fragments, and from stasis into flux, [thereby] challeng[ing] the Western system of values that … has privileged the first of each of these terms” (14). Brydon’s description of both novels as polyvocal is in line with Hutcheon’s claim that historiographic metafiction is a process whereby the reader is made to weave together various voices. Brydon also explains that in the two novels, “the hybridization of form corresponds to the colonial experience of a hybridization of cultures” (18), and that “[b]oth Wiebe and Stow cross traditional disciplinary boundaries to create the seismic disruptions of the old certainties through which the “heterological mentality” – the cross-cultural awareness – of a harlequin universe can be born” (19).

Brydon also argues that, if not countered by certain narrative techniques, some aspects of written narratives – their linearity geared towards conclusions, their grammatical subordination of object to subject, and the fact that “point of view privileges one perspective above another” (28) can be problematic when dealing with intercultural and intertextual
works. The narrative techniques she mentions are the juxtaposition of different versions of events by witnesses from different cultures and with different agendas to question “historical” facts, the denaturalization of stereotypes about European superiority over indigenous peoples, and the introduction of spirituality as a valid way of knowing that challenges short-term rationalism (28-29).

Brydon concludes her essay by stating that the formal features of heterologic novels promote creative dialogue and invite the reader to “learn openness to difference” (30). The polyvocalness of Canadian historiographic metafiction and “the sheer exuberance of [its] multifold creativity” (30) challenge the homogenization operated by imperialism and give a prominent place to all voices and ways of life – even those that have been alienated, marginalized, or silenced. Brydon’s positive ending insists on the role of the reader in recomposing a whole from the individual voices present in Wiebe’s and Stow’s narratives. By putting forward the “openness to difference and to change” (30) that is necessary to appreciate these texts, she suggests readers possess a creative force that can let them advance towards “a new future of [their] own making” (30). However, one question remains: Has this creative force the power to move Canadian society beyond the trauma of colonialism and into the utopian dream of postcolonialism, where the post- means done and over with?

3.2 Rudy Wiebe and the Search For a Voice: The Figure of the Storymaker

Rudy Wiebe was born in 1934 from “Dutch-Prussian-Russian Mennonites who immigrated to Saskatchewan in 1929” (Beck 856). His writings have been received mostly positively by Canadian First Nations (860), not the least because he strives “to call attention to the injustices that indigenes have endured and thereby to foster social justice for them in contemporary society and politics” (862). 66 Beck explains that “[e]xhaustive, creative research lies behind every one of Wiebe’s historical novels about Canada’s indigenous people” (859-860), and that the writer “gives the indigene a leading voice in his fiction, but

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66 For critiques of Wiebe’s appropriation of indigenous voices, see Collin (2006).
in the context of many other competing voices, both indigenous and European” (860). Wiebe indeed writes polyvocal narratives that encourage readers to accept multiplicity and thus to open themselves to the voice of the Other.

Already in the 1970s, Wiebe was aware of the difficulty of telling the past and of the risks of appropriation when writers represent indigenous voices. Citing Wiebe himself (Wiebe and Keith 211), Adam Weisman explains that the writer “is conscious of the danger attendant on the remythologization of Canada as a multicultural nation (as opposed to a monocultural, plural, or simply bicultural nation) that took place in the 1960s and 1970s” (Weisman 692). Indeed, in his essay “Where is the Voice Coming from?,” first published in 1974, Wiebe touches upon the problems of writing indigenous voices – in this example, the voice of the Cree fugitive Almighty Voice at the end of the nineteenth century. The essay “signals the onset of a radical change in Canadian cultural awareness and its ideology of nationhood – an end to deafness, so to speak” (Howells ix), for in it Wiebe dramatizes the fictionality of history and the problems inherent in producing a voice that resides in the past, especially when this voice belongs to a minority that has been silenced by colonialism.

Wiebe opens the essay with an intriguing statement, “The problem is to make the story” (1995b, 27), which raises a series of questions such as What story?, Why is it a problem to make it? and Are we talking about Story, History or Reality? and if the second, How can we “make” history? Wisebe continues:

Presumably all the parts of the story are themselves available. A difficulty is that they are, as always, available only in bits and pieces. Though the acts themselves seem quite clear, some written reports of the acts contradict each other. As if these acts were, at one time, too well-known; as if the original nodule of each particular fact had from somewhere received non-factual accretions; or even more, as if, since the basic facts were so clear, perhaps there were a larger number of facts than any one reporter, or several, or even any reporter had ever attempted to record. (1995b, 27-28)

This passage features several constitutive elements of Wiebe’s fiction: the fragmentation, multiplicity and fictionality (non-factuality) of facts and documents out of which (hi)story is constructed, as well as the omission or non-selection of certain facts and documents. Twenty years before the publication of ADOS, Wiebe was already aware of the long history
of colonial constructions of the past, and was already at work dramatizing the work of the writer and that of the reader.

Wiebe then reconceptualizes the relationship between historical person, history, fiction writer, and reader. He explains that he writes against both Aristotle’s distinction between history and fiction and Teilhard de Chardin’s assertion that in writing one isolates oneself from one’s surroundings.\(^\text{67}\) On the contrary, he explains:

\begin{quote}
despite the most rigid application of impersonal investigation, the elements of the story have now run me aground. … I can no longer pretend to objective, omnipotent disinterestedness. I am no longer spectator of what has happened or what may happen: I am become element in what is happening at this very moment. (1995b, 38)
\end{quote}

By studying the past through historical documents, Wiebe explains that he becomes an element of this past. More than being aware of the problem of rendering the past, Wiebe dramatizes this ideological involvement of the writer of history and fiction, and thus enables the reader to reflect on what constitutes appropriation. The voice in his work does not result from a reconstruction of a discrete situation, but rather from a poetic and physical involvement with the subject matter of his stories. In that conception of writing, the distinction between past and present is not absolute and attention should be focused on the entanglement of temporalities and spatialities in consciousness. In the same vein, fictional character and historical person are to be thought not as separate beings, but as two facets of the same poetic entity.

To account for this particular view of writing historiographic metafiction, Wiebe invents a figure: the \textit{storymaker}. The storymaker is a narratological device, a narrative function of the author that reflects on the practice of writing and telling stories; it is a special type of narrator that is self-conscious of its construction of a story through the weaving together of historical and geographical sources, and that is aware of the problems inherent in representing the past. But this figure is enriched in \textit{ADOS}, because the storymaker is also

\(^{67}\) “The true difference [between the historian and the poet] is that one relates what \textit{has} happened, the other what \textit{may} happen” (Aristotle); “We are continually inclined to isolate ourselves from the things and events which surround us … as though we were spectators, not elements, in what goes on” (Teilhard de Chardin).
embodied in the indigenous inscribed storytellers Keskarrah and Birdseye. The *implied* storyteller of historiographic metafiction (the one derived from “Where is the Voice Coming from?”), who weaves together historical sources, is thus to be read together with the *inscribed* storyteller of indigenous stories (the one derived from Keskarrah, Birdseye, and Greenstockings’s practice of storytelling), who weaves together material elements of the depicted ecosystem. Through the figure of the storyteller, the text operates a junction between the European and Indigenous interactional epistemes. The two types of storytellers are often impossible to disentangle in the novel, and in discourse their entanglement is realized through the use of free indirect speech.

There is something inherently peculiar in Wiebe’s approach to writing history and fiction. Rather than a collision between the present of the writer and the past of the character, the implied storyteller dramatizes the gradual discovery that takes place when an individual person engages with historical documents: the discovery of a voice. Indeed, in “Where the Voice is Coming from?,” the storyteller is also an inscribed reader, an inscribed meaning-maker who proactively produces the history he is recounting by taking into account the circumstances of his present. Therefore, the story of history emerges when the inscribed reader of historical documents *makes* the past embodied in the text resonate with the present embodied in his life. This conflation of text and reader, of storyworld and reader’s world, is important for the study of ADOS, for as Penelope Van Toorn claims, “The question ‘Where is the voice coming from?’ haunts all of Wiebe’s work” (1995b, 195). As she explains, “the internal dialogicity of Wiebe’s texts becomes more complex and pervasive, [and as a result] the question of the provenance of voice becomes more problematic for the reader” (196). Moreover, as “Wiebe resorts more and more to dialogic modes of engagement with his readers, it becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate between the reader’s voice and Wiebe’s” (196). Therefore, by ending “Where is the Voice Coming from?” with the fact that he does not himself speak Cree, the storyteller objectifies the voice of Almighty Voice while drawing attention to his own inability to know objectively what the voice of Almighty Voice sounded like. In doing so, the storyteller makes manifest how reader and writer become one in contemplating the untranslatability of Indigenous voices:
And there is a voice. It is an incredible voice that rises from among the young poplars ripped of their spring bark, from among the dead somewhere lying there, out of the arm-deep pit shorter than a man; a voice rises over the exploding smoke and thunder of guns that reel back in their positions, worked over, serviced by the grimed motionless men in bright coats and glinting buttons, a voice so high and clear, so unbelievably high and strong in its unending wordless cry.

The voice of “Gitchie-Manitou Wayo” – interpreted as “voice of the Great Spirit” – that is, The Almighty Voice. His death chant no less incredible in its beauty than in its incomprehensible happiness.

I say “wordless cry” because that is the way it sounds to me. I could be more accurate if I had a reliable interpreter who would make a reliable interpretation. For I do not, of course, understand the Cree myself. (1995b, 40)

In this passage, the storytaker first makes clear that the voice of Almighty Voice emerges from the whole situation in which it is embedded, thereby suggesting that getting to know a voice from the past demands to account for the environment that has fashioned this voice. The storytaker draws attention to the fictionality of his reconstruction of the scene through the repetition of adjectives and adverbs such as “incredible,” “unbelievably,” and “incomprehensible” that work in concert with the mention of the storytaker’s “inaccuracy” due to his lack of a “reliable interpreter who would make a reliable interpretation.” The final paragraph hammers this fact down by reflecting on the storytaker’s own use of the phrase “wordless cry” due to the fact he does not speak Cree, and by saying it is the way the voice of Gitchie-Manitou Wayo as described here sounds to him and him only. The text makes it clear that the storytaker has not heard himself the voice he describes, but that he reconstructs it as a physical voice. By doing so, Wiebe avoids appropriating the voice and he makes plain that the past is always mediated, interpreted, and thus subject to the ideology of mediators and interpreters. By thematizing this work of interpretation, and the shortcomings of such a method, Wiebe does more than acknowledging the risk of appropriation: he dramatizes it.

Wiebe’s fictional oeuvre is pervaded by a dramatization of the representation of the indigenous voices of the past. In 1973, a year before publishing “Where is the Voice Coming from?,” Wiebe published his second novel The Temptations of Big Bear, in which he recreates the indigenous voice of the Plains Cree chief Big Bear, or Mistahimaskwa, who recounts his version of the conquest of the West in the years 1876-1888. Five years later,
Wiebe published *The Scorched-Wood People*, in which he gives a voice to Louis Riel, a Métis who writes the history and stories of his people. In 1998, Rudy Wiebe collaborates with Yvonne Johnson, who is Big Bear’s great-great granddaughter on *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman*: “[u]sing tapes and interviews and thousands of pages of Johnson’s own writing” (Egan and Helms 225), Wiebe constructs a narrative that makes audible Johnson’s trauma.

These examples show Wiebe’s concern with the problem of the representation of Indigenous voices. This concern is also very present in *ADOS*, in which Wiebe makes use of “the land” (the first word of the novel) as a common ground for settlers and indigenous peoples to encounter each other. The Arctic environment, with its specificities and hardships, becomes a way of connecting the experiences of the English and of the Tetsot’ine. Wiebe deals in detail with the difficulty of the Arctic experience in *Playing Dead*, a reflection on the Arctic as an environment that is shared by Inuit, Dene and settlers. The Arctic as a shared environment becomes the means to construct the voice of the storymaker.

The juxtaposition of voices in *ADOS* makes it almost impossible not to acknowledge the dialogism and heteroglossia of both the form of the novel and of human societies and histories. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Mikhail Bakhtin explains that aspects of the novel – its polyphony, its stratification, its diversity – imitate the form of society. Bakhtin also explains that in order to study the “novel as a whole,” scholars must analyze “the distinctive social dialogue among languages that is present in the novel” (263). He however warns us that “it is not a dialogue in the narrative sense, nor in the abstract sense; rather it is a dialogue between points of view, each with its own concrete language that cannot be translated into the other” (76).

Bakhtin mentions two forms of dialogism: he differentiates between a “form of dialogism … within the object [i.e., the work] itself” (282) – it is the one mentioned in the paragraph above – and a form of dialogism between the work and the “subjective belief system of the listener” (282). In the first form of dialogism, the multiple voices that compose the novel are necessarily read in the light of each other. From this perspective, the novel is a process of production, an orchestration of dialogized units that interact with each other.
and that resonate outside of the work by means of the reader. In the case of Rudy Wiebe’s historiographic metafiction, it is not only the discourses of history and fiction that coexist in a dialogical relation, but also the voices of the explorers – embodied in their journals – and the voices of the indigenous Tetsot’ine as reimagined by Wiebe on the model of the storymaker’s engagement with the documents in “Where is the Voice Coming from?.”

The internal dialogism of Wiebe’s novel – emphasized by Hutcheon and Brydon – entails that reading is active and that it consists in piecing together the various voices and discourses that make up the novel, which thus draws attention to the second form of dialogism. Indeed the form of discourse that is internalized and dialogized in ADOS is history. By dramatizing the discourse of history embodied by the explorers’ journals, Wiebe also dramatizes the process of interpreting historical documents, which is ultimately what both he and the reader have to do in the production and reception of ADOS. This brings us back to Bakhtin’s second form of dialogism (between the word and the reader/listener’s belief system), about which Bakhtin explains that “an active understanding, one that assimilates the word under consideration into a new conceptual system, that of the one striving to understand, establishes a series of complex interrelationships, consonances and dissonances with the word and enriches it with new elements” (282). Here Bakhtin’s “active understanding” amounts to a mutually enriching dialogue between context, reader, and text. This form of dialogism is summed up by Michael Holquist who, in the glossary to his translation of The Dialogic Imagination, explains that dialogism is an “epistemological mode” in which “[e]verything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole – there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others” (426). In ADOS we are made to understand the English and Tetsot’ine interactional epistemes as well as their interactional patterns in relation to each other; we are also made to understand the story itself in relation to the history – both of the author and of the historical characters – that has generated it. The dialogism internal to the work draws attention to the dialogism between work and world. The novel is not to be experienced as a closed “genre,” but as a generative dialogue.
In the case of *ADOS*, the complex interaction between the Tetsot’ine and the English explorers, whose systems of knowledge and ways of life are incommensurate, therefore demands an approach that reflects on the colonial (mis)representations of land and indigenous peoples. Ecofeminism, and particularly its Australian version, is very critical of monological impositions of “truths” in the context of settler societies, and it argues for a form of socioecological dialogism in which life “is aimed not at self-maximisation but at negotiation and mutual flourishing” (2002, 33). This socioecological dialogism “requires a basic level of mutuality and equality, give and take, response and feedback, that is not available in monological systems” (33) such as those of imperialism. Plumwood’s socioecological dialogism frames my reading of *ADOS* as the locus of a dialogical interaction between Tetsot’ine and English, storytelling and history, and reader and text. Indeed, Plumwood’s dialogism provides a framework that sheds light on how the meeting of communities in *ADOS* can be read as dialogue rather than as two monologues, and how one’s interaction with the environment can be envisioned in less dualistic terms. By making English and Tetsot’ine enter into dialogue in the structure and content of his work of historiographic metafiction, Wiebe moves away from the principle of hyperseparation that pervaded colonization. The novel then offers in dialogism and discovery an alternative to monologism and hyperseparation.

### 3.3 Historiographic Metafiction as Dialogism

**Is it Paratext? It’s Text!**
The dialogism at the core of *ADOS*, just as it resists a separation of history and fiction, of narrative and book, of telling and listening, and of writing and reading, also resists an easy separation of text and paratext. Rather, I argue that what initially seems paratextual in *ADOS*, soon becomes indispensable when one thinks of the work as historiographic metafiction. The Tetsot’ine story of “frame and woven centre” (91), in which skilled practice

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68 If hyperseparation and monologism characterize the attitude of some explorers in *ADOS* – they instrumentalize and silence both the land and its indigenous inhabitants – it is a socioecological dialogism that characterizes the indigenous protagonists’ way of knowing.
reunites practitioner and material, inside and outside, organism and environment, content of the story and form of the story, makes it clear that what surrounds the text cannot be separated from the actual text, which invites the reader to acknowledge that the historicity, spatiality and materiality of the book is part of the text, and that to a certain extent the embodied consciousness of the reading organism is part of it too.

Before the first chapter of ADOS, the novel includes in this order: a quote from the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, two maps of the Dene lands in 1820-1821, and a prefatory note (and perhaps less importantly in my analysis, a table of content). I argue that the quote, the maps and the note perform a juxtaposition of the discourses of history, cartography and fiction (which is also seen in the subsequent story), and by doing so encourage the reader to acknowledge the dialogism inherent in the storymaker’s work. In a way, the reader is warned that the novel is incomplete, unreadable if they dismiss either of these ways of representing the world, or if they envision them in isolation.

The entanglement of modes of telling is first alluded to in a translation of a quotation by Rainer Maria Rilke, “Strangely I heard a stranger say:/ I am with you” (i)\textsuperscript{69} from the poem “Entführung” (“Kidnapping,” “Elopement,” or “Abduction” in English), which was published in the collection “Der neuen Gedichte: Anderer Teil” (The New Poems: Second Part in English) in 1908. In the original German version, the subject of the last sentence is a third-person feminine “sie”; the line reads “und hörte fremd einen Fremden sagen: / Ichbinbeidir” (Rilke, 1989, 132). By replacing the third-person feminine with a neutral first-person pronoun, the translation creates a sense of intimacy between the speaker of the poem and the reader. This empathy is itself taken to an extreme in the German term “Ichbinbeidir,” which formalizes the connectedness of two beings. It is not clear whether Wiebe uses a mistranslation or if he willfully mistranslates. What is important to remember however is that Wiebe’s first language is a form of German, which means he would certainly be aware of the difference between Rilke’s version and the version of ADOS. Read in this light, the translated quote sheds light on the poetic license that Wiebe takes in the novel. By providing

\textsuperscript{69} In another version, the text reads: “And herself a stranger, heard a stranger say:/ lamwithyou” (sic; emphasis added; Rilke, 1989, 133).
a mistranslation of Rilke’s poetic voice, the text becomes self-reflexive and shows that quoting a voice is a process of selection, of combination and of transformation; quoting is truly re-writing, and it intimately engages one’s personality. By extension, the implied storytaker’s re-creation of the Tetsot’ine voice is more complex than mere appropriation. By reflecting on the process of quoting and translating, the storytaker shows that he is aware of the problems behind his undertaking. Rather than seeing the history of the Franklin expedition and of the indigenous Tetsot’ine as a separate past that collides with the present of the writer – in which case there could be appropriation – the prefatory quote shows that the story of the explorers and the Tetsot’ine is a dialogue between past and present through the activity of the storytaker. This entanglement of the past of the story with the present of the storyteller is in keeping with the Dene understanding of time as explained by Sharp, in which the “past and the future are as real as the present”, and in which “[c]ommunication and connection between past, now, and future are all possible” (Sharp 63). Storymaking as conceived by Wiebe echoes the Dene understanding of past, present, and future as being simultaneous in certain circumstances.

After the mistranslated epigraph, the entanglement of narrative modes is made manifest a second time as two historical maps of the explored area are provided (ii-iii), with the dates, places and journeys of the expedition. Interestingly, the maps present both the Tetsot’ine and the English nomenclature: the “Everlasting Ice” is followed by a parenthesis indicating it is also the “Coronation Gulf”; the “River of Copperwoman” is also the “Coppermine River.” This juxtaposition of respectively Tetsot’ine and English names is a reminder that the two knowledge systems are related to one another by the very fact that they have encountered each other. As such, the reader cannot read them separately, which is reinforced by the fact that the storytelling mode of the Tetsot’ine seems to have pervaded the cartographic mode of the explorers, and the reverse is also true. But the maps are not simply colonial, they also include indigenous epistemology. Therefore the reader is invited to read them as a manifestation of the syncretism that has taken place after the collision of communities; reading the maps reveals that the hybrid interactional episteme embodied in historiographic metafiction is an outcome of this meeting of cultures. This movement of
revelation, this unveiling of syncretism is important, for it counterbalances the preconceived idea that the indigenous Others (now “extinct” or rather incorporated into the neighbouring Dene peoples) have been completely assimilated, and thus definitely silenced. By providing a sense of their voice (the storied names of the land) in the very medium that has participated in their annihilation (the colonial maps), the text stages the activity of storymaking as an attempt at overcoming one of the most harmful consequences of European colonial history: the silencing of non-Western voices.

The third instance of the opening sections that lays bare the entanglement of narrative modes is the prefatory note that follows the maps and warns that excerpts of the journals of two explorers are interspersed between the fictional chapters of the book (iv). In the note, the storytaker makes manifest the creative dialogue between history and fiction, for he cleverly writes that the “dated selections between chapters are quoted (with some minor rearrangements)” (emphasis added; iv). Again, the notion that textual sources are manipulated – albeit in a minor way – comes to the fore and demonstrates that the storytaker’s undertaking is a playful arrangement of the voices of the past that are now gone. The configuration of these journal entries is also very important, for it reasserts that on top of a rewriting, a process of selection and recombination necessarily takes place in a novel. The storytaker could easily have separated history and fiction in a neat way, for instance by placing all the historical sources at the beginning or end of the book. Rather, he intersperses fiction with history, thereby showing that the two are not as easily distinguishable as one might think. Here the storytaker asserts that history can be a fictional narrative and that literary narratives also function as historical documents.

Overall, the opening section of the book combines poetry, geography, fiction and history and prefigures the combination of ecopoetics and historiographic metafiction in the main text. The quote, the maps and the note invite the reader to examine the relationships between history, geography and fiction and how these seemingly disparate “disciplines” produce storyworlds in reading. The reader’s encounter with the work and with the storyworld is necessarily reflexive due to the historiographic metafictional quality of the work, and this interpretive examination, in a ripple effect, is then echoed when history and fiction,
and rational and traditional knowledges encounter each other to produce the storyworld. Moreover, the storymaker gives a voice to several communities (English explorers, indigenous Tetsot’ine, modern Canadians and in a later stage, which you are now reading, to me as a reader), to several moments (early nineteenth century, late twentieth century, and the time of my reading and writing) and to several modes of expression (prose, maps, poetry, criticism) thereby avoiding a one-sided account of exploration and colonization and instead offering a truly polyvocal storyworld. The active engagement demanded by the book means that the act of reading can be envisioned as the skilled activity of meaning-making; in this view the reader takes up the role of a meaning-maker and it is a role that is not so different from Wiebe’s role of storymaker and of Greenstockings’s role as tool-maker. This emphasis on making is crucial in the novel: it contributes to connecting storyworld with reader’s world.

**The Story as Discovery**

Seen as performative, the work becomes the story of the reader’s discovery of the encounter of Tetsot’ine and English communities. Initially, this encounter of communities seems to be an annihilating event, a destructive collision, but paradoxically, the more one reads the more the encounter becomes a constructive discovery that results in the making of the novel and in the reader’s making of its meaning. The meeting of interactional epistemes allows for the storymaker and for the reader as meaning-maker to produce a fruitful dialogue between ways of knowing and being. The tragedy that befalls the Tetsot’ine partly results from the socioecological monologism of the explorers, and almost antithetically this tragedy permits the reader to discover the alterity of the socioecological dialogism of the indigenous community. By juxtaposing in a reflexive manner history and fiction, understanding and expression, anthropocentrism and ecocentrism, English epistemology and ontology and Tetsot’ine ways of knowing, being and doing, the text sets in motion a reconfiguration of the novel-as-genre and of colonial history. By inviting the reader to rediscover both the preconceptions they have inherited from colonial history and the conventions of the novel genre as a fiction outside of physical reality, the text brings
forth a polyvocal storyworld through the presentation of the ecological voice of the opening chapter, which in turn permits the reader to have a better sense of what a systemic understanding of life is. In this way, and this statement should not be taken cynically, the final outcome of the collision of interactional epistemes is not destruction, but creation and production, or poiesis: the collision of English and Tetsot’ine allows for a whole new literary culture to emerge, a culture of which ecopoetic metafiction becomes the epitome. ADOS, by dramatizing the creative collision of interactional epistemes, the mutual discovery of alterity, and the meeting of history and fiction in historiographic metafiction can then be envisioned as the literary outcome of a multiscalar, multilayered and multimodal land that forms the basis of Canadian history, culture and society. In that context, the storytaker is not a mere editor of fixed historical sources, and the work is not a congealed rendering of the past. Rather the storytaker’s activity is as much part of the history of the past as it is of the present of the reader, and the weaving together of two antagonistic storyworlds can be performed by the text’s dialogism.

Oscillating between History and Story

The socioecological dialogism of the Tetsot’ine, who are in constant conversation with the land and its beings, is reproduced when the reader is made to read history and fiction in the light of each other. The peculiar configuration of ADOS that alternates between historical documents and stories in the making, allows the reader to participate in the chronotoping of past, present and place. Not only do the journals provide a chronological backbone to the story, they also enable the reader to identify the geographical location of the storyworld, and they enable the reader to better grasp the indigenous interactional episteme. Initially this is a defamiliarizing plunge into alterity, but it becomes increasingly comprehensible in dialogue with the familiar discourse of the explorers.

In ADOS history and fiction ought to be read together. For instance, the first chapter about the ecological voice of the land is directly followed by an entry of Midshipman Robert Hood’s journal, dated 18 July 1820 – the start of the expedition in Fort Chipewyan – and beginning with the ominous sentence “Despite the discouraging situation, though not
hopeless, we were determined on pushing forwards” (12). Hood’s naïve optimism contrasts with the description of “Whites” in Chapter 1 as “bent and staggering” (1), leaving “helpless trails” (11) and “collaps[ing] one after the other” (11) and it is soon counterbalanced in Chapter 2, “Into a Northern Blindness of Names,” by the implacable statement that “when those [of the English naval officers] who were still alive appeared again out of the north fifteen months later, they were quite incapable of seeing anything at all” (emphasis added; 13). By jumping forward fifteen months from the historical journals into the fictional story, the text makes it clear that the fictional chapters are here to offer a retrospective commentary on the historical journal entries. The fictional parts of the novel shed light on its historical parts; the storymaker’s voice modulates the explorers’. There is a dialogue between story and history that is brought to life in reading the novel: history cannot be a paratext of fiction, and fiction cannot be a footnote of history.

Another example of that oscillation between history and story is when Robert Hood says in his journal that “[t]he woods discontinued and the rest of the country was a naked desert of coarse brown sand diversified by small rocky hills and lakes” (57). To that description of the land as a desert, the text replies in the following chapter and in the free indirect speech of Greenstockings that “[h]opefully that [i.e., the death of the explorers] would happen before These English burned everything, or killed it, they and all their men ate so much” (74). If Hood sees the land as a desert, Greenstockings perceive the explorers as making the land into a desert. The stasis present in the cartographic assessment of the landscape by Hood is echoed by the dynamism of Greenstockings’s interpretation of the explorers’ interactional patterns.

In ADOS, the encounter of explorers and indigenous people reveals the importance of dialogism for interaction with the land. Moreover, the encounter of explorers and indigenous people is mirrored by the reader’s encounter with the text, be it fictional or historical. Historiographic metafiction becomes a gateway into comprehending what socioecological dialogism consists in. The reader is led to encounter alterity in its radicality: the storymaker’s voicing of the consciousness of “The Animals in this Country” plunges the reader into a dialogical relationship with the storyworld. What may seem at first as a collision
with the Dene lands is actually the first phase of a gradual discovery of what it means to be
enmeshed within the Arctic ecosystem. Indeed, the collision of interactional epistemes that
the first chapter operates, paradoxically, presents the encounter as a discovery of the Other.
What appears at first as a poetics of collision gradually transforms into a hermeneutics of
discovery. This interpretive mode favors an intimate engagement with the work. This
intimacy in reading is enhanced by the voicing of Tetsot’ine interactional episteme and
interactional patterns. The skill of storytelling is likened to the craft of making tools, which is
itself the making of new persons. Through these repeated invocations of making tools, making
stories, making maps, and making persons, the reader is metafictionally embedded
within the depicted ecosystem, within the storyworld. In this context, making is not the
realization of a thought that preexists activity; rather making is the very activity of producing
meaning. Reading as meaning-making, in this sense, ought to be understood as the skill of
resonating with the text, just as living is the skill of resonating with the land. But stories in
ADOS are never purely fictional; they are always socioecological; they always function as
ways to connect with the present situation, with the past that has led to the present, and
with the future that the present anticipates. Stories in ADOS are therefore instances of
ecopoiesis, and reading the novel reveals and enacts the ability of stories to connect time
periods, to link beings, and to reveal the intertwined aspects of all phenomena, be they
bodily, environmental or sociocultural. Ecopoetic metafiction reveals, dramatizes and thus
performs the discovery of a being’s entanglement with the processes of the material world.

More particularly, by allowing the reader to resonate with the enminded bodies and
embodied minds of Greenstockings and Robert Hood, and by then making these two youths
encounter each other in the intimacy of the firelight, ADOS lays bare the foundations of an
ecological self that is both informed by European forms of knowledge and by Indigenous
ways of knowing. In a sense, the ecopoetics and metanarrativity of the novel enable the
reader to think the unthinkable and to grasp the intangible. Reading ADOS with skill is to
accept that the traditional “Western” sense of individuality is shattered; it is to realize that
meaning, text and reader are co-constitutive, that life, environment and organism are
codependent, that they are facets of the same process, manifestations of the same line of becoming. After all, meaning-making, like all skilled activity, is a process of the mesh.

3.4 Plunging into Alterity through Poetics

The fictional chapters of ADOS represent the way of life of the indigenous inhabitants of the Dene land and make audible their knowledge system. They also make manifest a very specific interactional episteme based on storytelling, animal kinship, ecological caring and a radically different understanding of space – specific to Arctic people in Canada – based on length as opposed to surface. I argue that the relationship between the inhabitants of the Dene lands and their environment is so defamilizaring that, when voiced in the text, it becomes poetic and opens up a space for rethinking colonial history. In this section, I will focus on the first chapter, for it is the most unsettling in its production of a peculiar sense of dwelling through the representation of the mesh, and its ecopoetics forms the foundation of the indigenous interactional episteme that will be developed in the rest of the book.

Voicing the Land and its Ecology

In the opening of ADOS, the text shatters notions of point of view, focalization and perspective in the novel by producing a voice that seems to emerge from the depicted ecosystem, from the mesh. This voice plunges the reader into the alterity of the storyworld, which is also the totally alien Arctic environment that the explorers had to face. But this storyworld that is pure alterity, is also, historically, a reconstruction of the ecopoetics of the extinct indigenous community of the Tetsot’ine. The voicing of the fictional ecology of the “Dene lands” (see maps of the region in the paratext) arises from the storymaker’s engagement with the historicity and ecology of the region and from his careful attention to the lines of life that make up the mesh. I argue that the first chapter is told in the voice of an inscribed indigenous storymaker, possibly Keskarrah, although this fact is not made explicit. Understood this way, the boundary between the implied storymaker of historiographic

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70 One may wonder: How can an ecology have a voice? As I will show, in the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme, processes of the environment and stories are not so different, and the world speaks, if one is willing and able to listen (24).
metafiction and the inscribed indigenous storyteller of ecopoetic metafiction is blurred like tracks in snow.

The storyteller’s voicing of the land is an ecopoetic manifestation of the mesh that makes audible the interactional episteme arising from the environment shared by the Tetsot’ine, the animals, and after their arrival, the explorers. The text defamiliarizes the arrival of the English explorers of the 1819-1822 Franklin expedition and their subsequent interaction with the indigenous community on several levels. First it shows that the land and its animals have voices that can be heard, which challenges anthropocentrism. The defamiliarization undermines the very definition of indigenous beings and lands as “resources,” and this subverts colonialism. Finally it goes against the very notion of “narratorial” authority by blurring the boundaries of the textual voice.

With the presence of the determiner “this” in the title of the first chapter,\textsuperscript{71} the text signals that the storyteller’s voice belongs to the Arctic storyworld, is not alienated from it. The opening of \textit{ADOS} makes manifest that the land is a meshwork of threads of consciousness and experience, that the Dene territory is an intertwining of the lines of life of the organisms of the Dene land – indeed of “The Animals in This Country” (the title of the chapter), comprising that of the caribou, the wolves, the Tetsot’ine, and the explorers – although for the latter, this line is broken into surfaces:

\begin{quote}
The land is so long, and the people travelling in it so few, the curious animals barely notice them from one lifetime to the next. The human beings whose name is Tetsot’ine live here with great care, their feet travelling year after year those paths where the animals can easily avoid them if they want to, or follow, or circle back ahead to watch them with little danger. Therefore, when the first one or two Whites appeared in this country, an animal would have had to search for four lifetimes to find them being paddled about, or walking, or bent and staggering, somewhere on the inexorable land. (1)
\end{quote}

This opening into alterity yields three discoveries. Firstly, it lays bare the storyteller’s peculiar attitude towards the world that is inspired by a mode of understanding specific to Arctic people: qualifying the land as “long” imbues the latter with life, dynamism and

\textsuperscript{71} This phrase echoes Margaret Atwood’s poetry collection “The Animals in \textit{that} Country” (emphasis added). However, by deliberately using “this” instead of “that,” \textit{ADOS} signals that the voicing of the land is embedded in the environment it depicts.
movement and signals that the narrative voice comes from indigenous knowledge. This quality also permits the organisms that populate it (caribou, Tetsot’ine, the “Whites”) to encounter the lines of life of other organisms. It is from these encounters between the “animals in this country” that the storytaker’s voicing of the land emerges. This ecological understanding is shared by the Tetsot’ine, but not by the European explorers. Indeed, the end of the first paragraph of the novel rather qualifies the explorers’ vision of the land as “inexorable,” a negative term implying rigidity and immutability, and imbuing the Arctic with a destructive lifeforce impossible to stop.

The second discovery concerns the indigenous population’s interactional patterns. The storytaker emphasizes how these “human beings” live with “care” and respect for the land and its beings. The phrase “human beings” places the Tetsot’ine on the same level as the “animal [beings] in this country.” In the mesh, the difference between indigenous humans and non-humans is less strongly marked than in anthropocentric discourses. As is generally the case in indigenous hunter-gatherer ontologies, animals are as much “persons” as human beings (Ingold, 2002, 48). This is significant, for this is part of the Tetsot’ine attitude of care that preserves the agency of non-humans and does not relegate the latter to an instrumentalized other. Moreover, the Tetsot’ine are described as “travelling,” and therefore, in light of Wiebe’s use of Inuit epistemology in Playing Dead,72 the Tetsot’ine are to be understood as linear beings in the linear dimension of the land. This similarity between the Tetsot’ine, the animals and the land is a sign of the relationships of mutual codependence that characterize life in the Dene lands and more generally in the Arctic. This relationship is made manifest in the interplay of lines of life whereby the animals “can easily

72 In Playing Dead (2003) Wiebe tells of his own personal encounter with the Arctic environment and with its peoples. In it, he explains that in Inuktitut grammar, things can be either areal (equal in breadth and length) or linear (longer than broad) (52). More interestingly, an areal thing becomes grammatically linear when it moves, and since survival in the Arctic requires quasi constant movement to acquire food, linearity becomes associated with life. Language is here inherently ecological, for it is an echo of the interactional pattern. Indeed, discussing Playing Dead, Tim Ingold explains that for the Inuit, “as soon as a person moves he becomes a line. To hunt for an animal, or to find another human being who may be lost, you lay one line of tracks through the expanse, looking for signs of another line that might lead you to your quarry. Thus the entire country is perceived as a mesh of interweaving lines rather than a continuous surface” (Ingold, 2007, 75).
avoid [the Tetsot’ine] if they want to, or follow, or circle back ahead to watch them with little danger” (1). Far from a collision of two trajectories of life, the relationship between the animals and the Tetsot’ine is an intertwining of patterns of interaction.

The third discovery concerns the explorers. The storymaker makes manifest how the explorers’ patterns of interaction, which are clumsy and struggling, contrast with that of the Tetsot’ine. The shift in interactional pattern is introduced by the connector “therefore.”73 The fact that “an animal would have had to search for four lifetimes to find them [the Whites] being paddled about, or walking, or bent and staggering” (4) illustrates this dysfunctional relationship between the Europeans and the Dene land as described in the opening. The use of the passive mode and of the verb “stagger” emphasize the “areality” of the Europeans, and their inability to survive on an “inexorable” land, which is deaf to their rationalism, for “incapable of being moved by entreaty” (OED). The sentence also singles out the explorers’ sense that there is an ontological disconnection between humans and animals.

Finally, it is important to note that the storymaker’s voicing of the Dene ecology is not akin to omniscient narration in which the narrator knows all and is everywhere as a homogeneous substance. On the contrary, the storymaker’s voicing of the land arises from the interactions between things and beings, between past and present, between the historian and the indigenous storyteller, between Wiebe, the Tetsot’ine, the explorers and the reader. By expressing these interactions, the storymaker initiates a subtle hermeneutic spiral wherein beings’ interactional patterns make up the environment of other beings, and spiral forwards from the past of the action to the present of their voicing.

**Sensuousness of the prose**
The storymaker’s voicing of the ecology of the region is reinforced by a sensuous prose that emphasizes sounds. As percepts, sounds are more diffuse than visual images, and they are carried by pressure waves that ripple through air and matter alike and that resonate

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73 It is to be noted that the explorers are first referred to as the “Whites.” Contrary to the Tetsot’ine who are “human beings,” the narrative voice does not yet describe the Europeans as humans, as if being human was not an ontological question, but a question of attitude towards the world and of one’s behavior within it. Unsettling the definition of humanness is a strategy of defamiliarization that reinforces the immersion into alterity.
within an organism’s body. By concentrating on sounds in the second paragraph, the storytmaker facilitates the immersion into alterity, but he also signals a transformation of the ecology of the Dene. The arrival of the Europeans coincides with a change in the depicted soundscape of the Dene lands, which is made particularly salient in the following passage, where the arrival of the strangers is aestheticized through the motif of sound collisions:

About that time some of the animals did begin to hear strange noises, bits of shriek and hammer above the wavering roar of the rapids or the steady flagellation of wind. These were strangers, so different, so blatantly loud the caribou themselves could not help hearing them long before they needed to be smelled, and some animals drifted around to see what made the trees in one place scream and smash that way, the rocks clang. They noticed creatures that looked like humans standing motionless here and there, abruptly pointing and shrieking, pounding! pounding! pounding! scuttling about all day and sometimes at night as well, when tendrils of bush along the river might spring up suddenly into terrifying flame. And the animals understood then that such brutal hiss and clangour must bring on a winter even colder than usual. (1-2)

If the arrival of the Europeans changes the ecology of the Dene lands, it also logically changes the storytmaker’s voicing of this ecology. This modulation of the aural environment by the “strangers, so different, so blatantly loud” is rendered in writing by a series of onomatopoeic phrases that plunge the reader more deeply in the folds of the changing storyworld, and by extension into resonance with its animals. For instance, the phrase “bits of shriek and hammer” contains the plosive consonants [b], [t] and [k] that mimic the abrupt collision of hammer on wood, but it also contains the sibilant fricatives [s] and [ʃ] that evoke the sound of trees falling and burning. In the same vein, the phrase “abruptly pointing and shrieking, pounding! pounding!” also uses plosives and sibilants, but adorns it with a repetition of the word “pounding” followed by an exclamation mark that enhances the violence of logging through punctuation and syntax. The onomatopoeic collision resonates with the meeting of indigenous beings and strangers, sending feedback loops into the narratorial language which makes use of poetic license to voice the line of interaction of the “curious animals” (1). The paragraph ends with a prefiguration of the effects of this alteration of the aural environment: the “brutal hiss and clangour must bring on a winter even colder than usual” (2). This conclusion to the second paragraph is significant for two reasons: first it shows what to a modern rationally minded reader seems like a peculiar intuitive way of
reasoning regarding weather patterns, but which turns out to be true, and predictable on the basis of situated, local knowledge. It foreshadows the explorers’ difficulty with predicting seasonal changes in weather; and it predicates the Europeans’ seeming lack of care and respect for the land as a cause for the demise of the expedition. Thus alterity is turned on its head through place. The colonial behavior of the loud strangers is so peculiar and so intrusive that it cannot leave the ecosystem untouched and therefore its voicing unaltered.

Reading ADOS as an immersion in and as a discovery of alterity enables a reconfiguration of the reader’s attitude towards place. This becomes clear in the third paragraph when the collective and cyclical organism-environment processes of the caribou is given in more detail. The storytaker’s voice becomes imbued with an animal quality that brings about an intense reflection on the difference and similarities between human beings and animal beings’ interaction with the environment:

the racket these strange human beings [i.e., the explorers] made in one place mattered nothing at all. The animals simply moved away into their necessary silence, travelling where they pleased, as they always had inside that clenched fist of the long darkness, their powerful feathered, furred bodies as light as flecks of ice sifting over snow, as light and quick as breathing. (2)

Here, the “necessary silence” of the caribou contrasts with the “racket” of the explorers. This contrast in sound production serves to reinforce the difference in ways of life between indigenous and non-indigenous beings.74 Moreover, it characterizes animals as enjoying agency as well as having a sense of necessity and tradition. By portraying the animals as knowing what is necessary in the present, what they wish for the future and where they come from in the past, the storytaker facilitates the reader’s encounter with these beings who, with these qualities in mind, are not so different from humans after all. This tension between animal and human beings, between difference and sameness, is complicated by the use of figurative language that both makes familiar the line of experience of the animals and defamiliarizes the land they travel in. This defamiliarization forces the reader to slow

74 It is important to bear in mind that the term “indigenous” does not differentiate between humans and animals, for in the Dene worldview, as in other indigenous communities in North America, “[p]ersonhood … is open equally to human and non-human animal (and even nonanimal) kinds” (Ingold, 2002, 48).
down to attend more carefully to the interactional pattern of the caribou. For instance, by referring to the land in winter as a “clenched fist of the long darkness” (2), the storymaker invites the reader to imagine a clenched fist, thereby giving flesh to life in winter, making it corporeal, concrete and compact. But the storymaker then blurs this image and transmutes it into an evanescent and elongated “darkness.” This contrast between the corporeal fist and the ungraspable darkness, between static density and dynamic length, resonates with the way the storymaker depicts the animals as having “powerful” sturdy bodies characterized with adjectives of textures that are easily imagined (“feathered” and “furred”), all the while being “light” and “quick” as “flecks of ice” and “breathing” – the latter two analogies taking the reader slightly longer to imagine, perhaps because of their apparent aerial immateriality. The antithetical complexity of the poetic language here reveals the rhetorical strategy behind the first chapter: the storymaker’s voicing of the land is not supposed to alienate the reader from the world of animals, but rather it seeks to incorporate the reader into the animals’ storyworld while acknowledging the unfeasibility of complete identification.

I can draw an analogy at this moment: a human being imagining the consciousness of an animal being is somehow similar to a reader making sense of two parts of an antithetical proposition. Both human and reader are bound to feel uneasy and to experience a sense of incompatibility, which results in a gap in meaning at first. However, from this incompatibility is bound to emerge a richer meaning, for through a defamiliarization that shows the impossibility of complete identification – and by extension understanding – the storymaker is liberated and can lay out the line of interaction of the caribou, and then in a second stage move on to the life of the Tetsot’ine community.

Indeed, after offering a moment of poetic reflection on the mechanisms that subtend the conception and experience of the other, the storymaker proceeds to depict more vividly the way of life of the caribou, this time without any mention of human beings:

But throughout the dark weight of midwinter, with moss and lichens always harder to smell and paw from under the crusted snow, all the caribou knew that the sun would certainly return again. And eventually it did; its rim grew slowly day by day up out of darkness and into red brilliance, until finally the cows and
calves recognized themselves together as they always were, in the whole giant ball of it shimmering through ice fog, round and complete again on the distant edge of the sky. The cows lay in their hollows of snow on a drifted lake, their calves from the previous spring sheltered against their backs out of the wind. Their blunt, furry noses lifted from the angles of their folded legs, their nostrils opened to the burning air: it was sharp as ice, gentle with all the smells they recognized, arctic and safe. Lying safe, alert in this instant of rest, they were reassured that when that blazing sun stands three times its height over the glazed levels of this lake, they will feel the restlessness of their young grow heavier within them. And then they will move again into their continual travel.

In this paragraph, the fourth, the collective consciousness of the caribou is glimpsed mainly through the animals’ collective interactional pattern, and more particularly their movement, smell, vision and touch. If at the end of the third paragraph, the lightness and quickness of the caribou’s movement was enacted by a sequence of iamb and trochees (i.e., “as light | as flecks | of ice | sifting | over | snow, | as light | and quick | as breathing”) that mirrored a forward movement. Now, the beginning of the fourth paragraph consists of a combination of stressed syllables placed on the phrase describing the atmosphere of the Dene lands (“the dark weight of midwinter”). This contrast, which indicates that winter bears heavily on the animals’ bodies and slows down their interactional pattern, is also a subtle allusion to the entanglement of organism and environment, of way of life and seasonal patterns. The next units of interaction confirm this, as the absence and difficulty of smell and touch are highlighted by the fact that “moss and lichens [are] always harder to smell and paw from under the crusted snow.” Here the voicing of the caribou’s interactional pattern combines perception and action, and smell and paw (i.e., touch) are but two aspects of the same process of foraging. There is a kinesthetic conflation of perception and action at play, and this conflation is brought to life as the style of the text, and more precisely the plosive consonants [k] and [t] and the sibilant fricative [s] brings to sonority the sound of paws and mouths breaking layers of “crusted snow.” Sound and rhythm here enable a strong intimacy with the described world of the “animals in this country.”

This vivid rendering of the caribou’s interactional patterns is reinforced when the caribou experience the return of the sun after a lightless winter. The text describes how they perceive the sun’s “rim [grow] slowly … out of darkness into red brilliance, … [a] giant ball
of shimmering through ice and fog, round and complete again on the distant edge of the sky” (2). In this sentence, the visual “shimmering” is rendered aural, for the tremulousness of the light is evoked by the sound [ʃ]. This synesthetic transposition of sight into sound is reinforced by the presence alongside the alliterating monophthong-syllables [ɹm] (”rim”) and [red] (“red”) of the diphthong-syllable [raʊnd].

Poetic language facilitates immersion in the Dene lands, and more specifically in the group of caribou, but it also induces the reader to reflect on her active participation in the production of storyworlds. The phrase “finally the cows and calves recognized themselves together as they always were, in the whole giant ball of [the sun] shimmering” (emphasis added; 2) renders the conflation of animal and human in reading even more profound. The reader can indeed imagine herself performing the completion of the disk of the sun, which permits the caribou to “recognize themselves together” in this light. The reader is subtly invited to believe that her mouth participates in the natural reunion of cow and calf. Reading therefore becomes part of the very situation that the text describes; reading enables the story to unfold, the storyworld to grow and the caribou to travel their land; reading is producing meaning, is making meaning; reading is writing, is performing, is reforming the reader’s mindset. The sensuousness of the prose enables the reader to conflate the corporeal space of their mouth and the geographical space of the sun’s light through fog, thereby reinforcing the entanglement of reader-text-human-animal in dialogism.

After the voicing of the land has brought to consciousness the natural cycle of caribou birth, the annual migration, “the continual travel” (3) can begin:

Gradually at first, then more steadily, like driftwood discovering a momentary current, hesitating into daily eddies of moss or crusted erratics but leaning more certainly down into motion along this contorted river, or this lakeshore; easily avoiding the noisy, devastated esker between Roundrock and Winter lakes and their connecting tributary streams. Seeking steadily north. From every direction more and more of them will drift together, thousands and tens of thousands drawn together by the lengthening light into the worn paths of their necessary journey, an immense dark river of life flowing north to the ocean, to the calving grounds where they know themselves to have been born. (3)

The “continual travel” is first likened to “driftwood discovering a momentary current.” This simile draws together two primary processes of the Dene lands, the migration of caribou
and the flow of rivers, and imbues both processes with consciousness. More importantly, this analogy draws attention to the fact that migration and river resume their course each year together. The correlation between the seasonal movements of river and caribou northward is developed in the metaphor, as the “lengthening light” (again, the notion of length signifying life) causes caribou herds to “drift together,” in a similar fashion to the “connecting tributary streams.” The metaphor of the tens-of-thousands-individual herd as “an immense dark river of life” completes the correlation between water and caribou, between length, movement and life. At the same time as the metaphor reveals the trajectories that make up the Dene ecology as both land- and water-based, it also blurs the distinction between animal and geographical processes. In this passage, figurative language contributes to the defamiliarization of the reader’s expectations by connecting caribou and river. The metaphor however also introduces a complex system of relationships that underscores the connection between the watercourse, the caribou and the Tetsot’ine. The Tetsot’ine call the river “Copperwoman,” which means that by extension the “river of life” is not only qualifying the water current, but the animal and human currents as well. The principles behind the literary ecology of the Dene lands are therefore informed not by dichotomy, as in the culture/nature or human/animal binaries, but rather by co-constitutional dialogism through movement, and by linearity as opposed to areality.

**Personhood of Animals and Transmutation of Beings**

The storymaker’s voicing of indigenous animal-persons’ interactional patterns takes the reader even further into the interconnections of the ecology. After describing the interactional patterns of the caribou, the storymaker now moves on to a foundational principle of the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme: the personhood of animals. The system of correlations and codependence at the basis of the ecology of the Dene lands is indeed developed as the storymaker breaks from the ecological accounts of the caribou’s migration and shifts towards the sociocultural connection between caribou and humans. This unexpected change of scope from the collective to the individual signals a change in narration that mirrors the transmutation from caribou to human and from human to caribou.
At this point, the text no longer focuses on the “river of life” and on the “tens of thousands” (3), but narrows down the scope to one individual, the “caribou cow with three tines on each of her antlers” (3), or ˀElyàske (4). By naming the three-tined cow, the storymaker reveals the mythical quality of her story and her personhood, which transcends the species barrier. Moreover, the sudden change from a past tense (“lay,” “bedded”) to a future (“will awaken”) and to a present point of view (“is gone,” “search,” “notice,” etc.) indicates a change of narrative mode: behind this sequence of events (the transformation of a child into a caribou and its departure from the group of humans) lie two principles that regulate the way of life of the Tetsot’ine, i.e., the kinship between animals and humans (133) and the metamorphoses of people. At this point, the text offers the Tetsot’ine reaction to the disappearance of the child in direct speech (the only instance in the chapter!), which reinforces the intensity of their grief: “We have lost another good child to the caribou,” they begin to wail. “She will never play and make a fire with us, or dance, or sew clothes and bear strong children, or comfort us when we are hungry and sick. No-o-o-o, oh no, no. We will never see that good child again” (4). The sense of grief at the loss of a child is made aural through an onomatopoeic rendering of the wailing (“No-o-o, oh no, no”). The fact that the Tetsot’ine emotional reaction is given direct speech and that this is the only instance of it in the chapter contributes to drawing attention on the narrative nature of the kinship between caribou and people. Both onomatopoeia and direct discourse thus participate in the defamiliarization of human-animal ontology in the first place, and of the referentiality of discourse in a second time. By juxtaposing past, present and future, free indirect speech and direct speech, collective and individual, human, animal and elemental, the text blurs the distinctions and differences between them. Drawing attention to its constructedness, the story of ˀElyàske as voiced in the first chapter of ADOS dramatizes the relationship between fact and fiction, thereby hinting at the metanarrative quality of the book.

This metanarrative reflection on the referentiality of stories is not purely a human trait. It is shown in the paragraph that directly follows ˀElyàske’s story and that refers now to Naˀácho the silver wolf (4). Here again, the storymaker does not depict a simple wolf; he tells a story that enriches the characterization of an individual organism with a mythical
origin and thereby complicates this organism’s social and ecological function. If the three-tined cow was kin with the Tetsot’ine and was blurring the difference between human and animal, Na’ácho is rather a feared distant presence, almost intangible since it “lives best in memory” (4) and is an “untouchable enigma” (4). This enigma however resides “between the eskers and the ocean” (4), which gives an indication as to its nature. Eskers are “elongated and often flat-topped mounds of post-glacial gravel” (OED). To reside between the esker and the ocean therefore amounts to residing in the location of a former glacier. The fact that Na’ácho is characterized as being “gigantic,” that it is remembered when “strands of [the wolves’] twilight howl strayed alone and united again over the long evening hills” (emphasis added; 4), and that the wolf’s “voice deepened into that long warning other males could hear and avoid” (emphasis added; 4) all point to the awesome geological process of a glacier, whose symphony of sounds (high pitched like the wolves’ howls and low pitched like their growls) could well be imitated in stories by mimicking the animal’s vocal patterns travelling over features of the landscape.75 Since the geology and geography of the Dene lands is grounded in the former glaciers, by likening the individual figure of the silver wolf to a presence that has fashioned the river courses of the region through deep time, the storytaker also defines the wolf as an essential being in the meshwork of life of the Dene lands.

The roaming presence of the silver wolf is therefore a sign and a reminder of the ever-present glaciers; it is also an example of the particular referentiality of indigenous knowledge systems, in which a being may be a sign for something else. Of course, imbuing the silver wolf with an ability to remember a past identity also illustrates the metaleptic quality of indigenous oral storytelling, where characters are not simply figures who remain in the storyworld, but on the contrary are beings who cohabit with and inform the lives of those who know them.

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75 This conflation of ontology and geology, of the wolf with the geological process of the glacier and its marks left after retreating might seem far-fetched, but it is to be noted that later in the novel, on page 17, an indigenous elder, Birdseye, also refers to a geological process (the “melting mountain”) as being the source of a sociocultural process (the differentiation of indigenous languages).
Confusing the story of Na’ácho with a myth would be a mistake, for the animal is first and foremost a being enmeshed in the ecosystem of the Dene lands. The sequence that follows the silver wolf’s characterization as Na’ácho demonstrates this by providing a detailed description first of the animal’s desires and abilities, and then of his participation in the life of the pack (5). The description of the silver wolf’s abilities borders the mythical, what with the combination of hyperbolic adjectival phrases (“precisely careful”; “so swiftly”; “far too slow”), of atmospheric analogies (“silent as breath”; “like bloody slivers”) and of bodily capabilities (“could see an eyelid flicker and hear a caribou calf’s heart beat”; “he could still smell anything he sniffed after”; “his deliberating nose”). All these rhetorical devices however evoke the personality of the silver wolf intimately. Particularly, the phrases “eyelid flicker,” with its two trochees and quick rhythm, and “caribou calf’s heart beat steady,” with its five stressed syllables and slow tempo, seem to perform the action they denote. This poetic configuration matches the narration with what it depicts, thereby creating a form of referentiality where form and content are intertwined. In other words, the interactional pattern of the silver wolf is so vivid that it enables the reader to immerse more completely in the pack of which the animal is the alpha.

This immersion in the lives of “the animals in this country” reaches its climax in the vivid depiction of a hunt, during which the silver wolf will be fatally wounded and the caribou calf will be killed, the former by having his lower jaw crushed by the calf’s mother, the latter by having his nose “clamped” (9) by the silver wolf’s female companion while the new leader of the pack, the brown wolf, crushes his neck.76 But it is important to analyze this hunt in more detail. After the wolves have charged, the interactional pattern of the caribou is voiced (8). With the phrases “continual community of apprehension” and “immense communal vision of safety,” the text describes the caribou herd as having a form of collective consciousness during their flight. This collective interactional pattern is reinforced by the

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76 If there is a moral to this story, it may well be that the termination of life is a necessary process of the cycle of the “unrelenting land” (11). In relation to the work as a whole, the sequence of collision between herd of caribou and pack of wolves reveals two very different animal ways of experiencing life in the Dene lands, and two possible ways of representing a trajectory of life: one is communal, and consciousness is distributed throughout the fleeing herd; the other is singular, and consciousness is concentrated into the hunting individual.
figurative language used to illustrate the fluidity of this communal entity, such as the characterization of the herd as a "quick river bursting thick and strong," as a "burst of dark animals like land flooding over the frozen lake" (8) and as a "flowing forest of bodies" (8). Together, the caribou are unstoppable, a flowing river of life that no mere animal can impede; they are linear beings whose cooperation enables them to live on. This collective interactional pattern is made concrete by the addition of descriptions of bodily actions and impressions coupled with poetic language. For instance the sentence “tight, hot closeness of their boned bodies beginning to stretch every intricacy of muscle into familiar speed,” with its alliterative patterns of stressed syllables (alliteration of [t] in “tight, hot closeness”; alliteration of [b] in “boned bodies beginning”) evokes the trembling rumble of the herd’s trampling. Paradoxically, the defamiliarizing interactional pattern of the caribou, through the alliterative language used to describe it, creates in the reader a sense of closeness with the caribou, as though they belonged to their ontological unity. Ecologically, this passage illustrates the strength-in-unity principle that often characterizes prey.

However, this unity shatters when the hunting strategy of the white female wolf kicks in, for “from the sidelong treachery of a drift, the white wolf lying there in wait, charge[s]” (8) and forces the calf to “turn... a trifle slowly, turn... a hesitation too wide” (8-9), which separates him from the herd. As the safe unity of the herd is overcome, it allows the reader to experience another animal consciousness, that of the white wolf for whom “all that mattered” was “the small rift between calf and herd” (9).

She shifted her charge slightly, straight across the curve of the calf strained now beyond breathing for the fleeing herd, and on that line for one instant only she ran alongside him, stride upon stride, her jaws companionably gaping wide with his, and in that second of speed they snapped into his nose, a flurry of wolf and caribou skidding, smashing over in the snow. Desperately the calf lunged to his feet, his nose-blood bursting over the wolf as he heaved her here, there, body spastic with terror, heaved her, heaved! but her teeth were clamped immovably, and then the brown male arrived and leaped up. With one gigantic bite to the base of the skull, he crushed the calf’s neck. (9)

By moving to the singular interactional pattern of the white wolf at the beginning, the storytaker beautifully shows the complexity of hunting and the intentionality behind it. The arrival of the brown wolf at the end of the passage also shows the cooperative nature of
wolf hunts. Interestingly, at the beginning the white wolf almost mimics the movements of the caribou, which recalls the “continual community of apprehension” of the herd. This imitation is not a mark of belonging however, but a mark of difference, for the wolf’s behavior is not directed towards safety in collectivity, but towards killing in isolation. Imitation is here a strategy where the hunter matches the speed and rhythm of the hunted to better isolate and immobilize the latter. As opposed to the compact unity of the herd episode, the hunt episode is full of hectic tension, and the phrase “a flurry of wolf and caribou” shows that the interactional patterns of the caribou and of the wolf for a short moment have mingled together in a bursting chaos of energy. This coincidence of interactional pattern is short-lived, and is followed by a desperate struggle for individuality. The repetition of the stem word “heave” four times enacts the frantic body of the calf “spastic with terror” who tries to shake loose the predator and wastes breath doing so – the word [hiːv] here mimics the anxious aspiration of air; this terror is made even stronger by the addition of an exclamation mark, which seems to mark an ultimate attempt at liberation before death, the latter taking the form of an onomatopoeic [krʌʃ] reinforced by the alliteration of the velar plosive [k] in the two final words of the last phrase “crushed the calf’s neck.”

Reading the first chapter of ADOS, the reader is immersed deeply in the folds of the Dene ecology, but the complexity of the storymaker’s representation of the interactional patterns of the indigenous animal-persons makes it very difficult to comprehend on a first reading. I argue that this difficulty echoes how the alterity of the subarctic ecosystem affected the first European explorers. It would be in agreement with an important principle of the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme, made manifest when Keskarrah tells his daughter Greenstockings later on that words anticipate “what there is in the world” (132). Read in light of Keskarrah’s words, the first chapter anticipates the development of the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme in the other chapter of the book, but it also anticipates the dissonance brought about by the arrival of the explorers. This dissonance is an intermingling of

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77 With the allusions that caribou are (like) a river, and that wolves are (like) glaciers in mind, the story of the hunt acquires a new significance. The coming together of life and winter, of water and ice seems to echo the coming together of prey and predator through death, which can then be envisioned intuitively as but a normal event in the spiral of life.
numerous voices of history and of imaginary voices of fiction; it becomes the new story to be told, the story that brings together English explorers and Indigenous Tetsot’ine in their respective discovery of the strangers.

3.5 “Guns Screamed: ‘Listen: I’M HERE!’”: The European Cartographic Interactional Episteme

Monological Knowledge
In the fictional chapters of ADOS, the interactional episteme of the explorers is perhaps best characterized as a form of socioecological monologism, in the sense that it will not “receive the feedback that would cause it to change itself, or to open itself to dialogue” (Rose, 2002, 176-177), either because it refuses to do so, or because it is unable to do so. This socioecological monologism imposes meaning onto both the world and other communities that do not share the European worldview; it tends to be disconnected from the context it is applied to; it is essentially a one-way movement from organism to environment. The explorers exhibit a universalist attitude towards the environment. The text offers numerous examples of the deafness of the explorers, who “heard only their own telling, as told to themselves” (15) and who, unlike the Tetsot’ine, are therefore unable to listen to the stories told by the land, even when these stories are narrated to them by the Tetsot’ine. The colonial interactional episteme is not unlike a gunshot: noisy, unilateral, and destructive.

The interactional episteme of the explorers is cartographic: it is informed to a large extent by the goals of the expedition: mapping the Canadian Arctic and evaluating the natural resources of the land. A corollary of this cartographic interactional episteme is an

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78 The original quote comes from Keskarrah’s thoughts: “Trader guns needed endless, slow work, and yet were never as accurate as a quick arrow. And they screamed, “Listen: I’M HERE!’ for unbelievable distances in all directions” (23).
79 Mostly, this rather negative view of the explorers is given from the perspective of the Tetsot’ine, but it is also visible in the few episodes where the storytaker reconstructs the perspective of explorers such as Midshipman George Back and Doctor John Richardson.
80 Other examples can be found on pages 75-76, 130, 131, 132, 298.
81 Historically, there are of course other motivations at the basis of the English interactional episteme.
instrumentalization of the land and of its beings. The explorers’ knowledge system is based on a blind positivist belief that the colonial “science” of exploration can make more sense of the Dene lands than the traditional ecological knowledge of the Tetsot’ine. In the first sentence of Chapter 2, the text explains that the “lake they [the explorers] named after her [i.e., Greenstockings], later, was no more than an infinitesimal detail in their grand attempt to rename the entire country. It is, however, questionable whether the English naval officers ever actually saw Greenstockings Lake” (13). The emphasis of the cartographic interactional episteme on propositional knowledge to the detriment of experiential knowledge, contrasts with the reliance of the Tetsot’ine on the latter. This contrast reinforces the inappropriateness of the English episteme for surviving in the Arctic, and this is shown by echoing the colonial practice of naming with the direct discourse of Keskarrah, a Tetsot’ine elder who is himself a mapmaker: “I laughed to myself when I first saw their boss, Thick English … When he explained to us that it was for our benefit they had come to find what was in our land, I should have laughed again. Louder” (13-14). By voicing Keskarrah’s disbelief, black humor and thoughts with regard to the goals of the expedition as explained by John Franklin, the text illustrates the potential clash of ideas that can take place when two radically different interactional epistememes encounter one another.

This difference in the way the English define their goals and the way the text and the Tetsot’ine perceive them is developed further when George Back reads out loud the proclamation, an “agreement” that defines how the Tetsot’ine and the explorers will interact (42). The royal proclamation underscores the monological principles that inform the interactional episteme of the explorers: the hierarchization of decision-making and the instrumentalization of resources (including animals, people, and environment). Both principles are geared towards facilitating the accumulation of knowledge, wealth and property and both are devoid of any care for the land and its beings. It is precisely along

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82 In reading, we realize that if cartography can reveal some characteristics of the geography of the Dene lands, it is not really adapted to surviving in an arctic environment.

83 This theme was foreshadowed in Playing Dead, where Wiebe explains that in his understanding of the explorers of the first Franklin expedition thought the “Yellowknives” were uncivilized and primitive (132).
this line of contention (care of the Land vs. instrumentalization of it) that the two systems of interaction enter into friction.

The explorers’ careless attitude is a consequence of socioecological monologism. The text enumerates how the explorers do not care much about the “snowshoes they had been given” by the Tetsot’ine (14), how the names they assign to indigenous women are wrong (15), how guns trouble the quiet of the animals and make them flee (23; 36), how the names of the Canadian “paddle-slaves” will be left out of history (23-24), and how they are “killing” the trees that “welcomed the People … to the edge of the tundra” (38).

The explorers’ interactional episteme objectifies the land. This is made manifest in the text’s rendering of Franklin’s thoughts on page 142, which details the military aims of the expedition: the “sketching of the natives” is part of a bigger plan to write up a “detailed report” based on the “determining of the Northern Coast of North America.” This positivist undertaking is based in writing and it entails freezing a situation at one point in time, objectifying the land and its inhabitants, and detaching the observer from the world. The use of the future tense and of the perfect mode (“Franklin will decide”; “drawings he has already decided will form”) reinforces the fact that Franklin is not really adapting to the situation, but rather is merely applying a pattern of actions that has been decided beforehand. This pattern of action is inappropriate, and borders on the absurd, not the least because Franklin and his men are naval officers using and applying naval and maritime systems of knowledge onto the land. In this scheme, drawing, like other colonial cartographic activities, is a “record” – supposedly objective – that also amounts to congealing the land. The text’s insistence on Franklin’s thoughts, on Hood’s drawing, and overall on the records of the land produced by the explorers helps the reader better understand the colonial and environmental history of Canada, which lies at the core of ADOS.

**Colonial Mapping and Writing**

The inadequacy of the explorers’ interactional episteme comes to the surface in an episode where Franklin tries and fails to convince the hunter Bigfoot to accompany the explorers on
a short mission of exploration. Bigfoot is adamant about it: he explains that the “long winter is already upon them” (70) and they will need to prepare for it by “dreaming”84 the caribou so that “Women [can] dry [their] meat [and] scrape [their] hides” (71). Franklin insists and argues: “But… we take temperatures five times a day, we record all the weather. Now, here, we register only a few degrees below last year, when we travelled to the end of October and our cloth clothing was quite adequate, we walked all through – ” (72). Franklin is then interrupted rather rashly by the translator St. Germain, who says: “You, now, in Tetsot’ine place … Winter – no deer boots, spring – no feet” (72).

Upon Bigfoot’s refusal, the short mission is cancelled, the English having no means to forage for their food without the help of the Tetsot’ine. St-Germain’s statement, “You, now, in Tetsot’ine place,” evokes the fact that the indigenous community has coevolved with the environment of Arctic Canada, has accumulated traditional ecological knowledge, and thus knows the place a little! Their knowledge is situated in place. However Franklin, sure of his ability to measure the weather and to extrapolate predictions from it from one year to the next, thinks he knows better. His knowledge does not arise from an intimate and well-tested interaction with the land, but from a use of cartographical and meteorological tools and an imposition of meaning onto the land.85 This episode is representative of Franklin’s paternalist attitude, but it also shows that the Tetsot’ine are not easily subdued by These English’s authority, although they will be annihilated by the power of their guns and the diseases they brought with them. In this initial dialogue between traditional ecological knowledge and colonial scientific knowledge, it is the former that has the upper hand, but it will not always be the case.

Keskarrah the mapmaker reflects on the explorers’ interactional patterns and on their colonial practice of cartography. The text shows how the Europeans, due to their reliance on writing and detached observation, fail to understand the dynamism of the environment:

84 The concept of “dreaming” is here related to the Dene conception of time, wherein in certain circumstances the future is simultaneous with the present, and thus the position of animals in the future can be known, and therefore snares and traps can be set up (Sharp).
85 It is to be noted that the traditional ecological knowledge of the Tetsot’ine is validated by Seaman John Hepburn, who later reflects that the Tetsot’ine refusal to “guide [the explorers] farther … proved … wisely, for in early September winter was fully begun” (96).
Everything changes when they come, and yet they mark it down as if it will always be the same and they can use it. ... They’re always making marks, marks on paper that any drop of water can destroy. As if they had no memory. ... They always have to hold something in their hands, something to make marks on, or to look at things or through unknowable instruments. They aim their eyes across every lake and river with instruments that the sun distorts first, and then they draw something of it onto paper, with names that mostly mean nothing. As if a lake or river is ever the same twice! When you travel and live with a river or lake, or hill, it can remain mostly like it seems, but when you look at it with your dreaming eye, you know it is never what it seemed to be when you were first awake to it... [Thick English] and his men always stare at [the sun] through something else, and I think the sun uses their instruments to blind them. To make them think living things are always the same. (75-76)

The passage is told in a free indirect speech that blends the voice of Keskarrah the mapmaker with that of the storymaker, who reflects on the explorers’ failure to read place and write text. This inability to interpret correctly is a consequence of the European interactional episteme, which is based on writing as a fixation of the relations of the ecosystem. Here, colonial cartography and the interactional patterns associated with it (writing down aspects of the land) entail a comprehension of the environment as a finite object that can be precisely measured; it homogenizes and silences the complexity of the land. This misrepresentation is also due to a problem in perception: because the explorers perceive the environment as static, they can only enact this stasis in their textual representation.86

The episode about the explorers’ scientific observation functions as an allegory of bad interpretation87 that should encourage the reader to question the act of understanding the relationship between place and text. The storymaker creates a connection between the understanding of place and the production of text, which opens up an interpretive field that hints at an alternative hermeneutics based on the socioecological knowledge of the Tetsot’ine. Keskarrah’s reading of the explorers’ interactional patterns defamiliarizes the European interactional episteme, which in turn encourages the reader to not homogenize

86 Keskarrah’s interactional episteme is based on the fact that “[w]ords mirror what there is in the world, as they also anticipate it” (132). How one represents therefore is entangled with what one represents; the telling cannot be dissociated from the told.

87 In chapter 3 of his Allegories of Reading, Paul de Man reminds us that it is crucial to question whether a “passage on … reading [may] make paradigmatic claims for itself” (58).
the narrative and think that it is “ever the same twice,” as the explorers do concerning the land.

On the metafictional level, this allegory of interpretation lays bare the dynamism and heteroglossia that is so characteristic of the novel, which Bakhtin saw as the essential literary form (Bakhtin 263), but interestingly does so by means of a dialogue between a written and an oral worldview. By giving voice to Keskarrah’s reading of the explorers’ interactional patterns, the storytaker draws the reader actively into the differences between the interactional episteme of the indigenous population and the interactional episteme of the explorers. The reader as meaning-maker is invited to adopt a way of producing meaning that does not radically exclude the environment as an inferior entity, and that does not relegate text to the background.

The storytaker also questions the Europeans’ interpretive practice through Keskarrah’s wife Birdseye, who reflects on the explorers’ interactional patterns of recording and knowing through written text:

the Whitemuds [i.e., the European explorers] can so easily sit on the water and observe the immense land pass inside the tubes they hold to their eyes, and see nothing except the folds of papers they always clutch in their hands, the tiny marks they continuously accumulate heap upon heap between straight lines, down in columns. What they lay out flat and straight and hold in their hands in these marks, which only they will know how to interpret, will be enough to guide them; that is how they know everything, and will know whatever happens to them. Sometime, somewhere, they have decided to believe this simplicity of mark, and they will live their lives straight to the end believing that. (147)

In the first part of this passage, Birdseye depicts the interactional pattern involved in scientific observation and recording as passive (the explorers “sit on water”) and self-centered (the explorers focus on their instruments more than on the environment). In the second part, Birdseye sees the written text as an epistemology that severs the organism from its environment. If the fact that only the English can read written marks demonstrates how exclusionary writing can be, it is the self-sufficiency of the written to guide and make “everything” known to the English that is most problematic. Indeed, the text describes the Europeans as having unilaterally “decided to believe this simplicity of mark” to the detriment of what they themselves can perceive. By doing so, they fail to see how the Tetsot’ine
reasoning and traditional knowledge may constitute valid ways of interacting with the land and they silence the stories and voices present in the land, in the environment of the story, including that part of their own experiences which cannot be expressed in official discourse. Contrary to the explorers, Birdseye knows that if the mark is static, the land it denotes is not, and her observations of the explorers interactional patterns and of the practice of writing the environment and reading text force the reader to reflect on the process of reading and more generally on the effects of “science as the writing of the world” (Massey 25). The reader should not believe in the “simplicity of mark” (Wiebe, 1995a, 141) and think she knows “everything”; the text should not sever the reading organism from the textual environment and should not exclude the voices of the Other – including the voices of the land; the text is not a container of meaning. On the level of the metafictional engagement of the reader, scientific and colonial writing is undermined as a substitute for traditional ecological knowledge. Rather the two forms of knowledge enter into dialogue with one another (as in the example with Bigfoot and Franklin above, and as in Wiebe’s own practice of storytelling).

There is an important historiographical corollary to this metafictional dialogue between the writing of the explorers and the writing of the novel on the one hand and the plurality of voices on the other. The reader is drawn “back” into the dynamism and uncertainty of exploration rather than the “inexorable” rationalism of colonization. Baktinian novelistic dialogism is used to undermine the Plumwoodian monologism of colonialism.

**Colonial Hunting**

The expedition relies on mass hunting, and this has an important impact on the Tetsot’ine interactional patterns. After explaining how “These English … tried to name every lake and river” (22) of the country, the text represents the attitude of the explorers towards the Tetsot’ine women as ambiguous (23). The explorers indeed acknowledge the women’s presence, but without acknowledging their names. It is only the women’s function to make

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88 This is made even more evident by the fact that Birdseye’s criticism actually takes the form of a dream, who in the Dene worldview is a powerful way of understanding the world. For more information, see Henry Sharp, on the notion of “inkoze” (63).
clothing to serve the expedition that is recognized, not their social identity. The instrumentalization of the indigenous community concerns the female weavers, but it also encompasses the male hunters. The explorers’ instructions to the Tetsot’ine hunters to hunt with guns transforms the latter’s pattern of interaction with the environment (115-116). The excessive demands of the expedition impose a new conception of hunting. The “long-distance killing” (115-116) and the fact that the “hunter no longer touches [the] animal” (115-116) establish an ontological separation between humans and animals. The interference caused by the explorer undermines the Tetsot’ine conception of personhood described in the first section of this chapter. More than a simple change in hunting habits, it is the whole indigenous interactional episteme that is affected by the introduction of firearms.

The storymaker insists on this by voicing Keskarrah’s thoughts: “That was what Keskarrah hated before he ever met any Whites: guns. Trader guns needed endless, slow work, and yet were never as accurate as a quick arrow. And they screamed, ‘Listen: I'M HERE!’ for unbelievable distances in all directions” (23). Keskarrah’s personal opinion towards guns is clear: not only do they signal one’s presence in a brutal way, but they are not functional, stinky, messy and disrespectful. Moreover, they prevent hunters from connecting with animals by “forc[ing them] to die” (116), instead of accepting their “gifts” (132). By imbuing the guns with the ability to scream “Listen: I'M HERE!” the text voices the monological environmental attitude of those who hunt with firearms: guns become a metonym for the socioecological monologism of the European explorers. Firearms become embodiments of the English interactional episteme, and they transform the Tetsot’ine hunters into subalterns like the canoe-“slaves”, which ultimately triggers the collapse of the Tetsot’ine community. Indeed, through the free indirect speech of Greenstockings, the storymaker explains at the end of the book:

after all, the Tetsot’ine have so many guns, so much powder and shot from trapping so many small furs, of which the traders always want more! always more! so they need less time to hunt and have more than enough time to plan wars, since there are always fewer People to feed and it is of course so much more manly and exciting to use guns to steal food and wives and clothing and dogs and territory from enemies than to work for them in the slow, considerate ways of the living land, and they have this endless source of powerful weapons
if they just kill enough animals … [T]he men’s unrelenting aggression will destroy Greenstockings’ People (315-316).

This passage no longer refers to the explorers of the Franklin expedition. The latter are now long gone, and have been replaced by traders. The introduction of the Tetsot’ine to a colonial economy based on fur trade signals the beginning of their extinction as a people. The presence of numerous comparatives and superlatives (“so many,” “so much,” “always more,” “more than enough”) combines with the repetition of “and” (“to steal food and wives and clothing and dogs and territory”) to emphasize the passage of the Tetsot’ine from a “subsistence economy” (Radkau 37) to a surplus economy. The promise of having an “endless source of … weapons” in exchange for “kill[ing] enough animals” is the beginning of an inexorable movement towards extinction.

From this account of colonization, it seems that from the first gunshot onwards, the voices of the Tetsot’ine have grown quieter until what remains is the monological scream of the colonizers. Indeed, the description of These English as a “fireball smash[ing] through the sky” and as a meteor “crash” that burns and destroys the “cycle of Tetsot’ine seasons” (17) brings the immediacy of modernity, its unmissable and unforgettable urgency, into focus, but it also functions as the principle that subtends the storymaker’s rendering of the English colonization of Arctic Canada.

**Colonial Characterization**

In the book, some of the English explorers function as archetypes that exemplify in a static way some aspects of the European interactional episteme. The characterization of the explorers here imitates the military hierarchy of the expedition. The English explorers’ ideologies are fixed; they are not open to change. In a narratology situated in the environment it describes (the Arctic), the English characters are “areal” – in the Arctic sense – that is to say their boundaries and limits are unmoving. This “areality” of the English explorers is alluded to in the free indirect speech of Greenstockings, who wonders: “What strange names they [i.e., the explorers] have – Hood – Back – no short back or red hood, just one short word to name them. As if they had no stories in them” (39). Here, the voices of Greenstockings and the storymaker mingle to unveil the stasis inherent in the English
linguistic system. As opposed to stories, names alone cannot capture the dynamism of the world, the transmutability of beings. By commenting on the characterization of the English through Greenstockings’s speech and her Tetsot’ine principle of a storied world, the text reasserts its dialogical combination of colonial history and metafiction.

The storytakers recount that after a trip to an island to find timber, and after witnessing the grief felt by the Tetsot’ine after losing two members of their community to the waters of the river, the “English officers began to discover the nature of [their] Indians” (emphasis added; 58). In the discussion of this “nature,” which is internal to the group of English officers, Franklin thinks that “only extended and very firm experience of English order” (59) can give the indigenous the “discipline necessary for efficient service to the Expedition” (59), whereas Richardson says: “We will never control any Indians, not in this wild country, until we teach them the absolute, practical necessity of money. … [T]he fundamental problem in the economic development of primitives [is that they trade for what they need]. They must want more than they need. That is civilization” (59). In this reconstructed episode, the ironic use of the term “Indian” signals the simulacrum that masks the absence of “Indians” in the Arctic. The text however counters this imperial creation of a stereotype by reversing it and characterizing the English as stereotypes. In this conversation, both Franklin and Richardson exhibit colonial paternalism, although there is a clear difference between their two views of the indigenous population: whereas Franklin wants them to be of “efficient service,” Richardson wants to “control” them. The difference is noticed by Franklin, who does not agree with Richardson’s analysis, which seems to him “not so much down to earth as profoundly uncharitable, almost revealing an ungodly cynicism” (59-60). Franklin’s paternalist attitude towards the Tetsot’ine is based on the Christian principles of piousness and charity. His attitude aims at raising the Tetsot’ine, who “want so little” (59), and bring them into civilization so that they can be helpful to the “larger issues” (59) lurking behind exploration. Franklin’s charity contrasts with Richardson’s liberal ideology inspired by Adam Smith, in which the primitive peoples must be raised from their condition and brought into civilization not for their own sake, but so that they can be used and controlled to facilitate trade. But despite the fact that Richardson and Franklin have the
higher ranks in the expedition, their voices are not prominent in the novel’s representation of the English: Midshipmen George Back and Robert Hood’s voices are recreated more saliently by the storytaker.

George Back embodies the racism and individualism that feed the ideology of imperialism in the nineteenth century. Back’s thoughts are voiced in Chapter 3, soberly entitled “Midshipman George Back,” which provides in the first-person singular an insight into the mindset of the proud young officer. Back characterizes the Tetsot’ine knowledge system as superstitious (41) and primitive (43). He views the relationship between the explorers and the indigenous population as one of obedience and servility (47), in which the Tetsot’ine must obey the explorers and hunt for them. Moreover, Back’s racism prevents him from noticing the environmental truth behind the Tetsot’ine name for the Northern Ocean, “the ‘Everlasting Ice’, as it seems these Indians call it, doubtless because they fear it” (48). By thinking that superstition and irrational fear are the main elements in the interactional episteme of the indigenous community, Back underestimates their intimate knowledge of the land and the dangers always present in the Arctic. Ultimately, this inability, or refusal, to listen to the Tetsot’ine will be one of the causes of the failure of the expedition, for as Wiebe says in Playing Dead, “one could argue that not only were the English in the Arctic inferior to most nations, they were also, at a certain bullheaded point, fundamentally unteachable” (2003, 134). Finally, the text contrasts Back’s imperialism with Hood’s more humane and charitable view. If Back worries only about the success of the expedition, Hood wonders what will happen to the Tetsot’ine families whose hunters have been requisitioned by the explorers (1995a, 49-50).

Overall, the storytaker depicts Robert Hood in a way that contrasts with the three other officers (Franklin, Richardson and Back). Hood embodies a Romantic and Christian aspect of the English interactional episteme. He is more compassionate with and more tolerant of the indigenous way of living and knowing, and this is made plain in his relationship with Greenstockings. Hood is indeed the only English character who develops an intimate experience of the indigenous population: he is invited to the lodge of Keskarrah’s family and falls in love with Greenstockings.
Hood attempts to develop this experience into an understanding of what is going on in the Tetsot'ine interactional episteme, but he is never able to crystallize it; his grasp remains ephemeral. In a passage on pages 61-62, the text reveals the difficulty for a European to adopt a different sense of place. The vivid representation of Hood’s embodiment lays bare the sailor’s failed attempt at making sense of his surroundings outside of his usual mindset. The colonial interactional episteme is about observation and record. Hood’s attempt at “capturing a coherent quadrant of the world” evokes the framing of landscapes in European paintings. The coherence mentioned betrays the reduction of the complexity of the world and the distortion of its fluidity that are operated by colonial discourse; this reduction and distortion may be necessary for colonial representations to make sense to colonial audiences, but they have an enormous impact on the conception of indigenous peoples.

In Hood’s interactional pattern of observation, however, the sailor is not disembodied; on the contrary, in this episode his body is vividly present, so present that it cannot be overlooked. First, the explorer’s sense of perspective is disturbed; Hood’s notion of a center is undermined as his attention is drawn “sideways,” “towards a periphery in the corner of his eye,” a periphery that is ultimately “never there.” The impossibility of finding the periphery in relation to the center evokes the situation of the colony vis-à-vis the Empire: in a rhetorical move that is manifestly postcolonial and counterdiscursive, the storytaker is highlighting the illusionism of European perspectives as being the center, the core of humanness, and indigenous ways of life as being the margin, the periphery, the fringe. This tension that subtends the illusion is felt by Hood when his body “tightens” and “twists.” This tension is then reinforced and made even more explicit as an analogy between body and spiral is introduced by “as if” and presents the sailor’s experiencing of defamiliarization as the transformation of his body “into a gradual spiral that might turn his head off at the neck.” Here again, the image is striking: the bodily perception of the futility of the quest for centering the decentered, for normalizing the margin, is likened to a continuous movement of twisting that stops only at the head, the latter being the locus, in colonial thinking, of reason and intellect. More interestingly, the distortion of European perspective is extended
and enriched by two other similes, respectively involving “trees” – and therefore in this context denoting the land and ecology – and the “Story of Owl” – therefore denoting indigenous storytelling. This reduplication of Hood’s bodily feeling with ecology and storytelling is meaningful, for it underscores the fact that the young man is gradually becoming more like an indigenous Person. However, due to the persistence of his interactional episteme, the analogy cannot reach completion, and Hood cannot achieve complete identification. The climactic final sentence of the passage, with the interjection created by the conjunction and the exclamation mark (“But his sketch must stop, must have frame!”) leaves no doubt. The need to frame, the need to normalize are too deeply ingrained in his ontology. Once again, the text makes use of defamiliarization to reshape the colonial understanding of indigenous ways of life.

Another voice of the explorers deserves special attention, for it is presented in a striking way: Seaman John Hepburn is indeed given emphasis by having a whole chapter in which he recounts his experience of the expedition in the first-person, like George Back. The storytaker offers Hepburn’s voice as a commentary of the expedition process, where the “ordinary seaman” explains that he “speak[s] as truthfully as [he] do[es] recall of events” of the expedition (95). This sentence draws attention to the subjectivity of Hepburn’s report, as his memory may have faltered. Instead of pretending to hold the truth, Hepburn rather suggests he attempts to recall truthfully. Moreover, Hepburn offers a privileged insight into the internal mechanics of the expedition, for he “served all the officers” (96), although “never quartered with them” (96). Hepburn therefore occupies a liminal position where he is both serving the officers and being served by the Canadian Voyageurs, while sleeping in the latter’s company. Hepburn embodies the pragmatic side of the English interactional episteme; he is a practical man who sees the qualities of both the English and the Tetsot’ine, but who also discerns the shortcomings of both parties. For instance, of the conversation between Franklin and Bigfoot about hunting, Hepburn says: “That week of August was when the Indians refused to guide us father (as it proved, wisely, for in early September winter was fully begun)” (emphasis added; 96). Hepburn provides another interpretation of the tension between exploration and indigenous life. By describing the Tetsot’ine as wise,
Hepburn’s voice becomes a counterpoint to the paternalism and racism exhibited by Franklin, Richardson, and Back. Hepburn also voices elements of the exploration process that have been kept from historical documents. As he himself says, “I have spoken to no one of this” (101), “this” meaning the rivalry between Hood and Back regarding Greenstockings, and the duel that ensued. However, in order to protect the expedition, Hepburn removes the bullets, for as he explains: “in such a small party, in a very difficult land, each officer must perform essential duties if we were to hope for any success. But both had lost their clear sense of duty, and so I, the servant, was the only Englishman left to decide” (104).

By weaving several English interpretations of the events that surround the expedition, the text embodies the heterogeneity of the group of explorers. Far from all being stereotypes of the greedy colonizer, each explorer makes manifest a facet of the same interactional episteme that is uncovered by the storytaker’s dialogical engagement with historical documents. The encounter with alterity forces the explorers to make up their own minds and interpret the situation. In this context, the hardships of the Arctic shatters any heroic view of the explorers, and rather sheds light on how the collision of the English interactional episteme with the environment of the Arctic tests the moral system of the explorers and forces them to individually and idiosyncratically confront the Other, including landscape and people. The violence engendered by this confrontation, by this collision, is systemic: it is social, but mostly it is ecological and therefore it is not immediate, which creates a situation where the Tetsot’ine have time to reflect on the disintegration of their community due to the destruction of their way of life (315).

**Constructing a Colonial Storyworld Through Cartography**

Through the English explorers’ interactional patterns, the storytaker constructs a frozen, rigid, measurable and objectified storyworld – a cartographic storyworld – in which the environment and the indigenous people and animals are backgrounded and instrumentalized, and in which writing fixes the dynamism of the ecology of the Dene lands into a map. The English explorers’ interactional episteme foregrounds the colonial
undertaking and its aim of “discovering” and extracting the resources of the marginalized Dene lands to fuel the needs of the imperial center. But this discovery is a unilateral and monological endeavor, which is revealed in the explorers’ careless interactional patterns and in the colonial practices of mapping, measuring and hunting to exhaustion. This form of interaction spreads throughout the Dene community of the Tetsot’ine mainly in bodily ways, most strikingly the disease called “the Eater,” which is already killing Birdseye, one of whose characteristics as a storymaker is that she can see the future. The explorers’ monologism is echoed in the form of the discourse, and more precisely in a peculiar form of characterization in which the explorers are not represented as having agency, but rather are static embodiments of the hierarchical aspect of the English ideological system. The construction of a monological cartographic storyworld, however, is enriched throughout the novel by the storytelling techniques of the Tetsot’ine characters, who in combination with the explorers’ journals and the storymaker’s reconstruction, contribute to weaving into form a dialogical ecopoetic storyworld.

3.6 “Frame and Woven Centre”\textsuperscript{89}: The Tetsot’ine Storied Interactional Episteme

Relational knowledge
The Tetsot’ine interactional episteme is \textit{relational} both in terms of social and ecological interactions: it emerges from an evolving web of relations between animal-persons and the land. Relational knowledge is underlain by a form of socioecological dialogism that is immanent in the land. It emerges from the dialogue of organism and environment, from a dynamic and mutual relationship between the experiencing consciousness and its surroundings – including the physical environment and other beings. Relational knowledge can also be called “ecological knowledge” – it is tied to a specific ecology – or it could be called “situated knowledge,” for it is always embedded in a specific situation. Relational knowledge is necessarily humble since limited – the very name “Tetsot’ine,” the text tells

\textsuperscript{89} This quote is taken from page 91.
us, means “Those Who Know Something a Little” (emphasis added; 4). Besides, it is not fixed, but relative. There is no end to relational knowledge, for it is dependent on the environment and is grounded in a care for the land and its beings. In the novel, the Tetsot’ine consider the caribou as kin (18) whose hides belong to themselves only and are shared with the Tetsot’ine as gifts (133). The relational knowledge of the Tetsot’ine is transmitted in the form of oral stories that capture the dynamism of the land. This “storied knowledge” is contrasted with cartographic and categorical knowledge and with the colonial practice of naming that tends to “perma-freeze” the land. The arrival of the Europeans will change the stories that express the Tetsot’ine way of life: in a sense, relational knowledge is always inclusive of the stranger. Paradoxically, the text portrays this radical inclusion as one of several reasons for the downfall of the Tetsot’ine: their hospitality, the adoption of firearms and of a trade economy by some hunters, which will alter the “animal circle that gives [them] life every day” (129), as well as the “strange and various sicknesses” (315) – amongst which smallpox – unwillingly imported by the explorers, together will exert too strong a pressure on the Tetsot’ine population.

The Tetsot’ine interactional episteme is partly voiced by the storymaker on page 24 in Chapter 2, where in two paragraphs (“Of course, every place … where all land already lies fully complete, though hidden”) he lays out the poetics of knowing that underlies his reconstruction of the Tetsot’ine in ADOS. The passage contributes to unsettling European epistemology, which plunges the reader deeper in the Arctic environment. For instance, the syntax of the sentence “every place already was its true and exact name” has for corollary that the name of a place predates the place the name refers to. In the indigenous episteme, it is not humans who impose a name onto the land, but rather persons find out the “hidden” names of places. Persons do not create names; they merely discover them, which means that there is no radical separation between human language and the material world. This is also the expression of a second principle: language, land and person are not discrete entities, but are the processes of a triadic dynamic system of which the voicing of the land is the manifestation. This is seen in the sentences “Birdseye and Keskarrah between them knew the land, each name a story complete in their heads” and “The stories the land told
… were the stories of all People who had ever lived there, and therefore they were greater than any person, or two, could comprehend” (24). The first sentence shows that knowing the land necessitates knowing its stories; without the stories, the land is incomplete. The second sentence shows that these stories are also the stories of people in the past, which implies that stories of the land form an incommensurable body of knowledge that one cannot hope to comprehend in its entirety. This is important, for it implies that ecological knowledge is necessarily the result of collaboration between different people, but also between organism and environment.

The Tetsot’ine ecological knowledge emerges from a dialogue with the land (19), with the stories of the past, and with the voices of the present. Indeed, the land is able to tell stories if one is willing to listen (24). Moreover, animals are not excluded from the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme, but rather they take an active part in it. In the sentence “the fell of soft caribou and thick marten or fox turned continually into clothing for People in her hands” (emphasis added; 24), the text draws attention to the participation of animals with the use of the verb “turn” in a way that suggests that the animal becomes clothing willingly.90 Finally, perhaps the most important principle of the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme is that the Tetsot’ine way of life is based on “ceaseless travel and thought” (24). In this phrase, the storytaker reminds us first that in the Arctic, life is movement and movement is life, for movement is what allows the potentiality of cooperation to take place. Therefore, movement is not only ecological, it is communal (Wiebe, 2003, 52).

I said above that the colonial interactional episteme is a form of socioecological monologism; it is a system of knowledge that is deaf to the land as a source of voices and being, or in other words it tends to objectify organisms and environments. The image of the gunshot and the colonial science of exploration represent well this monologism. By contrast, the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme is represented by the image of the snowshoe and by the traditional practice of making,91 which can take the form of mapping, crafting and

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90 Other examples can be found on pages 132 and 133.
91 Here “making” is understood in Ingoldian’s terms (Ingold, 2002, 87–88).
worldmaking. I will first explain how storytelling and mapmaking are brought together in Keskarrah’s interactional pattern.

**Storytelling, Making, Knowing**
Keskarrah’s mapmaking is a good example of how interactional patterns contribute to fashioning a literary representation of a system of knowledge. The practice of mapping is dramatized in an episode where Keskarrah describes the geography of the Dene lands to Bigfoot, who repeats it to Twospeaker the translator, who will then “whistle” it to the explorers (20). First, the storytaker describes the situation where the mapping takes place: “Keskarrah continues to say nothing at all in that council circle … Searching deeper inside himself, slowly, slowly he will lean forwards. / He will dare to draw, with his finger on the ground between them, a very small picture of the land” (19). In this example, it is not the final object – the map drawn by Keskarrah – that matters (he will in fact erase it almost immediately), but *mapping* as the embodied and enminded *process* of drawing a representation of the world which he knows. In the second sentence of the first paragraph, the repetition of the word “slowly” connects Keskarrah’s cognitive movement inwards with the movement of his body forward. The shift of atmosphere is tangible, and is reinforced by a chiasmus that is not so much syntactical as physiological: introspection and expression mirror each other, just like body and mind do. This connection of the mental and the bodily is then extended to the entanglement of Person and Land, of organism and environment. Indeed Keskarrah’s finger suddenly connects the elder with the land upon and within which he is situated. This entanglement is developed a few pages further, when Keskarrah’s drawing prowess is mentioned: “[h]e could draw, very carefully, the places he knew through his fingers from behind his eyes onto the ground, which is where all the land already lies fully and complete, though hidden” (24). Here, a clever use of preposition seamlessly shifts the emphasis from body (“through his fingers”), to mind (“behind his eyes”) and land (“onto the ground”) and thereby connects these three situated processes into one.

The map drawn by Keskarrah is a story; the relations between places cannot be measured with numbers, mathematically, as the explorers do, for these relations are not
quantitative, but qualitative. Keskarrah performs the map with his body (24). The repetition of deictic terms (eight “here,” five “we,” three “this,” etc.) makes this situated performance manifest in the reader’s imagination. This is reinforced by the numerous references to Tetsot’ine landmarks (the lake “Tucho,” the river “Dehcho,” the bay “Breasts Like a Woman,” the river “Ana-tessy,” the river of “Copperwoman,” and the “Copperwoman Mountains”) – which are also present alongside the colonial names that prevailed on pages ii and iii of the book – and by the presence of the personal acquaintance of Keskarrah with the first explorer White Walker, i.e., Samuel Hearne. Despite Keskarrah’s acceptance to “name” the land to convey his knowledge of the environment to the explorers, this passage is highly dynamic and interactive. The use of imperatives and interrogative clauses to keep Bigfoot’s attention focused (“tell,” “look,” “Do they see this?”) also functions to draw the reader’s attention and to create a sense of immersion. This immersion is made even more vivid when Keskarrah begins mapping the organisms’ seasonal patterns of migration and the limits of their territories. Indeed, from a purely geographic point of view, Keskarrah’s performance of the Land becomes socioecological. The Tetsot’ine do not go “beyond the last trees in the world” – probably because they could not hunt caribou if there are no trees to hide the hunters – whereas caribou and wolves do; the Tetsot’ine do not go as far as the “stinking water” – perhaps because it belongs to the Raw-Meat Eaters (the Inuit), towards whom the Tetsot’ine exhibit racism to the extent of taboo; perhaps because it is polluted by the copper in the mountain; or perhaps because it is partially mixed with saltwater. The performance of the mapping is also about connecting with past experiences: Keskarrah indeed links the Franklin expedition in 1820 with a previous expedition featuring White Walker (actually Samuel Hearne forty years earlier, as George Back recounts on page 44). Overall, by connecting the map to his body, to his personal history, to the migrations of the Tetsot’ine and of the “Animals in This Country,” Keskarrah’s performance mingles various spatiotemporal scales and embodied practices, all the while shedding light on a way of knowing which is radically different from colonial science. The substantial presence of action verbs on this map evokes the dynamic “flow” of this storyworld, as opposed to the static rigidity of the explorers’ representations.
Taken reflexively, what does this episode say about the production and reception of stories? About the mapping of world and storyworld? First, Keskarrah is referred to as the “mapmaker” (45) by George Back; Wiebe refers to a function of the author in the essay “Where is the Voice Coming From” as the “storymaker” (1995b, 38), and Keskarrah says of Greenstockings that she is “making” snowshoes (87) while telling stories to herself. The insistence on “making” is crucial in the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme as manifested in ADOS: knowing the world, its geography, ecology and history, is a dynamic process of meaning-making. Knowing the world is not possessing representational information about this world, knowledge that would take the form of a picture, a map, a journal, or a word. On the contrary, as Keskarrah himself says:

[[just making a sound can mean…nothing… … It is for us to look. Perhaps we will recognize how everything alive is already within everything else. It is like…holding water…cup it in your hands, and it is the nature of water that very soon it will cup your hands as well.(emphasis added; 25)]

Keskarrah’s analogy between the embodied action of holding water and the semantic potential of sound grounds the Tetsot’ine practice of knowing in the material, in the ecological. The image of the container and the contained is rendered a process; the relationship inside/outside is blurred (this is also reminiscent of the snowshoes story of Ptarmigan and Man). Knowing about something is not being outside of it, but rather it is about engaging bodily with the phenomenon, letting it engage with you. It is in the interaction that meaning is made; it is in the entanglement, in the intermingling of all life processes that the emergence of knowledge is rendered possible. Knowing is not circumscribing the known entity, rendering it a discrete object, isolated from the observer and from the world; knowing is recognizing that meaning is nested within everything already, and that it is the action of seeking meaning that lets it spring forth.

I argue that interpreting a narrative should be no different! This passage about Keskarrah mapping the land for the explorers enables the reader to reflect on their own process of meaning-making: How can one avoid circumscribing the work too neatly? How does one keep it dynamic? How does one enmesh it in one’s world? Perhaps these

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questions are the beginning of an answer. It is by questioning one’s practice that one avoids reducing it to stasis.

In the community of the Tetsot’ine as presented in ADOS, the main activities that make up interactional patterns are crafting, hunting, storytelling, caring for the diseased, and lovemaking. Here I would like to focus on one particular episode that dramatizes the entanglement of making, telling and knowing in the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme. This episode involves Keskarrah telling a story, Greenstockings making snowshoes, and Robert Hood listening (without understanding) and drawing. There are three stories embedded in Keskarrah’s practice of storytelling: the story of Sky and Earth, of Man and Bear, and of Man and Woman-Ptarmigan. I will focus on the latter.

The episode begins when Hood arrives at the lodge of Keskarrah’s family with the intent “to draw [Greenstockings’s] picture … at her woman’s work. Making snowshoes” (81). This episode is an instance of ekphrasis (the event is inspired by Robert Hood’s painting entitled “Keskarrah a Copper Indian Guide and His Daughter Green Stockings. Mending a Snow Shoe.” The ekphrasis draws attention to the storyteller’s active participation in the making of history; it also draws attention to the metanarrative quality of ADOS. Indeed, the historical painting is used by the storyteller to produce an episode in which a Tetsot’ine girl makes snowshoes while voicing her thoughts. Later on, the novel stages Keskarrah’s telling of a story about the beginning of the world.

The episode that depicts Greenstockings’s activity shows how an everyday task actually combines skilled practice, ecological anticipation and narrative imagination (83). It begins with Greenstockings’s delicate action of threading the babiche onto the frame. The snowshoe is however not an object isolated from the world; the former participates in the formation of the latter, and vice and versa. In free indirect speech, the text presents Greenstockings’s reflection on the importance of snowshoes for life in the Arctic. As she weaves the snowshoe into existence, she imagines the ability it bestows on her father: it enables him to run “swift as a bird” (emphasis added), to be a line, to be alive in the Arctic.
The analogy between Person and bird ought to be read as a metaphor, and not a simile, for it points to the fact that, in the Tetsot’ine worldview, as a Person draws from the materials of the land and of the animals around, the Person weaves herself a new identity, quite literally; the convergence of the trajectories of life of hunter, craftsperson and animal indeed makes “a new creature, one winged to walk on snow” (86). The crafted object is thus ecological; it is inserted in the becoming of the world through the skilled practice of craftspeople – whether they be hunters, or weavers. This insertion in the world is reinforced later, when the social aspects of hunting in the Arctic are alluded to: as the text says in the free indirect discourse of Greenstockings, “whoever crosses the brief memory these shoes will leave on snow will recognize her [Greenstockings], and recognize her father who bent the wood, and recognize the caribou, and the birch tree” (86). In these passages, making, being, living and doing are one and the same; they are entangled processes.

What is perhaps even more striking, is that the episode of threading snowshoes of page 83 finishes with a sentence of 145 words! The length of this sentence invites the reading to be continuous, as if Greenstockings's interactional pattern were unbroken, which stretches the reader’s experience of the scene into a line of flight, just like Greenstockings’s imagination is “carried” away by the potentiality snowshoes bestow on the Person. The moan of pleasure “oooo” introduces another state of cognition: as she weaves the snowshoes with her fingers, Greenstockings also weaves her imaginary with the possibilities offered by the tool, which is reinforced by the confusion of the interactional units of action and imagination. The repetition of continuous aspects of verbs such as “lifting,” “rising,” “curling,” “spiraling,” and “soaring” contributes to the feeling of elation experienced by Greenstockings, and this feeling is echoed by the syntax of the sentence.

Moreover, crafting the material is here enhanced by the crafting of a narrative. From the skilled practice of snowshoe-making, Greenstockings enters another skilled practice, that of seeing the world as a system. In her becoming-raven, Greenstockings is now able

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92 On page 91, this metaphor is made even more explicit for Keskarrah explains that in the story of Ptarmigan and Man, when Man is “fastened the snowshoes to his feet, he became a bird” (emphasis added).
to experience the world as (and not like) a bird: through this line of experience she is weaving for herself, the girl is able to imagine the fact that the explorers have “burned or smashed down [trees that defied the wind for centuries] into walls for the three square English houses covered with frozen mud” (83). This mention of the destruction of the forest by Europeans evokes the ability of the skilled practitioner to see the world from a certain distance – although this distance is not a separation – and to see its entangled complexity – as opposed to the practice of the Europeans, based on mechanistic materialism. The passage above also makes manifest the idea that art can help one have a systemic view of the world (Bateson 147). Greenstockings’s imaginary and her skilled practice indeed reveal the “forces and flows of material” (Ingold, 2011, 216) and invites “the viewer to join the artist as a fellow traveler” (Wiebe, 1995a, 216). By revealing the connection between work and world through the weaving of a narrative, the passage above about Greenstockings’s activity draws attention to the intimate intertwining of making, being, knowing and doing in the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme.

I interpret this staging of a character making a narrative out of making a tool as a metafictional episode where fiction is conceived in its etymological sense, that is as fashioning: as Greenstockings is fashioning snowshoes, she is also fashioning a narrative and by extension a way of life. To go back to the ekphrastic origin of the episode, this postcolonial poetic rewriting of a somewhat badly drawn colonial image is representative of the storymaker’s skills and practice: the ekphrasis, here, alludes to the radical difference in the colonial reductive and simplistic representation of a girl “mending a snow shoe,” as opposed to the rich postcolonial depiction of an animal-Person enmeshed in the ecology of the Arctic. What colonial discourse flattens and congeals, postcolonial counterdiscourse fleshes out and dynamizes.

In a sense, the storymaker does with fiction what Tim Ingold does with anthropology; that is, the storymaker tries to bring back dynamism into textual practices to ground them in the world. Ingold claims that “[t]o name the tool is to invoke the story. It follows that for an object to count as a tool it must be endowed with a story, which the practitioner should know and understand in order to recognise it as such and use it appropriately. Considered
as tools, things are their stories” (Ingold, 2011, 56). Following Ingold, it can be said that if the crafting of tools is a way of telling the world, the telling of tools is also a way of crafting the world, as is seen a few pages after the passage above. Indeed, as Keskarrah says to Hood, “these snowshoes she is making … they could carry you around it [the lake] … Then you might be able to see [the lake as the fish it is] and you could name it correctly. That is, if you wanted to” (emphasis added; 87). Here, possessing and wearing the tool is not enough for understanding the world as a Tetsot’ine; it is also a question of attitude towards one’s place in the world and towards one’s surroundings, and this attitude cannot change easily. It seems that perceiving the dynamism of the world, apprehending the storied quality of matter, and understanding the entanglement of Person and Land are skills to be slowly acquired, just like the wielding of a tool is a skill learned through trial and error. The storytaker suggests that stories can help one make sense of this worldview.

The text suggests that storytelling is the same as world-making. After telling how the world started when “Sky came to Earth and they lay together” (88), and how Man was caught by a female bear and managed to escape from her, Keskarrah tells Hood and Greenstockings how snowshoes came to be (87-91). This story explains the complementarity of male and female, of human, vegetal and animal, of hunting and cooking, of useful and beautiful, of technological tools and human activity, of past and present in the cycle of life. More than complementarity, the relationships between these figures are instances of entanglement through skilled practice. Indeed, as Ptarmigan “changed when [Man] held her, … her holding changed him as well: frame and woven centre, when she fastened the snowshoes to his feet, he became a bird” (91). The story indeed suggests that as soon as Man and Woman, frame and center, useful and beautiful become entangled, they cannot be understood in isolation. In this long passage on pages 87 to 91, the rhetorical explanation for these entanglements derive from the image of the snowshoe, and its necessary union of frame and center. Hide and birch become snowshoes when the separated components coalesce in activity and begin forming a unique entity. The snowshoe thus becomes a metonym for the “web of life,” or “meshwork,” which is defined by Ingold as an entanglement of “lines of life, growth and movement” (2011, 63). In the
same vein, crafting the snowshoe becomes a metonym for conceiving the world as an entanglement of Stories, Persons and Land.

The storytaker reconstructs Keskarrahs voice telling a story, and therefore this story of beginning is metafictional in two ways: first the written is mirrored by the oral, and the two can be read in light of each other; second, and more importantly, the story is entangled with the situation in which it is immersed, that is the nascent relationship between Hood and Greenstockings, as well as the latter’s practice of making snowshoes. The “story of beginning” (91) is thus not only about the beginning of the world (Earth and Sky), of kinship (Man and Woman) and of snowshoes (birch frame and leather threads), it is also about the beginning of a relationship between members of the audience of that very story, namely Keskarrahs daughter and the explorer Robert Hood. But Hood and Greenstockings are also representatives of their respective interactional epistemes, and as I will argue in more detail, their coming together mirrors the coming together of colonial science and indigenous knowledge, of history and storytelling, of English and Tetsot’ine.

What may appear at first glance as a “generic” story of origin is thus also a reification of that same story, showing that the story and its contexts of enunciation and reception are inseparable, all being caught up in a feedback loop. The entanglement of story, of production and of reception raises an interesting point: Keskarrahs seems to tell the story because the very situation in which he is situated reminds him of that story, and allows him to understand it in a new light, enabling a more profound resonance with it. In the light of Ingold’s explanation of the meanings of stories (2011, 56-57) and of Wiebe’s conception of the storytaker, Keskarrahs telling Hood and Greenstockings a story about the beginning of the world and of men and women relationships acquires a new significance: Keskarrahs is making sense of the story he was told by his mother long ago; he fleshes it out by feeding into it the very situation in which he is enmeshed at the moment of its re-enunciation.

This metanarrative passage suggests that it is erroneous to try to understand the meaning of the story of Man and Ptarmigan from the perspectives of Hood (who does not speak Keskarrahs language and thus does not get a word of it) or Greenstockings (who focuses on the “birth of humanity” (89) aspects of it), or even from the perspective of
Keskarrah, who is recalling his mother telling him that story about the complementarity and entanglement of all, which is attested by Keskarrah’s last remark: “Long ago my mother told me this story of beginning… O my mother, long ago my mother” (91).

This seeming juxtaposition of perspectives is not a static configuration, where one perspective emerges as more meaningful or more authoritative. On the contrary, the storyteller produces a dynamic movement between production and reception, between the events directly related in the story and the events that have triggered this telling. The metanarrative quality of the storyteller’s rendition of Keskarrah, Greenstockings and Hood can make scholars question their motivation for reading and writing about ADOS. More particularly, the text’s metanarrativity interrogates the tension between the production of the story and the reader’s reception of it, and enables the latter to think in dialogical terms about meaning-making activities.

In this sense, in works of historiographic metafiction, reading is influenced as much by the past as it is by the present; reading brings past and present circumstances closer together. More importantly, if reading is a form of meaning-making, it is also a process of worldmaking! The story of Man and Ptarmigan thus offers an example of the cycle of life as understood by the Tetsot’ine: the storyteller manages to make the reader enact how their experience and conception of the Land emerge from an intimate and mutual connection between living, making, knowing, doing and telling. There is no point in finding the origin of either of these processes, for they are entangled with one another; the systemic nature of the Land and People as presented in ADOS enables the reader to experience their interconnectedness. This means that stories do not simply make a situation of the world meaningful, as would be the case in a simplistic homological conception of the relationship between work and world; on the contrary, stories emerge from being-in-the-world, just as the function of a tool emerges from the skilled practice of the craftsperson in their activity of making. A corollary is that stories and tools ought to be conceived as reflexive, in the sense that they tell something about the very person wielding them as well as about the situation they are wielded in. Stories can be seen as metonyms of the environment in which they arise and of the environment they describe.
This is in keeping with what Wiebe writes in *Playing Dead*: stories “are beyond value; they are the memory and wisdom of a people, the particular individual rivers of the sea of life which constitutes us all” (70). In this beautiful metaphor, stories are rivers that are constantly flowing and shaping our physical and sociocultural environments (not unlike Amitav Ghosh’s treatment of stories in *The Hungry Tide*). Telling stories contributes to shaping one’s socioecosystem, and vice and versa. In the same vein, interpreting stories is making sense of the ecosystem, and of one’s interaction with and within it. As Ingold explains: “the only way one can really know things – that is, from the very inside of one’s being – is through a process of self-discovery. To know things you have to grow into them, and let them grow in you, so that they become a part of who you are” (Ingold, 2013, 1). In the episode above, as Keskarrah lets the story grow into him from the moment of his reception of it during his childhood to the moment of his re-enunciation of it with his child, he becomes an embodiment of the storymaker: as the situation he experiences around him becomes the source of his practice of storytelling, he himself grows into the story, adds his own idiosyncratic undertones to it. What could be seen as simple transmission of information is really the reaffirmation of a foundational principle of the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme through storytelling: the interaction of organism and environment is revealed in every activity.

A clue to understanding the importance of storytelling in revealing the organism-environment process to a readership is the presence of an audience to the story of Man and Ptarmigan: a narratee who does not understand the implications of Tetsot’ine stories and on whom the storymaker comments. This narratee is Robert Hood, and his practice of drawing Greenstockings while her father tells the story sheds light on the postcolonial rewriting of the expedition produced by the storymaker. This draws us back to the colonial painting of Keskarrah and Greenstockings. As was shown above, overall the explorers are deaf to the Tetsot’ine recommendations regarding survival in the Arctic. Hood is an exception, and ultimately he attempts to treat the Tetsot’ine with respect as fellow human beings.
However, when Hood first arrives in the lodge to draw Greenstockings, the latter’s mother Birdseye worries that “[i]t’s too dangerous” (81), and her father Keskarrah wonders “[w]hy does he do that? … He can look at you, he can see you different every day, why fix you on his paper once?” (81), to which Greenstockings replies “[m]aybe he has no memory” (81). Then, Birdseye “murmurs, ‘Snow Man’” (82), as though Robert Hood were part of a story wherein a man from the north comes south and brings an “everlasting winter” with him. In the story of Snow Man, the latter is tricked into returning north to his woman and children. Hood has no clue that Birdseye and some Tetsot’ine believe he is an embodiment of winter and snow. It is manifest, for instead of figuring out what and why Birdseye murmurs to him, “like chant buried in her throat beyond leather, ‘Snow Man, Snow Man, white as snow man…why have you come?…what follows you?…nothing but snow, nothing but woe man….’” (84), Hood is too intent on drawing the object of his forbidden desire. Indeed, in this episode Hood seems more interested in Greenstockings’s body than in her parents’ stories. Of course, the passage also reveals to the reader that in the Tetsot’ine understanding of stories, the latter not only refer to something that has happened, but to something about to happen.

Hood is a complex character: despite his relative kindness towards and respect for the Tetsot’ine, he remains trapped in the colonial interactional episteme. This can be seen on pages 87 and 88, where he functions as an inscribed audience to the storytaker Keskarrah. At the beginning of this episode, it is striking how Hood reduces Keskarrah’s voice to auditory and visual elements of the natural world – “wind” and “aurora” (87). Moreover, what Hood perceives as a “rumble” (87) is a story about how inept the explorers are at understanding the land; the two similes “like wind in night spruce, like aurora walking over sky” thus acquire an ironical meaning and indicate that Hood only partially understands Keskarrah, but more importantly that he relegates Greenstockings’s father to the background, the primary focus of his attention being the body of the fifteen-year-old girl and his activity of drawing her. This is reinforced when Keskarrah is compared to a “grand organ” (87) that sustains Hood’s own singing. The meaning of the Tetsot’ine story is lost to Hood, as is made even clearer when the young sailor overwrites Keskarrah’s song with his own
song of desire for the girl he is drawing. Mesmerized by the body of Greenstockings, Hood then convinces himself that he is “performing the assigned duty for which he was selected” (88). The nature of this duty – to draw the landscapes and peoples of the Arctic – is mixed with a sexual desire for Greenstockings.

Hood is here an embodiment of the colonial desire for the exoticism of the New World and for discovering the resources of the country. This desire manifests itself in Hood’s gaze, which points to his own hand drawing the girl. Not unlike writing, drawing becomes a substitute for touching, and the representation of the body becomes a substitute for the body. In this egocentric practice of drawing, Hood forgets that Greenstockings is not an object, and that Keskarrah is more than material and natural sound. Blinded by his desire for uncovering the girl and discovering the country, Hood is unable to see the personhood communicated in the stories that make up life in the Tetsot’ine community. Read in the light of this ekphrastic episode, the colonial painting cannot be understood as a representation of life in the Arctic, but merely as a projection of colonial desire on indigenous bodies and lands.

As I have just argued, the Tetsot’ine practice of making tools and making stories is not about describing a portion of the world in a closed work, but it is all about revealing the co-emergence of material entities in activity, including the storyteller and the audience. In the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme, stories are metonyms for the ecosystem. It is therefore no surprise that the storyteller’s rendering of Tetsot’ine voices are connected to a revelation about the ways the English interactional episteme affects the indigenous knowledge system.

**English Stories and Tetsot’ine Community**
The socioecological dialogism of the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme is made manifest in episodes of cross-cultural communication where the Tetsot’ine characters interpret English stories of origins, and by extension, the colonial interactional episteme. The Tetsot’ine interactional episteme therefore emerges from a process of interpretation, from a dialogical relationship with the explorers’ practice of being and mode of knowing.
An episode that stages the slow discovery by Keskarrah of the Strangers’ way of knowing is his reflection on the “Whitemud” story as the story of creation that underlies the European conception of subjectivity. In commenting the story of Genesis, Keskarrah attempts to make sense of it by engaging with it actively. This scene is quite humorous: it stages Keskarrah misunderstanding the story of Adam and Eve and of their creation because of the various (mis)translations that take place between John Richardson, Twospeaker the translator and Bigfoot, and it invigorates the playful dialogism at the core of Keskarrah’s personality (123) as well as his curiosity. Indeed, Keskarrah mistakes the word “spit” for “spirit,” and “mud” for clay. Not only does this mistranslation allude to the same process that underlies Rilke’s epigraph in the paratext – the fact that others’ words are always translated and interpreted, or even that there is always something lost in communication and in translation – but it also indicates the mingling of Keskarrah and the storytaker’s voices. The syncretism at the core of the storytaker’s activity is made salient in Keskarrah’s words – remember that the storytaker is “run aground” by the elements of the story (Wiebe, 1995b, 38). The storytaker’s syncretic effort enables Keskarrah’s words to emerge in the former’s practice of telling. Moreover, this creation of man from mud and spit, far from filling Keskarrah with awe, on the contrary has him wonder why man was not created stronger. Here the storytaker lays bare the gap between Tetsot’ine and English stories of origin. As Keskarrah does not perceive the point of the story of creation, it also signals that he does not perceive – and thus does not acknowledge – the authority inherent in the Christian version of the “Soul Everywhere” (123), creator of all.

On the contrary, far from naively believing in the story he is being told, Keskarrah initially questions its validity, and then includes the story in his repertoire and very own system of thinking:

“The white mud is good, and there’s that mound of it on the north side of this esker, which These English liked so much and mixed with water and smeared all over their building – so—” he has a sudden revelation “maybe These English should really be called Whitemuds, maybe they came from this place, here they found their original mud again! Though I can’t see how that could be. If they really belonged here, they would have known this place without me telling them, but obviously they know nothing here … Richard Sun says woman Whitemud was supposed to be the companion and helper of the man. She happens out of
his rib while he’s sleeping, but when he wakes up and there she is, his rib a woman out of his sleep, she doesn’t help him at all, she eats this one berry, which is so large it grows alone on one big tree, and then she gives it to him to eat and that makes everything in the world go completely crazy. Even the woman and the man. ... That’s the part I can’t understand, though I have been thinking about it. If People don’t eat, they die — and Whites eat far more than People. How can one tree berry have so much power that eating it matters to everything else? For ever? Aren’t there plenty of smaller berries for the man to eat? Our first man ate berries alone for a whole summer and nothing happened to him.” (124)

The storymaker here voices Keskarrah’s own hermeneutic undertaking. The fact that the clay of Genesis is envisioned as a local feature of the Dene lands shows that for Keskarrah’s knowledge and stories belong to the locale. It also shows the dynamism of traditional ecological knowledge. More importantly, this “revelation” of the connection between These English and the white mud shows how names are attributed in the Tetsot’ine community; that is to say they are attributed by connecting stories (here Genesis) and interaction with one’s surroundings (the smearing of mud on the cabins). Tetsot’ine stories are a complex form of metonymy. The groundedness of knowledge in story and landscape is however not shared by the English, who see themselves as disembedded from the land because they envision it either as an obstacle or as an external resource, which ultimately explains why in Keskarrah’s eyes they seem to “know nothing” of the land. Another interesting point of that passage is that it shows the difference between the metaphoric nature of Genesis and the metonymic nature of Tetsot’ine stories. Indeed, Keskarrah understands the “berry” not as a metaphor for knowledge, but as a metonym for survival: berries are sources of nutrients and energy and as such are of vital importance. Because of this non-metaphoric mode of knowing, Keskarrah does not understand how a berry could have the power to “make everything in the world go completely crazy.” In other words, Keskarrah does not see the transgression of God’s authority embodied in the symbolic act of eating the “berry.”

If Keskarrah is amused by the incongruities and impropriety of the stories of the English, which seem to be “only about men” (126) and about how in the Whitemud story,

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93 The effect of this inability to understand the symbolism of Genesis does not present a supposed “primitiveness” of Keskarrah, but rather it shows the irrelevance of the English interactional episteme in the Arctic, which borders on the ridiculous.
“two men [God and Adam] have to dream and work really hard, to give birth to one woman” (126), the Tetsot’ine mapmaker is also scared of the repercussions of that story:

“There’s trouble.” Keskarrah’s tone quiets them immediately. He is lying with his eyes closed, as if he has already wandered much farther than he wanted to. Indeed, as if he has betrayed himself.

“The Whitemud story,” he says, “is not happy. Not like our story of the man and the ptarmigan-woman and how they make the snowshoes together. They’re both the same then, and different. I’ve only heard a little of Richard Sun’s story, but I don’t think I want to hear more. It sounds dangerous. … Stories are like ropes, they pull you to incomprehensible places. This rib story could drag us tighter together with Whitemuds than the endless killing of animals, which we agreed to do without a proper council … Hey! a story can tangle you up so badly you start to think different. I think these strange Whitemud stories could be strong enough to tie us down – though I should be old enough by now to have heard everything at least once.” (126-127)

Keskarrah’s worries make manifest his conception of language that “[w]ords mirror what there is in the world, as they also anticipate it” (132). By voicing the problems inherent in the English story of creation, Keskarrah fears that he is dreaming the future into existence, that he is bringing it about. In that sense, the danger of Genesis is that the first action of humanity is one of “wrongness,” whereby Eve gives in to temptation and brings about the Fall of humanity from Eden. Keskarrah is afraid that the English principle of “always follow[ing] the power of the wrong” (130) will spread throughout the Tetsot’ine community through this story of wrong. In his mind, stories have a real effect on People and on the Land. Indeed the simile that stories are “like ropes” (126-127) makes Keskarrah’s anguish more material, alluding to the corporeal effects of having one’s interactional episteme drastically altered. The verbs “pull,” “drag” and “tangle” here make tangible on the scale of embodiment what it would mean to be assimilated into the “not happy” and “dangerous” world depicted in English stories. In this context, Keskarrah’s conception of storytelling reveals the interplay between interactional epistemes and interactional patterns; the function of story is to make plain this relationship of entanglement between intersubjective knowledge systems and individual patterns of interaction with the land.

On another level, the story-rope analogy also alludes to the story of Man and Ptarmigan, which is confirmed by Keskarrah’s mention of the story at the beginning of the paragraph. The text here makes an important metanarrative commentary about both
Tetsot’ine storytelling practices and about the storymaker’s own practice. Tetsot’ine stories, like the storymaker’s own story, do not and should not exclude teller and audience, but rather they should reflect how both are tangled up in storytelling practice. Of course, a practical effect of this is the possibility of losing one’s sense of self by including the strangers’ stories. Keskarrah is wary of this, for as he explains to Bigfoot: “We are hospitable, no one with us will starve while we have something to eat, but perhaps…perhaps at some point we…make ourselves stranger too” (131). This passage dramatizes the anguish felt by Keskarrah at the thought of becoming a “stranger” to the land, to be made an external observer of the land due to the stories of the explorers. I argue that it is a metanarrative commentary about Wiebe’s own practice of storymaking. By staging a character wondering about the power of stories to alter one’s self, Wiebe demonstrates his deep concern about the remaining power of colonial stories and histories that have fashioned his own personality.

In the case of the universalism that subtends the colonial version of Genesis, the power of stories over people is salient; it is so powerful that it can “overtell” (i.e., overwrite) the groundedness of Tetsot’ine stories. Keskarrah later explains to Bigfoot that “[t]heir [i.e., the English] first story tells them everything is always wrong. So wherever they go, they can see only how wrong the world is” (132), which makes Greenstockings wonder: “How can a place be – wrong?” (132). Greenstockings’s interrogation reveals the environmental hermeneutics of the Tetsot’ine, who understand place actively, and who believe that stories emerge through this active understanding. Stories are contingent on place and on teller; stories are the manifestation of a dialogism between organism-person and land-environment. Staging the intimate connection between teller, story and land in such a way sheds light on Keskarrah’s and Birdseye’s criticism of the explorers’ process of charting. This colonial cartographic process disconnects teller, story and land by promoting the first to a position of dominance, by freezing the second into independent (and thus meaningless) marks and by reducing the third to a static background of and instrument for colonization.

If Keskarrah and Birdseye, as well as Greenstockings, are fearful of the transformation brought about by the English explorers, some other Tetsot’ine are portrayed as accepting all too willingly the presence of the Europeans. Bigfoot’s behavior and
appearance, for instance, are radically altered by the arrival of the English and their imposition of firearm hunting. Arriving in Keskarrah's lodge, Bigfoot holds "a long rifle in his stiff mittens" and wears "a tall, black English hat" (128). Greenstockings painstakingly refrains from laughing at this beaver fur "tall as a stump" and "as wobbly as the authority [These English] assume [Bigfoot] has over People just because he talks for them" (128). However, after some time, Greenstockings's comments become more critical and cynical (133-134). The alteration of Bigfoot's personality, promoted to a chiefly status unknown among the Tetsot'ine, is perceived as a direct consequence of the arrival of the English and of their mindset regarding hierarchy and authority. Having lost his discernment and balance, Bigfoot is no longer a rightful representative of the Tetsot'ine. The encounter between strangers and indigenous people reveals another aspect of Bigfoot, thereby showing that the Tetsot'ine are not a homogeneous group, but rather a community of different persons. Some are critical of the explorers; some are all too accepting.

Through the free indirect speech of Keskarrah and Birdseye, the text uncovers how writing (embodied in the colonial practice of cartography) can seal off the organism from its environment and congeal the world into stasis. However, the text also shows the problems inherent in the oral storytelling culture of the Tetsot'ine. Indeed, if the text makes clear that imperial scientific writing has major shortcomings in its radical exclusion of the other, it also points out that indigenous orality poses problems in regard to the arrival of strangers. This problematic is brought forth in Greenstockings and in her criticism of her mother's mode of knowing:

As the sun sinks completely into winter, Greenstockings watches for the lengthening line of Whitemud story that her mother's voice draws up out of darkness ... She wants to hear her mother tell why all the People stood there so heedlessly, as if nothing but curiosity was happening, and watched These English arrive.

But Birdseye's murmured story explains nothing about what happened to the People then. (148)

The young girl is very critical of the radical inclusion of the expedition and of the inability of the Tetsot'ine to adapt to the arrival of the English explorers. Greenstockings wonders why her mother does not weave into story the rest of the encounter with the explorers, for she
intuitively knows that the refusal to face the reality of the Europeans’ presence is problematic: it places Birdseye and her family in the position of disempowered witnesses to an immutable and unstoppable force. This passage lays bare the internal politics of the Tetsot’ine, who do not blindly follow arbitrary authority, but who discuss their way into action.\textsuperscript{94} In light of the collaboration inherent in Tetsot’ine decision-making, the episode where Greenstockings questions her mother’s story acquires a deeper significance: it functions as an allegory of good interpretation that invites the reader to reflect on the fact that listening to a story does not necessarily mean accepting the narrative as an authoritative truth, but on the contrary that it consists in interrupting, questioning and dialoguing with the discourse. Silencing the presence of the Europeans is a mistake that Greenstockings picks up on; she refuses to take her mother’s story at face value. More worryingly, in so far as Birdseye has the ability in her storymaking to see into the future, her inability to integrate the Whitemuds hints at the extinction of the Tetsot’ine as well as her own death.

Metafictionally, this passage suggests that receiving a narrative is not a unilateral assimilation of information, but a dialogue between reader and text – or listener and speech – where the reader is made to question the textual configuration and to proactively reconfigure their horizon of understanding. Good interpretation entails interacting actively with history and story: good interpretation can and will fill in the blanks in the text, and question the deliberate silences that punctuate it. In the same vein, when representing indigenous peoples, a novel cannot simply discard the presence of Europeans, for it would fall into the trap of representing a precolonial noble savagery that is anything but representative.

Robert Kroetsch alludes to this paradox of absence and presence in his essay/short story “The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues.” Kroetsch reflects on the discrepancy between contemporary perceptions of the environment and historical

\textsuperscript{94} This form of cooperation is stressed earlier in the text when the storymaker explains that “[w]ithin the shifting groups of Tetsot’ine for a time agreeing to live together, as necessity arises, one person decides finally where they will travel, where they will stop – but that implies nothing like boss. They have no word for ‘chief’” (34).
representations of it. More particularly, he argues that the “authorized history, the given definition of history, was betraying us on those prairies” (Kroetsch 2). He continues:

Where I had learned the idea of absence, I was beginning to learn the idea of trace. There is always something left behind. That is the essential paradox. Even abandonment gives us memory.

I had to tell a story. I responded to those discoveries of absence, to that invisibility, to that silence, by knowing I had to make up a story. Our story. How do you write in a new country? (Kroetsch 2)

Kroetsch’s reflections on how story fashions interaction with the land, and how in turn it becomes difficult to interact with the land without betraying history or being betrayed by history, these reflections seem to lurk behind Greenstockings’ intuition. By voicing Greenstockings’s concern that Birdseye is creating an absence where there is actually a trace, the storytaker reminds the reader that from the first moment of encounter, one cannot forget the other, whether this other be indigenous or European. In a sense, history and land become like “frame and woven centre” (Wiebe, 1995a, 91).

It is to be noted that Keskarrah and Birdseye also perceive the power of the explorers' way of knowing, and more particularly the ability of the cartographic colonial interactional episteme to pinpoint geographical meaning:

“Maybe they don’t need to dream [Birdseye says]. Maybe through those instruments the sun lets them see how the world is. For them always there, always the same.”

Keskarrah stares at her, dumbfounded. He has never considered that the sun through the glass might not deceive the Whites; never imagined that something they could make and drag into the world he has always lived, travelling it into existence, might make the world more fixed than his own awareness could recognize. Greenstockings glances up and sees the possibilities of such an apprehension, with something like fear, gather in her father’s eyes. (78)

Keskarrah’s fear is here very revealing of the gap between English and Tetsot’ine interactional epistememes. Perceiving the world as static through technology and writing (“something they could make and drag into the world”) is something that Keskarrah cannot envision without feeling awe. Keskarrah is here trying to come to terms with the implications
of colonial science, notably the fact that history may well leave behind the Tetsot’ine and their ability to “know something a little.”

The Linearity of Tetsot’ine Animal-Persons
In contrast with the characterization of the English that I see as areal – fixed, unmoving, and archetypal, because based on rigid military hierarchy – I read the Tetsot’ine characters as linear. The boundaries of their being are not hermetic, either spatially or temporally, but rather the characters are depicted as travelling and transmuting embodied consciousnesses. To put it differently, names and identities should be considered as stories carrying into the future, whereas in the European interactional episteme the meaning of names is conventional. The Tetsot’ine, instead of being fashioned as characters, are constructed as animal-persons who, in their skilled practice, are weaving together frame and center, organism and environment, subject and history. This refusal to fix “identity” is reflected upon by the implied storymaker, who sarcastically depicts the English explorers’ imposition of the name “Greenstockings” on the girl (15-16) and on the map. Here the storymaker captures the fleeting nature of the Tetsot’ine, which changes according to circumstances. By drawing attention to the fact that “Greenstockings” is not Greenstockings’s name “that summer of first arrival,” but by not providing her name explicitly either, the storymaker sheds light on the tension brought about by the encounter between the English linguistic system and the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme. Of course, the name “Greenstockings” was assigned to the girl by the explorers, because of her appearance, and with ironic reference to the song “Greensleaves.” Other than the clothes she was wearing, this name however does not indicate much about her. By contrast, the storymaker, by adding the story of Jumping Marten (16) to characterize Greenstockings, unsettles the

95 Retrospectively, it is now well-known that 19th-century science and more particularly the scientific method lay down the foundations of huge leaps in the West’s understanding of the world. However, Donald Worster explains that imperial sciences, and more particularly eighteenth-century mechanistic materialism, produced an understanding of the world that favored economic exploitation over preservation (1977, 40). The understanding that the natural world was well-ordered thus contributed to creating a sense that humanity could control it, “manage” it. This conception of “Man’s domination over Nature” is in contradiction with the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme, in which the world is brought forth by the movement of animal-persons.
boundaries of her colonized identity and demonstrates how a story can capture the dynamism of enmeshment in the social ecosystem. Indeed, although Greenstockings is not explicitly identified with Jumping Marten, the similarities between the two women are striking, especially in the sense that they are both “so desirable [they are] stolen by enemies from the east.” The story however preserves the dynamism and uncertainty of the situation, for the “enemies from the east” can be understood as much as Hood and Back as the voyageur Michel, who in the chapter “Stolen Woman” abducts Greenstockings (199-200).

In the latter episode, the abduction takes place after Keskarrah has told Greenstockings a story of “desire and revenge” (198) in which an enemy steals Blackfire’s wife She Who Delights, which triggers Blackfire’s revenge. The story exemplifies the transmutable quality of Tetsot’ine identity and shows how the storymaker makes use of it to characterize Greenstockings. By telling this story, Keskarrah shows how names do not mean the same thing, depending on the context from which they emerge, and how stories are adapted to the circumstances of utterance (184-185). The various names assigned to the protagonists are contingent on what aspects of the story the storyteller wishes to convey. In the case of the oxymoronic name Blackfire, it is because of the desire for She Who Delights and the revenge against his archenemy White Horizon that Keskarrah decides upon it. Keskarrah in the story touches upon the relationship between the visible and the invisible, between what the senses can directly perceive, and what is concealed from them. These feelings of desire and revenge exist for the person who feels them, but they are not directly visible to the surrounding people. As for She Who Delights, her multivalence as a Person is reinforced by Keskarrah’s insistence on the fact that “her names are several too” (184), which is placed after her description as a “very wise person” (184). Interestingly, by associating wisdom and polyonymy (the fact of being known by several names), the storymaker draws attention to the fact that situations and environments always precede words and sentences. In this conception, language is only one ecological process amidst others.

This playful use of language is then echoed by the storymaker’s use of the verb “delight” to characterize Blackfire’s wife. The term comes from Old French delit (“pleasure,
sexual desire”), which itself comes from Latin delectare (“to allure, charm, please”). More interesting is the spelling of the word, which changed from “delite” to “delight” in the sixteenth century to match the spelling of words such as “light” and “flight” for instance. In this situation, the use of the verb “delight” interrogates the nature of words and names in English. This etymological investigation proves that words change over time, even in English. It shows that what words look like and what they denote is contingent on the sociolinguistic environment in which they are used. The word “delite” has been influenced by the English word “light,” and of course, in the story of Blackfire’s wife, it is the light she carries inside her that sparks and fuels Blackfire’s desire and revenge. In this example, the storymaker makes use of the dynamism of the Tetsot’ine naming system to show that the fixity and certainty of the word-meaning relationship is an illusion that ought to be uncovered. In that context, the reader cannot take for granted that Greenstockings’ name is her real name, but rather they are made to acknowledge once again that it is an imposition on the part of the imperial authority of the explorers. This example of Blackfire and She Who Delights gives flesh to the fact that names have “stories in them” (39). Read in light of Keskarrah’s comment that “Stories are like ropes, they pull you to incomprehensible places” (126), the storied quality of self entails that Tetsot’ine animal-persons cannot be envisioned as unchanging characters, but have to be envisioned as four-dimensional transmuting bodies and enmeshed consciousnesses, which is a way for the storymaker to avoid freezing the Tetsot’ine as precolonial beings, and instead to acknowledge the tragedy of their encounter with the English explorers.

**Constructing a Tetsot’ine Storyworld through Stories**

The storyworld constructed out of the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme is a meshwork of indigenous animal-persons, of English foreigners and of materials of the environment. This Tetsot’ine storyworld is incommensurable, always in movement, always dynamic, always alive and linear, always accreting the stories of the people inhabiting the land into deeper and more complex structures, and as such it resists the English explorers’ attempts at mapping. The Tetsot’ine interactional episteme as stylized in ADOS foregrounds the
intimate relationships between *Those Who Know Something A Little* (the Tetsot’ine), the *Animals In This Country* their kin, and the stories that populate the Dene lands and that are embodied in the very land they depict, mirror, echo and anticipate. However, instead of relegating the English ways of knowing to the background as the explorers do with Tetsot’ine stories, the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme integrates the English interactional episteme into its own fabric to the point that, after the arrival of the English explorers, the closely-knit ecological mesh of the Dene lands begins to unravel. Moreover, the Tetsot’ine interactional episteme is not taken for granted by the storymaker, who acknowledges its constructedness by making use of a vivid poetic voice to make it audible and to partly remedy the leftovers of colonial history.

3.7 Hood and Greenstockings: Unclothing Discovery

I argue that the love story between Midshipman Robert Hood and the indigenous girl Greenstockings has a special function in the novel: it gives flesh to the collision of interactional epistemes and to the mutual discovery that ensues. By uniting Hood and Greenstockings, the storymaker goes beyond the surface of the collision of communities, and unclothes the depth of the discovery of alterity. The storymaker’s sensuous prose enables the reader to experience bodily the encounter and mutual discovery of strangers.

The relationship between Hood and Greenstockings transgresses the military code of conduct, contradicting Franklin’s very own orders not to interact with indigenous women. Hood is aware of this transgression, for during his intimate encounter he is flooded with analepses reminding him of his “imperial duty under oath” (176). The relationship thus takes place in the context of a collapse of the moral and ethical system of the explorers due to the encounter with alterity. Hood’s dereliction of his duty in the lodge of Keskarrah and Birdseye’s family takes place around a fire where Greenstockings and he tell each other stories. In spite of the fact they do not understand the other’s language, they learn to know

96 This moral and ethical colonial system, seen retrospectively in light of postcolonial studies, is of course anything but moral and ethical.
each other; they feed each other and finally they make love. In the intimacy of the firelight, the two youths begin to form one being: “He leans closer to Greenstockings, his words such sibilant sound, while they both stare intently into the fire, both bent forwards but aware only (she thinks, he thinks) of each other side by side, the leaping fire that draws them together without touching” (160).

The physical and spiritual connection between the two youths (Hood is in his early twenties; Greenstockings is only fifteen years old) is made explicit by the storymaker and it is reinforced by the latter’s manipulation of form, particularly by his use of doubling in the parenthesis “(she thinks, he thinks),” by the repetition of the word “both” and by the phrase “side by side.” These three repetitions perform the encounter and subsequent overlapping of subjectivities that is the core of the whole episode until page 180. Indeed, in this passage Hood and Greenstockings’s voices intermingle, and the two young people experience the world together bodily and in sound. This intimate discovery of alterity is represented through a blending of interactional patterns (“they both stare,” are “both bent forwards”), which is contiguous with a description of the space of the fire as a locus where lines of life become enmeshed. Here the storymaker plays with the traditional narratological notion of focalization by using the fireplace as a literal point of focalization (the etymology of focalization is “focus,” which in Latin means the hearth, the fireplace). The entanglement of interactional patterns therefore occurs around the point of focus, that is to say the space of the fire around which Hood and Greenstockings are located. Moreover, in geometry, the focus also refers to the meeting of rays after refraction or reflection. The point of focus, the fire, is also the point of the story where Hood’s and Greenstockings’s consciousness meet and blend. Therefore, in this incredible scene, the storymaker stages the meeting of consciousnesses by making the latter connect through fire. At the same time, the tension between the physical fire and the linguistic and narrative focalization makes the reader aware that what allows the blending of consciousness to take place is really the storymaker’s skill as a medium of refraction. Keeping this in mind, the phrase “the leaping fire draws them together without touching” can then also be applied to the reader and to the storymaker, whose respective consciousness are drawn towards the spacetime of Hood
and Greenstockings and are indeed refracted through the blended consciousness of the couple. In this scene, the implied reader is offered the possibility through language to experience the blending of subjectivity.

The mingling of physical voices through a blending of interactional patterns is made possible by the linguistic gap between the two young people. The impossibility to communicate verbally does not shatter dialogism, but rather it opens up its potential for a deeper, more embodied form of dialogue based on spatial contiguousness rather than linguistic abilities. It is the common environment that allows the dialogue to take place (i.e., the fire and the lodge) and not the knowledge system. What is favored here is not the collision of interactional epistememes but the mingling of interactional patterns. Greenstockings reflects on this possibility for discovering the Other: “He is different, … even without words he often does not know anything … [S]he will tell him anything, whatever has always been unspeakable, his incomprehension gives her freedom” (160). For Greenstockings, Hood’s difference resides in his “quiet,” his “patience” and his “stillness” (161) that differentiate him from her conception of the typical man who sees her as “a piece of something to be groped for inside his thick head but that he won’t find there until he finally takes her between his hands, frees himself between his legs” (161). Hood’s undemanding, observing and listening presence allows Greenstockings to express herself freely and to voice the “unspeakable.”

The spatial intimacy of the lodge together with her personal intimacy with Hood makes her want to tell him a story. In this moment of closeness where interactional patterns overlap, the telling of the story functions as a line of becoming that connects the consciousness of the two young people:

In the flames she sees the tiny orange spot they are together in the great land spread out by the white darkness of the moon, the shades of the enormous lights burning over them. The People call those lights “caribou running” because stroking the hide of an animal lifts and sparkles the same fire under your hand, the lights vanishing themselves and returning on the deep night sky. She can say it?

She says slowly, aloud, “In the long dark, there are always the animals, their hoofs like quick shovels, their running in herds over the sky lights the winter darkness, and on earth they feed on the fine white moss they dig for us, to feed us from the ground they smell again, under the snow.” (161-162)
The first sentence of this quotation is complex, not the least because of its minimalist use of punctuation and its metaleptic transgression of spacetime. Paraphrased simply, seeing the fire, Greenstockings imagines herself from above (“the tiny orange spot they are together in”) observing the land punctuated at night with light (“the great land spread out by the white darkness of the moon”), which she associates with the stars in the sky (“the shades of the enormous lights burning over them”). This movement of Greenstockings’s imagination happens as she watches through the fire. Here, fire functions as a refractor that allows her imagination to encompass the land and the night sky, and then their overlapping. This complex rendering of the girl’s consciousness is then complicated by the fact that she introduces indigenous stories. As she explains that People call those lights (both the fires and the stars) “caribou running, because stroking the hide of an animal lifts and sparkles the same fire under your hand, the lights vanishing themselves and returning on the deep night sky,” she is grounding her previous understanding of the connection between land and sky through fire in a connection between human touch and caribou skin. What was a purely visual set of correspondences (fire, stars) becomes haptic (fire, stroking caribou, stars). In this passage, Greenstockings’s consciousness shows that Tetsot’ine stories have the power to connect different spaces, but also different senses. Indeed, the synesthetic movement of sight to touch is also one of rest to movement, which gives an impression that the world is animated through stories. The addition of the figure of the caribou in the set of correspondences imbues the whole scene with a sense of kinesthesia, where the mental and perspectival movement undertaken by Greenstockings in the first part of the sentence is re-explained as an embodied movement through stories about caribou. The connectedness offered by the caribou is in turn used to connect People to this world of the “long dark,” for the lines of experience of the caribou in the sky (“their running in herds over the sky lights the winter darkness”) and on the land (“on earth they feed on the fine white moss”) is what allows the Tetsot’ine to survive the harsh winter (“they dig for us, to feed us from the ground they smell again, under the snow”). The caribou here becomes the dynamic
image that organizes the chronotope of Greenstockings’s story, just like the snowshoe organized Keskarrah’s.

The power of this chronotoping is sensuous. As Greenstockings tells Hood this story about caribou, his “body [is] intense, listening. No one intrudes with an acceptable understanding, and her happiness begins to dance with him” (162). In this context, storytelling is not about content, nor is it about the transmission of information, for Hood is not “understanding a syllable of any word she has ever spoken” (157). The relationship between Greenstockings and Hood exemplifies that understanding stories is about discovering the Other sensuously; it is about empathy, about listening with the whole body and not with a separate transcendental “reason” that would seek out the meaning of the narrative. In this dialogical dance, Hood and Greenstockings learn to accept the ineffable complexity of the relationship between Other and Stranger, as well as its irreducibility in language. Dualism is overcome and replaced by dialogism, for in their case, communication is not about exchanging information between two distinct entities, but about sharing an experience together. It is about including the Other into your midst and about letting the Stranger in. After all, Hood is invited inside the lodge (inside her home, her oikos), and in a sensual way, he is invited into Greenstockings, for as the final words of their meeting minimally conclude: “Forehead and skin, and lips, and tongues” (177).

Obviously, this relationship is not about instrumentalizing the indigenous woman, who here would embody an Other-figure, nor is it about subjecting her into obedience. The function of this scene of love is on the contrary to show that if there is an apparent clash of cultures at a certain level (Hood at first displays colonial desire for Greenstockings in the drawing scene I have shown above), as this situation of collision trickles down to the level of individuals, it transforms itself into an intimate meeting of beings who are on equal ground. In this confusion of identities enacted by dialogism, the boundaries of what constitutes the Other shift, thereby transgressing the colonial imposition of meaning and shedding light on the power of the novel to transform collision into discovery.

In this context, ADOS transforms interpretation into discovery. In this hermeneutics, discovery is about understanding how one discovers, and discovering how one understands.
Hood understands Greenstockings's body language and discovers her intentions. The text makes manifest the apparent metalepsis inherent in Dene storytelling practices, and enables the reader to discover the dynamism of this way of knowing. These metafictional episodes of interpretive practices thus draw attention to a way of understanding the novel that demands an active investment in the production of meaning, a sort of textual dialogism. When one adopts a dialogical approach to the text, the conflict between explorers and indigenous people, history and story, fact and fiction, and scientific and storied knowledges, is backgrounded, and what is foregrounded is rather the collaborative processes that can be seen in almost all aspects of the work.

What I discover in reading ADOS is the fact that the storymaker's voice has the power to unveil a common ground that is based on an ecocentric understanding of the world and on a dialogical approach to life. This common ground recognizes alterity, but does not create a hierarchical system out of difference. In other words, instead of conceiving the novel as a fixed narrative configuration where polarized communities, ways of knowing, and discourses collide, the historiographic metafiction is a process of ecopoiesis whereby Tetsot'ine and English, traditional and scientific knowledge, and story and history discover and interpret each other.

### 3.8 Weaving two Interpretations into one Storyworld

In ADOS, the challenge faced by Wiebe in writing about the past is to make two ways of knowing-the-world and of being-in-the-world cohabit within the same storyworld without reducing to a background noise the harm caused by colonization and without appropriating the voice of the indigenous population. Bringing together the socioecological monologism of British imperialism (with its universalist outlook, its instrumentalization, backgrounding, congealing and silencing of the Dene lands and their indigenous inhabitants) and the socioecological dialogism of the indigenous Tetsot'ine (with their hospitality, care for and receptivity to the land and its beings) is realized by acknowledging their radical differences, by finding the threads that connect them, and, through a clever structure and discourse, by
inviting the reader to weave them together in reading. The strategy employed by Wiebe in *ADOS* is to make use of the figure of the storymaker as both a function of the author of historiographic metafiction (the implied storymaker) and a function of the indigenous storyteller (the inscribed storymaker). Therefore, by using a European mode of expression (the written form of the genre of historiographic metafiction) imbued with an indigenous understanding of the skilled practice of weaving stories, and by weaving these two modes of expression in the structure of the text, these two interactional epistemes in the storyworld, and overall these two understandings of the power of language to give sense to the world, *ADOS* ultimately enables the reader to apprehend the strangeness of guns and snowshoes that must have equally puzzled the Tetsot’ine and English communities after their encounter.
4. The Sundarbans as History, Ecology and Chronotope in *The Hungry Tide*


4.1 Ghosh and the Subaltern

Ghosh’s fictional work is infused with a concern for the subaltern and their experience (Anand 22). More precisely, in his novels, Ghosh writes against the “failure to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny” (Chakrabarty, 2000, 15) and sheds light on the untold stories of the subaltern on the subcontinent of India and its neighboring countries. A problem however arises during any historical investigation of the subaltern, for “subaltern social groups … do not leave their own documents” (22). This entails that “[h]istorians concerned with recuperating [subaltern] ‘experience’ in history have often turned to the resources of other disciplines for help: anthropology, demography, sociology, archaeology, human geography, etc.” (22).

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97 Ghosh’s interest for the figure of the subaltern is manifested explicitly in an email conversation he had with Dipesh Chakrabarty, a historian of the Subaltern Studies group, in December 2000. The Subaltern Studies collectives is a group of South Asian historians who “have sought to recover the histories of insurgency and resistance in South Asia from the perspective of subordinate social classes.” (S. Morton 162). Its journal *Subaltern Studies: Writings on Indian History and Society* “began in 1982 as a series of interventions in some debates specific to the writing of modern Indian history” (Chakrabarty 9). In his conversation with Chakrabarty, Ghosh explains that the latter’s work *Provincializing Europe* is most exciting because it “attempt[s] to restore meaning to subaltern resistance, even where those patterns of resistance make no sense from the point of view of modern citizenship, progress, etc.” (Chakrabarty and Ghosh 148).
In this context, literature offers the means to combine various disciplines. The transdisciplinarity mentioned by Chakrabarty that is inherent in the investigation of the subaltern is indeed akin to the one that Ghosh discusses in his interview with Kumar:

the novel is the form that synthesizes all kinds of expression. ... [H]istory or anthropology cannot give you the emotion, it cannot give you the affect, it cannot give you what individual characters feel as they experience history. So this is why I write novels, because I think novels can synthesize geology, history, personal relationships, emotion, everything. ... I see the novel as really the grandest form of expression. ... I think the genres as such – history, geology, whatever – the differences between them are to me meaningless. ... [E]specially with a book like *The Glass Palace*, or *The Hungry Tide*, I don’t want to write about just the individual in a particular place. I also want to write about what is there, the geology, the deep time that exists outside the individual, and the immediacy of time, and the times that make up every aspect of the circumstance. (Kumar and Ghosh 103)

Not only does the form of the novel permit Ghosh to express the repressed stories of the human subaltern, it enables him to voice what is “outside the individual”: the voice of “what is there,” of place. In this interview, and in *THT*, Ghosh almost treats the environment as a subaltern whose voice and story have been silenced for too long. By reasserting the agency of place and its importance in shaping narratives, Ghosh offers a form of “subaltern environmentalism.”

*THT*, like Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and her subsequent works of non-fiction, belongs to a form of Indian environmental literature that sheds light on the tensions between the big economic and political ideologies of development and the exploitation and silencing of subordinated beings (Chae 521). *THT* is critical of a version of environmentalism that would favor conservation and preservation to the detriment of human populations. In the 1950s and 1960s, most postcolonial nations attempted to transform themselves economically by adopting “development” to move beyond colonialism. However, by doing so, “they unreflexively embraced models of economic development that marginalized the local and subaltern in favor of the metropolitan, a top down perspective on development that was patronizing at best and ruthlessly exploitative at worst” (Kaur 133).

The result is that “[p]ostcolonial societies like India in their quest for development often create vast numbers of dispossessed and displaced” (Nayar 88). In other words, “[m]odernization, set in motion from around the 1950s in the form of dams, industrial
projects and economic planning, has also, concomitantly, shifted large numbers of people from their habitat, professions and cultural roots” (Nayar 88).

In THT, Ghosh writes against environmentalist undertakings that reinforce the marginalization of the subaltern. The novel “criticizes a brand of environmentalism in which human beings are given no importance. [It] thus valorizes the subaltern voice [and] responds to the conflict over access to habitat and resources and the brutal play of economic forces” (Pulugurtha 88). Terri Tomsky goes even further and asserts that Ghosh’s novel invites its readership to reflect on “how [we should] position ourselves in relation to today’s geopolitical inequalities in spaces that are both conceptually and geographically distant?” (Tomsky 53-54). THT therefore makes use of the tension between the necessity both of acknowledging the subaltern and of protecting the environment. The power of Ghosh’s fiction is to immerse the reader in this complex world where conflicting systems of knowledge and ecological practices cohabit, encounter each other, mingle with each other.

The novel consists of two main plot lines: (1) the story of Nirmal, Kusum and Fokir in the 1970s, which revolves around the violent eviction (or massacre) of the Morichjhāpi settlement during which Nirmal writes his journal; and (2) the story of Kanai, Piya and Fokir in the 2000s, which tells of Piya’s scientific survey with Fokir and of Kanai’s reading of Nirmal’s notebook. The text alternates between the past and the present, between the voices of Nirmal, Kanai and Piya, and between their experiencing of the ecology and society of the Sundarbans.

In the novel, features and processes of the described ecosystem – confluence, tide and mangrove – serve as topics that underlie the emergence of an ecosystemic storyworld. The feedback loop between the represented world and the representation of the world brings about a metafictional dynamic that engages the reader in envisioning the narrative as both an embodied reduction of the ecosystem it describes and as a process whereby the reader weaves together the various threads that compose the novel.

The first section of this chapter begins with a close reading of Nirmal’s mytho- and ecopoetic account of the Sundarbans at the beginning of the text. By depicting the region at the basis of the storyworld as a place where transformation and boundary-blurring affect
ontology and epistemology, the text unsettles the traditional separation of self and place, which, I argue, invites the reader to rethink this relationship. I then explain how this relationship is developed by means of what I call an “Aesthetics of the Tide” whereby the ecological, linguistic and cultural diversity of the region functions as a topic that connects environment, language and culture. In the third and fourth sections, I first identify and describe the systems of ecological knowledge that inform the protagonists’ interaction with the environment, and I show how the intertwining of the protagonists’ lines of interaction in the Sundarbans is not only a transformative process akin to the confluence of rivers of silt and tidal sea, but how it is also a source of emergence of the storyworld. In order to preserve the dynamism of the text, it is crucial to bear in mind that the storyworld of THT emerges from both the ecopoetic account of the Sundarbans established as a mythic Indian episteme, and from the lines of interaction of the fictional organisms; the storyworld indeed springs from the interplay of these two processes as they enter into resonance in reading.

4.2 Translating Ecopoiesis: Sundarbans, Tide Country and Rilke

Like ADOS, the first chapter of THT produces a literary space for rethinking the relationship between self and place. The narrative opens in a “south Kolkata commuter station” (Ghosh, 2005, 3) with the perspective of Kanai Dutt, a translator who characterizes himself as an “outsider” (4) just like Piya Roy, the woman he has just “spotted” (3) as a “foreigner [because] it was stamped in her posture, in the way she stood” (3). After this first scene where the two protagonists encounter each other, Kanai steps up into a train to Canning, and begins reading his uncle’s journal. By depicting Kanai’s gestures, the text draws attention to the embodied aspects inherent in the process of reading: “He reached into the outer flap of his suitcase and pulled out a few sheets of paper covered in closely written Bengali script. He smoothed the pages over his knees and began to read” (emphasis added; 6). Strikingly, the Bengali script that Kanai reads will always come out in English in the novel, thereby signaling that there is a continuous process of translation at play when narration is focalized through the character of Kanai. Therefore, more than an inscribed reader, Kanai
really functions as an inscribed translator, as one who carries the reader across the boundaries of work and world and into Nirmal’s Sundarbans.

The content of Nirmal’s notebook, especially its beginning, is the basis of a “metaphoric substitution” (A. Gibson 15) that renders possible the emergence of the storyworld as a dynamic ecosystem based on tidal movement and on the confluence of rivers. Nirmal’s journal also functions as an embodied interactional episteme that will affect the inscribed readers in ways that are unforeseen at the beginning of the narrative, but that become manifest in the course of it. The journal begins with a mythopoetic account of the river Ganges that defamiliarizes the sense of what is “place”:

“In our legends it is said that the goddess Ganga’s descent from the heavens would have split the earth had Lord Shiva not tamed her torrent by tying it into his ash-smeared locks. To hear this story is to see the river in a certain way: as a heavenly braid, for instance, an immense rope of water, unfurling through a wide and thirsty plain. That there is a further twist to the tale becomes apparent only in the final stages of the river’s journey – and this part of the story always comes as a surprise, because it is never told and thus never imagined. It is this: there is a point at which the braid comes undone; where Lord Shiva’s matted hair is washed apart into a vast, knotted tangle. Once past that point the river throws off its bindings and separates into hundreds, maybe thousands, of tangled strands. (6)

In this passage, the river Ganges flows forth as the coming together of two divinities, whose embodied interplay underlies the flow of the river. It is to be noted that the latter is not yet represented as an ecological phenomenon, but rather as a poetic process whereby Ganga’s torrents and Shiva’s hair are woven into a watery texture that comes undone in the delta of the Sundarbans, where the subsequent story is to take place. In the journal, the relationship between narrative, environment and divinity is dramatized with the phrase, “To hear this story is to see the river in a certain way: as a heavenly braid” (emphasis added). This phrase produces a confusion of the senses: to “hear” becomes “to see,” and then becomes haptic (a “braid” that can be touched, which is also reminiscent of the “tying” of Ganga by Shiva). The passage also produces a confusion of ontologies: “story” becomes “river,” which then becomes “braid” – here in the sense of a body part. The passage therefore has a

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98 This is not unlike in ADOS, where the rhetorical prowess of the implied storymaker and of the inscribed storymaker Keskarrah (and his story about weaving snowshoes) enables the reader to weave themselves into the mesh of the Dene lands.
metanarrative quality to it that suggest that the Sundarbans will become the locus where the texture of the narrative is made manifest to the reader, and where the threads of the storyworld are to be made sense of. Indeed, when the threads of the story come undone, they can then be woven together, and Nirmal’s journal, we realize later, functions as a loom for weaving a dynamic storyworld.

After defamiliarizing the Sundarbans through mythopoiesis, the journal gradually includes elements of the ecological discourse. In what becomes an ecopoetic account of the Sundarbans, Nirmal proceeds to explain the geography of the delta, which he characterizes as an “immense archipelago of islands … stretching for almost three hundred kilometres, from the Hooghly River in West Bengal to the shores of the Meghna in Bangladesh” (6). He explains that these islands are “the trailing threads of India’s fabric, the ragged fringe of her sari, the āchol that follows her, half-wetted by the sea” (6). The metaphors of island-as-thread and archipelago-as-fabric complete the metaphor of the river-as-strands-of-hair seen above, and they connect water and earth, river and island, place and myth, as if they were all coming into being from the same matrix. Instead of separating place and ecological process into different elements, the metaphor of “text/textile” and the text itself provide a unifying image from which Nirmal can depict the ecosystem of the Sundarbans.99

The intimacy between water and earth is touched upon explicitly by Nirmal as he evokes the boundary-blurring and transforming processes inherent in a deltaic region, which is characterized as an “always mutating” terrain whose boundaries are “unpredictable” (7). The blurring of boundaries and the unpredictability of the region are established as founding principles of the geography, ecology, and mythology of the Sundarbans, and by extension of the storyworld of THT. This confusion of ontologies also underlies the sociocultural system, as is suggested by Nirmal’s use of the words “restitution,” “return,” “dominion” and “gift” to qualify rivers and islands, which transform into a social phenomenon the continuous negotiation between ecological processes and entities.

99 It is to be noted that the mangrove forest would here function as a permeable skin that permits this unification of water and earth.
Nirmal qualifies the unique ecology of the Sundarbans with the Bengali word *mohona* that describes the phenomenon of confluence and by doing so avoids imposing a postcolonial narrative that could become universalist. In his interview with Kumar, Ghosh insists on the fact that places have “distinct realities and to deny them that reality is also a deeply troubling thing” (Kumar and Ghosh 105). The use of the word “mohona” on page 7 to describe the confluence of rivers in the delta that flows in the Sea of Bengal becomes a reminder of the specificity of place, and the word “mohona” grounds Nirmal’s mythical account of the storyworld in the locale; the phrase “language of the place” (7) reinforces this grounding. Nirmal makes the mohona – the meeting points of river channels – the nexus where immersion in the sensuous world of the Sundarbans is possible. In its description of the phenomenon of the mohona, the text uses the phrases “far edges of the landscape” and “distant rumour of land” (7) to depict the limits of respectively water and earth, which produces a synesthetic effect thatmingles visual and aural qualities and carries the reader to the center of a surrounding waterscape bordered by mangroves. The forest is also said to be “echoing back from the horizon” (7), which complicates this panoramic effect by imbuing the panorama of the mohona with aurality, thereby making it an *environment* of which the embodied consciousness of the reader has become the organism. This combination of sight and hearing, of horizon and echo, *performs* the very concept of “mohona” and illustrates its seductive and beguiling attributes, notably its ability to blur the boundaries between phenomena. Besides, by again using the imagery of textile to characterize the meaning of the term “mohona” – it is “wrapped” in “layers” of meaning (7) – Nirmal’s voice itself echoes the previous analogies between environment, text, and story. In this sense, if the ecological mohona is equivocal – it is a meeting of different rivers – the semantic mohona is polysemous too – it is a meeting of different layers of meaning that ultimately account for its polymorphic appearance.

Slowly, as Nirmal disentangles the ecosystem of the Sundarbans even more, he also unveils its complexity. The polymorphism of the Sundarbans is produced by the blurring of elements (earth and water) and geographic entities (island and river); this blurring seems to propagate to all ecological phenomena in the delta, especially to the intermingling of river
and sea. Indeed Nirmal explains that there “are no borders here to divide fresh water from salt, river from sea” (7). The always-mutating borders of the fresh water-saltwater tidal system, Nirmal says, are responsible for the always-mutating aspect of the islands. Indeed the meeting of river and sea brings about currents that “reshape the islands almost daily” (7) and produces them anew by concealing, displaying, creating or destroying parts of it.

The result of this constant reproduction of the environment is a peculiar forest system, the mangrove, hostile to human beings, impossible to conquer (8). Nirmal’s description of the mangrove, its toughness and impassable density, its stillness and fetidity, but more particularly its “hostility,” “cunning” and “resourcefulness” and “determination to destroy or expel [human beings]” (8) imbues the terrain with agency. Paradoxically, this ability to act is carried out by the animals, as “[e]very year, dozens of people perish in the embrace of that dense foliage, killed by tigers, snakes and crocodiles” (7-8). Animals here almost function as a metonym for the mangrove. Finally, the description of the mangrove as a “universe unto itself” that “spread[s]” (7) from island to island also contributes to developing the sense of the Sundarbans as a united matrix, as a coherent fabric made up of various ecological threads. This phrase also hints that the mangrove is also a form of textual phenomenon that resists interpretation due to the density of its foliage.

By establishing with so much care a set of analogies that tangle up notions of text and ecosystem, Nirmal sets the foundations of a mytho-ecopoetic conception of the Sundarbans-as-mesh that will influence Kanai later in the narrative. The text’s insistence on the poetic quality of this simultaneously confluent, tidal and mangrove ecology reaches its climax in the last section of Kanai’s first reading-translating session, when Nirmal combines etymology, history and poetry to characterize the “Tide Country”:

‘There is no prettiness here to invite the stranger in: yet, to the world at large this archipelago is known as “the Sundarban,” which means, “the beautiful forest.” There are some who believe the word to be derived from the name of a common species of mangrove – the sundari tree, Heriteria minor. But the word’s origin is no easier to account for than is its present prevalence, for in the record

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100 This is paradoxical given the fact that the inscribed reader-translator of Nirmal is actually going to the Sundarbans at the moment of reading.
101 The “tigers, snakes and crocodiles” function as metonyms for the island, which is in keeping with the story of Bon Bibi in which the Irrawaddy are messengers of the forest goddess.
books of the Mughal emperors this region is named not in reference to a tree but to a tide – *bhati*. And to the inhabitants of the islands this land is known as *bhatir desh* – the tide country – except that *bhati* is not just the “tide” but one tide in particular, the ebb-tide, the *bhata*. This is a land half-submerged at high tide: it is only in *falling* that the water gives birth to the forest. To look upon this strange parturition, midwived by the moon, is to know why the name “tide country” is not just right but necessary. For as with Rilke’s catkins hanging from the hazel and the spring rain upon the dark earth, when we behold the lowering tide

’en, who have always thought of joy
as rising ... feel the emotion
that almost amazes us
when a happy thing falls.’ (8)\(^{102}\)

In this passage, Nirmal provides two different appellations for the same geographic location: the “world at large” calls it “the Sundarban,” or “beautiful forest,” and thus sets the mangrove as the main feature of the place, and a positive and aesthetic feature at that; by contrast, the “inhabitants of the islands” call it “*bhatir desh,*” or “tide country,” and thus they stress the oscillating pattern that gives rise to daily environmental terrain alterations. Nirmal clearly favors the name “tide country”: he says it is “right [and] necessary.” Besides, he exhibits sarcasm towards the characterization of the forest by the “world at large” as “beautiful.” This is made clear in light of his vivid description of the mangrove above as “fetid” (7) and, in this passage, as possessing no “prettiness.” Nirmal here hints at a disconnection between how the Sundarbans are perceived by foreigners, and how the Tide Country is perceived by local inhabitants. He opens up a postcolonial perspective and shows that a position as outsider or insider affects one’s perception of the environment. However, Nirmal’s narrative, like the novel itself, is an attempt to turn the outsider’s perspective (which was initially Nirmal’s own) to an insider’s.

Bringing in the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke is used in a paradoxical way to undermine the appellation “Beautiful Forest” by foreigners, but it makes overt Nirmal’s attempt at re-producing a sense of place in his reader’s mind by engaging poetry as a way of translating the world. The use of Rilke’s poems operates as a kind of clue to the

\(^{102}\) This stanza is taken from the last stanza of Rilke’s Tenth Elegy. In German, it reads: “Und wir, die an *steigendes Glück* denken, empfanden die Rührung./ die uns beinah bestürzt./ wenn ein Glückliches fällt” (1977, 76)
metafictional dimension of Nirmal's journal, in so far as the reader has access to the journal in English in the discourse of the novel, but that in the storyworld it is written in Bengali. There is therefore a treble movement of translation whereby Rilke’s “Tenth Duino Elegy” is translated first from German to Bengali, then from Bengali to English, and all the while is used to translate Nirmal’s conception of the natural world. This ecolinguistic oscillation between a European text and a South Asian textile-like environment enacts the oscillation of the tidal ecology of the region and brings even more depth to the content of Rilke’s stanza. In a similar fashion to the ebb-tide that “gives birth to the forest,” Nirmal uses Rilke to engender an epistemic shift that will give birth to a new conception of the organism-environment process. Indeed, like Rilke in the penultimate stanza of his final elegy, who feels amazement at “catkins hanging from the hazel” and “spring rain upon the dark earth,” Nirmal suggests that the reader of his notebook should feel the same emotion when looking at the Tide Country’s defining phenomenon of the ebb-tide: amazement. Nirmal implies that the beauty of the Sundarbans arises not from the forest itself, but from the birth and rebirth, from the production and reproduction of the forest that is laid bare during the lowering tide.

It is the emergence of the archipelago, the uncovering of the matrix of islands, the discovery of the blurred boundaries between water and earth that gives its aesthetic and emotional power to the Tide Country. Ideally, by seeing the tidal ecosystem through a poetic veil that highlights its dynamism, one should then be able to see oneself with new eyes and to discover the feeling of elation that accompanies the realization that consciousness, text, and environment are intimately intertwined. Nirmal implies that reading the environment can provide the same sort of self-rediscovery as the daily reshaping of the ecosystem of the Tide Country. Rilke’s poem enables Nirmal to make manifest the entanglement of consciousness and environment, and to give its final touch to his literary undertaking and to his conception of the reading organism as translator of ecopoetic worlds.

By beginning the novel with Kanai reading-translating Nirmal’s journal and his poetic rendering of the mythoecological episteme of the Sundarbans/Tide Country, Ghosh sets the literary mode of his novel, which will be about environmental translations. Etymologically, “translation” carries a spatial meaning – it is the past participle of Latin *transferre*, and
means “carried across.” In *THT*, this spatial component of translation is enacted by the trajectories of life of the foreigners, who are literally carried across the Sundarbans on fishing boats. In these spatial translations, the foreigners Piya and Kanai, and to a certain extent Nirmal, experience the Sundarbans from within and learn to conceive of it as the Tide Country. Through these spatial translations, these interactional patterns, the reader is made to weave anew the Tide Country. Kanai, Piya and Nirmal are not only translated spatially into the Sundarbans; they are also carried across its cultures, are made to experience the transculturation inherent in the Tide Country, and thus they participate in the very production of this syncretic world. By dramatizing and chronotoping translation to such an extent, Ghosh draws our attention to the inevitable cultural and spatial negotiations arising from approaching and entering an unfamiliar place. Reading *THT* comes down to translating an ecological system by re-creating it in the experience of its organisms.

4.3 The Tide Country’s Ecological, Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

*THT* is riddled with ecological accounts of the diversity of the Sundarbans that enable the reader to bring to consciousness aspects of the storyworld that fictional organisms of the story cannot experience directly. These accounts, by explaining how the environmental diversity of the Sundarbans comes into being and how this milieu provides for a stunning biodiversity in the region, function as elements of the interactional episteme of the protagonists. Indeed, the text explains in detail how “Piya remembered a study” (125)\(^\text{103}\) that explains how the remarkable composition of the water resulting from the interpenetration and uneven intermingling of river and sea creates a highly heterogeneous ecological system by re-creating it in the experience of its organisms.

\(^\text{103}\) The study makes a comparison between the biological diversity of the Sundarbans and that of Europe (125). It is part of Ghosh’s strategy to demonstrate to an outsider the ecological and cultural richness of the Sundarbans, which sustains a more diverse aquatic life than the whole of Europe. The configuration of water currents is not only the basis of the ecology of the Tide Country, it also serves to represent its syncretic culture. By comparing the ecology of the Sundarbans to that of Europe, Ghosh paves the way for a comparison between the two cultural systems and of the Tide Country. Indeed, if Europe is made up of several ecosystems, it is also a heterogeneous blend of many different cultures. Therefore, if the Tide Country is richer than Europe in terms of ecology, it is also in terms of cultural diversity. It is to be noted that the richness of the Sundarbans is visible in the confluence of water, but also in the myriads of islands that compose the delta. These islands form a unity, an archipelago that gives coherence to the world of the story, just like the channels of the delta do.
ecosystem featuring a “proliferation of environments” that favors a “dazzling” diversity of life forms. The use of scientific terms and phrases such as “species,” “ecological niches,” “variations of salinity and turbidity,” “micro-environments,” “biodome,” “endemic fauna and flora” in this free indirect speech makes overt how science informs Piya’s perception of the Sundarbans as an ecosystem. By stating Piya’s reaction to the study – the awe she feels at the “universe of possibilities” that her knowledge of the ecology of the Tide Country offers her – the text indicates the extent to which Piya’s interactional episteme will fashion her interaction with the environment. Piya begins envisioning what she has to do, how she has to do it; she is planning ahead how her life will unfold. As the text says in indirect speech, she “had perhaps fifteen to twenty years of active field research ahead of her; she sensed that this project would consume all those years and more: it was the work of a lifetime” (126).

In the novel, the confluent, deltaic and tidal ecosystem acts as a matrix for transculturation. The text creates what I have called an Aesthetics of the Tide (Barras, 2014), which is based on an ontological connection between the eco- and cultural systems of the Sundarbans (and as I will show later, on the narrative system as well): when the rivers of silt meet the tide of the Sea of Bengal, it causes a proliferation of life; in a similar fashion, when the foreign cultures meet the culture of the tide, it causes a proliferation of cultural life, here envisioned as transculturation and made manifest on the islands of the archipelago. In this ontological connection, the rivers of silt stand for the foreign cultures, while the tidal current stands for the local culture. Ghosh sets up this Aesthetics of the Tide by likening the environmental phenomenon of confluent waters to the social phenomenon of confluent cultures. To do so, he uses Nirmal’s background as environmental historian:

> the mudbanks of the tide country are shaped not only by rivers of silt, but also by rivers of language: Bengali, English, Arabic, Hindi, Arakanese and who knows what else? Flowing into one another they create a proliferation of small worlds that hang suspended in the flow. (247)

In this passage, Nirmal’s literary voice creates a correspondence between language and cultures. This correspondence is a form of metonymy, and not simply a metaphor. Indeed, it is not only the similarity between languages and rivers that enables Nirmal to connect them through a figure of thought; rather it is their contiguity and entanglement in the Tide
Country that constitutes the main line of contact. Here, rivers are therefore metonyms for cultures, and vice versa. The presence in the region of such a variety of languages reflects the cultural diversity of the Sundarbans, and its contested history. The metonymic connection is reinforced by the fact that languages and rivers have a common characteristic: they both shape the environment. The analogy between cultures and rivers is crystallized by the use of the same phrase to denote their effects: as the meeting of cultures brings about “a proliferation of small worlds” (emphasis added; 247), the meeting of rivers brings about a “proliferation of aquatic life” and “a proliferation of environments” (emphasis added; 125). Life, environment and culture are connected by the same word, “proliferation.”

The latter word comes from Latin *proles*, which means “offspring.” Life, culture and environment can thus be seen as the offspring of the process of confluence. Ecological and cultural phenomena have in common their creative and generative power, which is echoed in Nirmal’s own ecopoetic evocation. The word “proliferation” entails that transculturation, like confluence, effectively shapes worlds. In the same vein, the form that Nirmal’s voice takes also makes clear that the telling of this ontological connection participates in the formation of the Tide Country; Nirmal’s voice contributes to this process of ecopoiesis, of world-formation.

Nirmal’s environmental history of the Sundarbans contains many poetic and literary overtones. This literariness draws attention to the constructedness of any representation of place, but most of all it exemplifies how literary constructions can provide holistic accounts of a region (not unlike *A Map of Glass*, as seen above). By grounding the process of transculturation in the process of confluence through Nirmal, Ghosh shows how writers of fiction who use environmental history and ecology can illuminate their representation of a place.

The ontological connection between ecosystem and cultural system allows to conceive of transculturation in original ways. For instance, when cultures meet, they do not simply merge; like rivers, cultures flow into one another, offering a space where life, diversity and creativity thrive. The confluence of cultures does not mean the dominance of one over another or a melting together, but instead myriads of “small worlds [that] hang suspended
in the flow” (247). The most important element that this ontological connection reveals is that transculturation is a spatiotemporal process that cannot be taken out and analyzed independently from the ecosystem in which it takes place. The river-culture correspondance implies that cultures are part of the material and physical world because they shape both environment and organism; they are not on another ontological level, a level of abstraction, but rather take part in the concrete construction of the world. Cultures have a tangible transformative power. In order to study a culture, one must study it in its environment, ranging from the scales of micro to macro, and including temporality and spatiality.

Ghosh the anthropologist turned novelist is not satisfied with a purely theoretical account of transculturation and ecological confluence; he substantiates this ontological connection in the smallest details of the local culture. In keeping with the thinking of the Subaltern school of Indian historians from Guha to Chakrabarty, it is the poorest inhabitants of the Sundarbans who provide the best example of the creative process of transculturation during the many waves of migration. In the novel, these waves of migration provoke a mixing of cultures that is made manifest in a syncretic story about the first settlers: the Story of Bon Bibi (103).

In the text, Kanai functions as the audience to that story. During his youth when he is “rusticated,” that is, “sent [to Lusibari] to suffer the company of rustics,” because he thought he “knew more about most things than [his] teachers did” (15), Kanai “learn[s] that a troupe of traveling actors [is] soon to come to Lusibari to stage performances of The Glory of Bon Bibi” (101). Bon Bibi is the Goddess of Mercy who is believed to have rendered half of the mangrove area of the Sundarbans habitable. She is herself a migrant who travelled from Arabia to the mangrove forests of Bengal, and her story is told in a mishmash of Arabic, Bengai and other languages, which is also deeply religiously syncretic, yet morally clear. The story recounts how she and her brother help the poor and the virtuous and how they punish the greedy. The story provides hope, but it also functions as a set of rules for interacting with the environment of the Tide Country. It does so by establishing a series of moral correspondences between the characters of the story of Bon Bibi and the mangrove forests.
For instance, tigers are considered embodiments of the demon king Dokkhin Rai (104-105); Irrawaddy dolphins are the benevolent messengers of Bon Bibi (234); the virtuous population of the Sundarbans may be analogized to Dukhey the sorrowful boy given to Dokkhin Rai by captain Dhona to devour (103-104); finally, the avaricious Dhona is associated with the greedy foreigners who exploit the local inhabitants (103).

The story of Bon Bibi blurs the borders between fiction and reality: not through any form of sophisticated mimesis, even of the kind offered by the storytaker in A Discovery of Strangers, but rather through emotional impact. If initially Kanai’s expectations of the performance reveal his urban arrogance and elitism – he expects to be “bored by this rustic entertainment” (105) – it is also an indication that a story can change a person’s mindset. Indeed the story has a great immersive power: Kanai is “utterly absorbed” and feels real “terror” (105). Kanai’s strong emotional reaction, qualified as “real and immediate,” demonstrates that verisimilitude is not necessary to produce an aesthetic effect – “there was nothing convincing about the tiger” (105). Rather, the passage insists on the resonance between audience and performance, which can be extended to the resonance between reader and text. Stories have an affective power, but it may take time for them to show their reality effect. Despite his appreciation of the story, Kanai does not seem to be able to empathize with the inhabitants of the Sundarbans yet. It will take another episode to do so, when Kanai encounters a tiger for real, this time.

In THT, transculturation is an environmental phenomenon and thus it pertains to the ecosystem; for these reasons it cannot be conceived as a disembodied process involving mental abstractions. On the contrary, the novel shows the way the culture of the Tide Country is continuously being fashioned by its encounter with foreigners. Because of its porosity, the local culture is conceived as a “(trans)culture.”104 I will focus on two examples of the entanglement of culture and place in the novel: the utopian society of Sir Daniel Hamilton and Nilima’s Trust.

104 The prefix “trans” here not only refers to the mixing of cultural streams, but also to the blurring of the material and cultural levels.
Nirmal tells Kanai the story of Sir Daniel Hamilton, a Scottish entrepreneur who emigrated to the Sundarbans in 1903. He bought around ten thousand acres of jungle that he intended to transform into arable land, erase “social distinctions and differences,” and have the “country run by co-operatives” (52-53). In effect, Hamilton’s goal was to create a new society, whose members’ castes and origins would not matter, indeed a utopian-agrarian example of transcultural society. Hamilton’s undertaking also included “arrangements for electricity” (52), “telephone lines” (53), “a Central Bank [and] even a … currency” (53). Hamilton’s dream would not succeed, mainly due to the fact that the land could not be “wholly leached of its salt” (79). The embankments the Scotsman had envisaged failed to prevent regular flooding. Despite its failure, however, Hamilton’s dream will have an important impact on the social environment of the Sundarbans, for it is responsible for two waves of migration.

The first wave of migration triggered by Sir Daniel involved the people who had believed in the Scottish utopian and gone to the Sundarbans to become free farmers. The land being infertile due to salt and regular flooding, the migrants soon became hunters and fishermen, vulnerable to crocodiles, sharks, snakes and tigers. With most men being killed while foraging in the jungle, the Tide Country became a land of widows. It is this devastated community that Kanai’s uncle and aunt wanted to help when they moved to the Sundarbans from Calcutta in 1950 (80).

The second wave of migration for which Hamilton’s dream is responsible is that of the refugees of Morichjhâpi Island. Seven decades after Hamilton’s arrival in the Sundarbans, the refugees exceed the Scotsman’s dream and manage to build an egalitarian community. Tragically, they are crushed by the authorities because they have invaded government property. The settlement of Morichjhâpi is seen through Nirmal’s eyes:

I stepped away from Kusum’s dwelling and saw others nearby. I walked a little farther and saw still more dwellings, scattered over cleared fields. These were huts, shacks and shanties built with the usual materials of the tide country – mud, thatch and bamboo – yet a pattern was evident there: these dwellings had not been laid at random … Paths had been laid; the bâdh – the guarantor of island life – had been augmented; little plots of land had been enclosed with fences; fishing nets had been hung up to dry… [B]etween what was happening at Morichjhâpi and what Hamilton had done there was one aspect of difference:
this was not one man's vision. This dream had been dreamt by the very people who were trying to make it real. (171)

This passage reveals the transcultural quality of the settlement of Morichjhāpi, for it describes the space of the latter as the “usual materials of the tide country” combined with Hamilton's idea, augmented by the vision of “the very people … trying to make it real.” The result is a coherent space where Hamilton’s utopia is translated into reality. The migrants of the island of Morichjhāpi have adapted Hamilton’s idea to their situation, rendering the settlement a locus of transculturation.

Nilima Bose is responsible for another important cultural transformation of the Sundarbans. Upon her arrival there in 1950, Nilima witnesses the misery and pain encountered by the widows of the poorest population. To help them, she creates a Women’s Union, which later becomes a Trust. At the end of the 1970s, her trust gives Nilima the opportunity to build a hospital, workshops, offices and a Guest House on the fictional island of Lusibari (81-82). Her undertaking has a profound influence on the local cultural system, for she helps women get an education that will allow them to take care of their families and imagine routes of escape from the poverty of the Sundarbans. The social installations of the Trust change the lives of the inhabitants economically by creating a “service industry” around them (132-133).

Thanks to the outsiders Hamilton and Nilima, the islands of Lusibari and Morichjhāpi become loci where various cultures mix with each other. Such places become transcultural in essence: cultural mohonas, niches of transculturation where a “dazzling variety of [cultural] life forms” can be sustained (125). Here cultures, upon their merging, however briefly, enrich one another and cause environmental transformations. Hamilton’s dream of equality and freedom triggered the coming of migrants who established semi-permanent islands by building embankments; Nilima's compassion with the widows of the Tide Country caused the island of Lusibari to bloom with new social expectations and hope.

In this section I have shown how the language of ecology is used metaphorically to describe the diversity and dynamism of the cultural mohona that is the Tide Country. But the representation of place discussed in this section is more conceptual than it is it
experiential. Indeed, if the ecopoetics of the novel connects the cultures, languages, and landscapes of the Tide Country, *THT* does more and offers readers an experiential immersion into the storyworld. The very form of the narrative mirrors the tidal, deltaic and confluent ecosystem, for through the meeting of interactional patterns and epistemes the text performs a confluence of lines of life. This narratological confluence is the third aspect of the Aesthetics of the Tide.

### 4.4 The Protagonists’ Interactional Epistemes

Each of the main protagonists of *THT* occupies a specific function in the structure of the ecopoetic metafiction. Piya has a straightforward role: she is a classic focalizing character. Through her perception of the Sundarbans, carried out through the scientific method of observation, she provides the reader with a fresh eye on the region and enables them to experience its unfamiliar nature. Kanai functions as an inscribed translator and enables the other characters to communicate with each other; he acts as a mediator between different interactional epistemes. Furthermore, Kanai also translates Nirmal’s journal and Fokir’s songs. By doing so, not only does he make the covert meaning of intradiegetic stories overt to the reader, but he also enables the intradiegetic storyworlds produced by Nirmal and Fokir to flood the main storyworld. In his process of translation, Kanai enriches the stories and storyworlds with his own input, showing that translation is never mere conversion: it is poetic transformation. Kanai serves to reveal the sociocultural and linguistic mediation at play in all environmental hermeneutic undertakings.

As for Nirmal, the third foreigner, he occupies the function of an inscribed writer. *In his writing* he makes the link between the past and the present, and *in writing* he makes the link between the storyworld and the depicted ecosystem. Nirmal offers his testimony on the traumatic events of Morichjhâpi as a legacy to Kanai (and by extension to Piya and to the reader). Nirmal’s numerous references to the poet Rilke and to Hindu mythology shed light on the intertextuality inherent in writing and on the poetic qualities of ecological processes and systems. By doing so, Nirmal the inscribed writer enables the reader to make more
explicit the connection between depicted ecosystem and constructed storyworld. Finally, Fokir occupies the function of messenger of the subaltern and syncretic metaphysics of the region, which is embodied in the intradiegetic storyworld of Bon Bibi. He makes Piya’s and Kanai’s interactional patterns in the Sundarbans physically possible by carrying them across the delta, and more importantly, he enables the confluence of interactional epistemes, which is the basis of the novel’s interactional chronotope, by revealing to the other characters the interrelatedness of the syncretic story and storyworld of Bon Bibi and the local knowledge and practice of the tidal, deltaic and mangrove ecosystem of the Sundarbans.

**Piya Roy**

Piya is a cetologist who goes to the Sundarbans to study the endangered Irrawaddy dolphins and to do a survey of their presence in the delta of the Ganges. Of the foreigners, she is the only one who comes to the Sundarbans to specifically study its ecology. Piya is of Indian descent, although she left India for Seattle when she was only one year old. As a result, she speaks only English and in her first appearance in the novel she is perceived by Kanai as being an exotic foreigner who is out of place.¹⁰⁵ Like Nirmal and Kanai, when she first encounters the Tide Country, Piya is estranged from it. She carries her theoretical scientific knowledge of ecology like her binoculars and her GPS, and this can be problematic when she interacts with the local population.

Although she is a stranger to India and to the Tide Country, Piya’s movements in Kanai’s eyes nevertheless denote “some experience in travel” and “a strength in her limbs that bellie[s] her diminutive size and wispy build” (5). This impression emanating from Piya’s movements is the effect of her occupation as a field ecologist who has already worked in the South China Sea, on the Mekong River (304-305) and “everywhere Irrawaddy dolphins were to be found: Burma, northern Australia, the Philippines, coastal Thailand” (307).

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¹⁰⁵ This scene is rather ironic, for Kanai is also perceived as an “outsider” because he looks urbane, prosperous and affluent (4-5).
At first, her interactions within the Tide Country are linked to her goal of mapping the patterns of migration of the orcaellae, and so she perceives her environment as an object of study. Her interactional pattern is almost entirely dedicated to scientific observation. For instance, when she first spots Fokir, it is through her binoculars. The text depicts how in her “line of vision” (41), the boat appears to her as a “scratch” that becomes a “pinpoint,” a “speck” and a finally a “dot” that “represent[s]” the real world, here a “small canoe-like craft” (41). Through her binoculars, Piya deals with graphic representations, not with material entities. Like Kanai’s initial conception of language as a lens, in the passage above the lens of Piya’s binoculars separates her from her environment, rather than unveiling her embeddedness in it. However, there is a shift in Piya’s pattern of observation: Fokir is no longer a visual representation, but is ultimately described as a body in movement “going through the motions of casting a net, standing upright to make his throw and stooping to pull his catch in” (41). The episode of her first sighting of Fokir prefigures the transformation of Piya’s interactional episteme: by showing Fokir’s embodied practice, the text breaks from the representation of purely visual stimuli. Piya’s first encounter with Fokir and the intrusion of human embodiment on Piya’s observation of the environment is the beginning of an epistemic shift. Slowly, by practice, she will learn to experience the Tide Country, as opposed to merely observing it.

After falling into the water from the patrol boat where she is harrassed by the rangers, Piya is rescued by Fokir onto his small boat. For a time, she settles back to a work routine and “scan[s] the water ahead” (72). The text makes clear that Piya’s use of the binoculars not only transforms her perception of her physical environment by “mellowing its edges,” but also affects her organism by “diminishing her sense of disorientation and unpreparedness” (72). Technology here is described as permitting more control over one’s surroundings and over one’s emotions. For instance, by describing her observation as “metronomic” and “as steady as the beam of a light house” (72), the text imbues Piya’s interactional pattern with a mechanic quality, as though her scientific observation made her more machine than organism. These statements certainly hint at Piya’s skilled practice, but her skills, instead of enmeshing her more deeply within the world around, actually sever her
entanglement with the environment. The technological enhancement of Piya’s interactional pattern of observation is completed by her “hand-held monitor that kept track of her location, through the Global Positioning System [and of] a rangefinder and a depthsounder, which could provide an exact reading of the water’s depth” (73). In this sentence, the term “reading” demands some attention, for Piya’s reading of the world is one that is stripped of affect. Through technology, Piya “numbs” her environment and its capacity to trigger emotional reactions. This form of reading, if it is useful for collecting information, is not necessary geared towards survival in a hostile environment.

After Piya and Fokir have reached Lusibari – the island where Kanai and his aunt Nilima are located – they depart to complete the survey of the dolphins, accompanied by Kanai and Horen. At that moment, Kanai reflects on Piya’s interactional pattern, and compares it to his own. In this episode, Kanai compares Piya’s interaction with the environment to an act of reading (269). The Tide Country is like “a codex … authored by the earth,” and Piya’s “closeness of attention” reveals her effort at translating a “yet-undeciphered manuscript.” Piya’s interactional episteme as perceived by Kanai seems closer to Nirmal, for she studies the world as if it were a language, whereas Kanai studies languages as if they were the world. What Kanai perceives however is that Piya studies the world as if she were a “textual scholar” (269), which is important, for it suggests that Piya is not a protagonist in the world she observes, but rather an external observer to it.

If Piya’s increased control over her perception of the Sundarbans enables her to carry out her scientific undertaking, paradoxically it also separates her from her immediate surroundings, from her direct environment. In some episodes, due to the fact that her attention is focused on a very limited ranges of environmental stimuli, Piya’s interactional pattern of observation disengages her body from other important aspects of the environment. When she decides to measure the depth of the river where she has spotted

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106 These comparisons are reminiscent of Nirmal’s own conception of the environment as a book, as a text. However Kanai’s analogies reveal that he possesses a slightly different understanding of the relationship between the world and language. To Kanai, language “conjugates” the “realities” of the world (269). By studying language, one really studies the structure of the world.

107 It is to be noted that this episode is situated before both Kanai’s and Piya’s metamorphoses, in which their conception of the organism-environment relationship will change dramatically.
dolphins, she lowers the depth-sounder into the water and with it her hand; at the moment Fokir brutally grabs her wrist and barely saves her from a “pair of huge jaws … shooting out of the river, breaking the surface exactly where Piya’s wrist had been a moment before” (174). This episode is representative of Piya’s experience in the Sundarbans: although she can measure aspects of the ecosystem, she is unable to survive in it by herself. As mechanic as her observation routine is, she is not attuned to the Sundarbans, is disconnected from its dangers, just like Kanai is when faced with the signs of the tiger. At that moment of the plot, Piya persists in objectifying the Tide Country, which is treated as an external element to be apprehended with the mind. Both the crocodile and Fokir remind her of the necessity to immerse fully in the world if she is to survive in it.

Piya’s concerns about the ecology of the Sundarbans also alienate her from the concerns of the local population. For the most part of the plot, Piya places more emphasis on the preservation of the “natural environment” than on the well-being of human populations who inhabit this environment. After Piya and Fokir have reached Lusibari – the island where Kanai and his aunt Nilima are located – and after Piya, Kanai, Fokir and Horen go together to complete Piya’s survey of the dolphins, Piya’s mindset regarding the relationship between humans and Nature is dramatized in an episode of the novel that is probably the most discussed by literary scholars; this episode stages the population of a local village killing a tiger that has intruded into a hut (292-295). Trapped by a net, the tiger cannot escape while men attempt to stab it with staves. Witnessing the scene with Kanai, Piya is in shock; she tries to stop the killing, but is prevented by Fokir, who himself was participating in the slaughter. The hut is finally put to flames with the tiger still in it. Soon after, Piya and Kanai enter into a dialogue in which, as Bartosch argues, “Ghosh directly includes an argument from the Deep versus Social Ecology-debate, and it seems that this time, Social Ecology is given the last word” (Bartosch 115). The dialogue indeed reveals the discrepancy between Piya’s ideology and that of the local population; it shows that Piya is closer to Deep Ecology and Kanai more sympathetic toward Social Ecology.

Through Kanai’s translation, Fokir tells Piya that “when a tiger comes into a human settlement, it’s because it wants to die” (295). The fisherman perceives the tiger as a
dangerous threat – Fokir’s father was killed by a tiger (108-109) and the tiger killed in the hunt had itself killed two people (294). Fokir’s attitude contrasts with Piya’s, for the cetologist sees the tiger as an endangered keystone species that ought to be protected at all cost, even perhaps to the detriment of human needs for revenge. What to Fokir and the others is an “everyday life” incident (300) – the protection of one’s village against a predator – Piya describes as a “horror” from “before recorded history” (300). By saying so, Piya somehow demonstrates that she does not understand the actions of the local inhabitants of the Tide Country. The torture of the tiger, Piya implies, is an uncivilized act of horror, whereas what should be done by civilization and science would be to protect the tiger. Kanai has a more balanced argument: he explains that both he and Piya are part of this horror, because most of society willingly or unwillingly ignores the weekly killings, the inhabitants of the Sundarbans being “too poor to matter” (301) for the national or international community. Piya however remains untouched by Kanai’s argument. Her interactional episteme is grounded in the fact that Nature and Earth possess an underlying intention, which is the cause of biological diversity (301). In that conception, each species has a particular function and place in the ecosystem. The species and its habitat are both to be protected, so that the ecological balance and the intention of nature can be preserved. On the contrary, the local inhabitants almost treat the tiger as a “person,” as a murderer who deserves no other treatment than that which it inflicts on others: death.

Piya’s reasoning tends to leave humans out of the ecosystem, despite their being organisms. Therefore this deep ecological attitude towards the world necessarily frames humanity as an interference that goes against Nature. In the case of the Sundarbans, the interference is assumed by Piya to be the subaltern population. In the most part of the novel, Piya considers the Tide ecosystem as an external object to which she does not belong, that she does not alter but that she simply ought to study; this conception permits her to have this deep ecological stance. However, similarly to Kanai, in the course of the novel Piya undergoes a shift in interactional episteme; this shift is brought about by Fokir in the climactic episode of the storm where he sacrifices his life for protecting Piya.
Kanai Dutt
Kanai Dutt is Nirmal’s nephew and the translator of his journal. Kanai is a middle-class Indian entrepreneur, the owner of a translation company in New Delhi. His first encounter with the Sundarbans is the result of the archaic punishment of “rustication”. His first contact with the Sundarbans is thus made reluctantly. The text describes Kanai’s appearance when he is an adult as one that “suggest[s] middle-aged prosperity and metropolitan affluence” (5). Kanai’s knowledge system is urban and cosmopolitan; Kanai studied in Paris and in Tunisia, where he learned French and Arabic (198-199).

Kanai’s second stay in the Sundarbans takes place after he is unexpectedly summoned by his aunt Nilima who has found her husband’s notebook and wants Kanai to have a look at it. First, Kanai is reluctant to leave his urban life. It is only after Nilima’s insistence that he finally agrees to depart for the Tide Country. Through Kanai’s translation of the Sundarbans (including its languages, but also its environment, which through him and his uncle’s writings can be said to function as a language) and of Nirmal’s notebook, Kanai carries the reader across the Sundarbans and enables her to immerse in the Tide Country, and to feel the fear of the local inhabitants when faced with a tiger. Kanai’s function in the ecopoetic metafiction is that of a translator of the storyworld.

Kanai occupies a function of mediator in the novel; through his translation he is the link to Nirmal’s journal, to Fokir’s voice, and through his body he is the link between the reader and the Tide Country. Kanai’s interactional episteme is largely influenced by his linguistic training; as the narrator explains:

In Kanai’s professional life there had been a few instances in which the act of interpretation had given him the momentary sensation of being transported out of his body and into another. In each instance it was as if the instrument of language had metamorphosed – instead of being a barrier, a curtain that divided, it had become a transparent film, a prism that allowed him to look through another set of eyes, to filter the world through a mind other than his own. (327)

Here, language is described as having two sides. Usually it is a “barrier, a curtain that divide[s]” the speaker from the world, from other speakers. However, in some special cases, language can have another function: it becomes another sense that allows Kanai to perceive different aspects of the world through empathy and identification with other beings.
In these cases, language “transports” the interpreter’s consciousness into another body, another mind, another “set of eyes.” In light of Kanai’s function as translator of the storyworld, these statements about the power of language to transport one’s consciousness into another body echo what the reader is doing in reading; these statements are reflexive and point to the power of language to transport the reader into another body and another place and to translate the world as experienced from someone else’s embodied and embedded perspective; language – and more precisely interactional pattern – allows the reader to vicariously experience the described situation (Zwaan). This merging of perspectives, this confluence of consciousnesses in interpretation and translation means that language serves to reveal the “lines” that are invisible to some and visible to others (Ghosh 224). Both Nirmal and Kanai “read” their environment into existence and are aware of it; the text metafictionally translates this reading and allows us as individual reading organisms to experience the fictional organisms’ interaction with the environment.

Before his encounter with the tiger, Kanai’s attitude towards the Tide Country makes him look arrogant, especially when he comments on his superiority over the local inhabitants. After discussing the difficulties for Fokir’s wife Moyna to simultaneously live with Fokir, a mere fisherman, and climb the social ladder, Piya makes a good reading of Kanai’s conception of life (before his transformative encounter with the tiger), in which everyone should want to achieve success and progress, in other words “get on in the world” (220). In this view, those who do not want to improve their social status supposedly lack “drive [and] energy” (220). Success and progress are contingent on a certain type of merit, for if success ought to be actively sought, it is through a liberal education (like Moyna) and not through a practice of the ecosystem that provides experiential knowledge (like Fokir). Kanai’s worldview as defined by Piya’s triad – “egalitarian, liberal, meritocratic” (219) – is more a fantasy than a reality, for Kanai is depicted more as elitist than egalitarian. This “meritocratic” conception of life is suited for urban settings, where education provides a high social rank and facilitates life, but for the people of the Sundarbans, experiential knowledge is at least as important as theoretical knowledge.
Kanai has a cynical attitude towards the inhabitants of the Sundarbans. In a debate with Piya about the slaughter by the local population of a man-eating tiger, Kanai explains Americans and urban Indians are partly responsible of this situation, due to the elites “push to protect the wildlife … without regard for the human costs [of] the poorest of the poor” (301). Despite his awareness of his complicity, and despite his deliberate choice to “hide these costs” (301), Kanai is at that point not ready to change his opinion of the population. He is able to rationally assess the situation, but he cannot yet empathize with the local population.

Kanai’s real attitude towards the poor fringe of the Sundarbans is made overt in an episode where he is dared by Fokir to follow tiger traces leading inland. After falling face forward in the mud, and after having been provoked by Fokir, Kanai’s anger cannot be contained and he insults the fisherman. At that moment, Kanai himself realizes that his personality is built upon “the master’s suspicion of the menial; the pride of the caste; the townsman’s mistrust of the rustic; the city’s antagonism towards the village” (326). This realization shatters Kanai’s own conception of himself as meritocratic and egalitarian, and sheds light on the internal tension of his mindset, notably his deep ingrained perception of Fokir as a subaltern.

**Nirmal Bose**

Nirmal Bose occupies the function of an inscribed writer who narrates the part of the novel dealing with the tragic eviction of the island of Morichjhāpi in 1979. During the eviction, Nirmal writes a journal of the event in a notebook of which he conceives his nephew Kanai as the reader. Nirmal’s voice and interactional episteme is provided through Kanai’s translation of the notebook written in Bangla. Nirmal is foreign to the Sundarbans. Upon entering the Sundarbans in the early 1950s, his ideology is based on a form of Romantic Socialism, as he is represented as a “leftist intellectual and a writer of promise [who is] teaching English literature” (76) and who has “scarcely any knowledge of life outside the city” (78). After his interrogation by the authorities regarding his involvement in the 1948 Socialist International as “a guide and general dogsbody for the Burmese delegation” (77),
he decides to leave Calcutta and finds a teaching job on the Hamilton Estate in the Sundarbans. Although he is at first “horrified at the thought of being associated with an enterprise founded by a leading capitalist” (78), he soon changes his opinion, “shamed … to think that … a foreigner … a rich capitalist – had taken it upon himself to address the issue of rural poverty when they themselves [he and his wife Nilima], despite their radical talk, had scarcely any knowledge of life outside the city” (78).

Nirmal first perceives the ecosystem of the Tide as a novelty that challenges his preconceived ideas and that forces him to redefine his function in society and in the ecosystem. His first account of the region describes it as “a strangeness beyond reckoning” (79), an “other world” (79) where “nothing was familiar [and] everything was new” (79). He says about the conditions of life of the inhabitants that “the destitution of the tide country was such [that] hunger and catastrophe were a way of life” (79). The shock and sensation of powerlessness overwhelms Nirmal: he “read and reread Lenin’s pamphlet without being able to find any definite answers” (80). This first experience of the Sundarbans is defamiliarizing, and it brings about a major shift in Nirmal’s interactional episteme. He realizes that the way of life of city-dwellers is unknown to much of the population of India; he realizes that his system of knowledge needs to be adjusted to the circumstances of the Tide Country.

One way of doing so is to use his literary skills and his acquired knowledge of the environmental history of the Sundarbans; using those, Nirmal begins narrating the story of the Morichjhâpi massacre so that future generations may remember the mistakes and tragedies of the past, more precisely the paradox engendered by the creation of environmental reserves to the detriment of human communities. About the eviction of the refugees, Nirmal says in his journal that his role as a writer is to “make sure at least that what happened here leaves some trace, some hold upon the memory of the world” (69). Nirmal’s attitude towards writing places him as a leader of opinion more than as a field activist. In his mind, he can affect the ecosystem of the Sundarbans only by convincing the elite of the population – here Kanai the inscribed translator/reader, but also by extension the reader – to find out and remember what happened to the refugees of Morichjhâpi. It is
indeed one of the functions of the notebook: it embodies the trace of Nirmal’s experience. Nirmal’s function in the ecosystem is not so much to fashion the environment of the Sundarbans, but rather to better understand the ecology of the region so as to fashion the minds of those who will in turn fashion the Tide Country. Reflexively, Nirmal’s journal embodies a conception of the writer-activist whose motivation is to unveil the complexity of the world, its contradictions and its catastrophes. Instead of proposing solutions to the conflict between the Morichjhãpi refugees and the government’s supposedly environmentalist concerns, Nirmal wishes to record the event so that at least the tragedy can serve future generations. It can be said that Nirmal’s literary journal – and by extension historiographical literature – is put in the service of historical remembrance and future human interaction with the environment in ways that reveal the complexity of a situation wherein environmentalist and postcolonial concerns seem antagonistic.

Nirmal’s system of thought and knowledge regarding the way humans should interact with the environment is based on a Marxist idealization of Hamilton’s agrarian utopia, in which “people wouldn’t exploit each other and everyone would have a share in the land” (52), and in which “people would live together without petty social distinctions and differences [and] men and women could be farmers in the morning, poets in the afternoon and carpenters in the evening” (53). Nirmal admires the ecopoetic polyvalence demanded of humans – both male and female – by Hamilton’s dream; being simultaneously a farmer who works the land, a poet in awe at the land, and a carpenter who builds themselves an oikos out of the land, is in Nirmal’s opinion the paragon of a human being reconnected with the environment.

Nirmal’s interactional episteme is embodied in the notebook that he transmits to Kanai. Analyzing the notebook in terms of its poetic qualities can shed light on Nirmal’s worldview. Nirmal frequently uses Rilke’s *Duino Elegies* as a matrix for describing the human experience of the environment. For instance, when he hears from Kusum her story in which she tells him of the arrival of the refugees on Morichjhãpi island, Nirmal affirms that “it was of them the Poet [Rilke] had spoken” (165) when he wrote that “[e]ach slow turn of the world carries such disinherited ones to whom neither the past nor the future belongs” (165). This
passage of Nirmal’s notebook links the 1971 refugees from East Pakistan (Bangla Desh) to Rilke’s Seventh Elegy written in the first quarter of the twentieth century (Rilke, 1977, 51). This link demonstrates Nirmal’s understanding of the trajectories of life of the Morichjhâpi refugees. They are not master of their destiny; they will not be able to establish the utopian society they dream of, and they can do nothing about their past, and more precisely the civil wars that have ravaged their country. The refugees are left with only the present moment of their lives, and possibly their hope for a better future.

Ultimately, the example above reveals how poetry and personal narratives influence Nirmal’s understanding of the world and how the meaning of a text can overflow its material container. Moreover, it also reaffirms Nirmal’s place in society as a shaper of mentalities. Interpreted reflexively, Nirmal’s use of Rilke’s poetry to depict the world around him and the history of this world reinforces the fact that Nirmal’s journal is a verbal translation of the ecosystem. Nirmal’s experience of the environment of the Sundarbans is thus self-consciously ecopoetic: his perception of the Tide Country is a creation, a self-aware process of poiesis that is itself underlain by other creations: Rilke’s poem and Kusum’s story.108 As was said above, Rilke’s poems that Nirmal possesses are already a translation, a recreation of the poems in another language. The fact that Rilke’s poetry is translated from German to English to Bangla and then used by Nirmal as a frame of reference for creating his verbal account of the Morichjhâpi incidents and of Kusum’s story makes manifest the plasticity, circulation and createdness of interactional epistemes. Therefore, more than a mere description of the complexity of the situation of the refugees, Nirmal’s journal is also an insight into the ways that knowledge of the ecosystem is created, transformed and shared.

Nirmal’s conception of the relationship between organism, environment and language is made overt through Kanai, who interprets his uncle’s attitude towards the Tide Country as a combination of the poetics of Rainer Maria Rilke and historical materialism (282). Kanai’s description of Nirmal’s historical materialism as being the process of collecting facts

108 It is to be noted that Nirmal draws attention to the fact that he is listening to a story (162).
and “str[i]ng[ing] them all together [so they] become stories” (283) enables the reader to rethink Nirmal’s journal, and even to rethink the figure of the writer. In Kanai’s conception of Nirmal, storytelling is about connecting various fields of knowledge together and give them coherence, which is what Amitav Ghosh does in THT (see his interview with Kumar). This redefinition of the writer is accompanied by a reconceptualization of the reader: the text creates an analogy between Nirmal’s “soaking” Rilke’s “idea” on the one hand and “cloth absorb[ing] ink” (282) on the other. This analogy blurs the boundaries between reading and writing. Kanai’s metaphor suggests that by reading Rilke, Nirmal writes himself. Indeed, Kanai’s use of the word “soak” to refer to the process of reading means that in reading information flows across the boundary of outside and inside. This transmission is complicated by the fact that Kanai’s analogy between reading and cloth absorbing ink also blurs the boundaries between organism and environment. If this image suggests that reading is like absorbing water – as mud does – and if one keeps in mind the fact that rivers are said to be a “braid,” a “rope,” a “tangle,” and that the islands are “threads” and “fringes” (6), then reading amounts to enmeshing oneself within the ecosystem of the Tide Country. In the framework of the Aesthetics of the Tide, reading, as a merging of reader and text, thus functions as a way of immersing deeper into place. In this conception, organism and the environment are both readers and writers, absorbing each other’s ink and marking each other’s fabric.

**Fokir Mondol**

In the ecopoetic metafiction, Fokir embodies the interactional episteme of the local inhabitants of the Sundarbans. His transdiegetic quality means that as a character Fokir overcomes the material limits of his body and comes to stand for the storyworld produced by the story of Bon Bibi. Moreover, Fokir plays an important role in the epistemic transformations of Piya, Kanai and Nirmal. In their meeting with Fokir or with his mother Kusum, the interactional episteme of the local population flows into the interactional episteme of the foreign protagonists. While Piya was almost a metafictional critique of the classic notion of the focalizer, Fokir (as the true subaltern) never focalizes the narrative on
his own behalf. He is nevertheless a very expressive embodiment of the local interactional episteme: his expressivity is what brings about Nirmal’s reflection on the syncretism of Bon Bibi’s story, Kanai’s life-changing encounter with the tiger, and Piya’s shift in environmental attitude after his sacrifice. As such, Fokir, “who lives in idealized harmony with the rhythms of the tide country” (Kaur 135), is also the “only person who seems to exist in dialogic relation with all [the] different sensibilities [of the other characters] at once” (135). Better than anyone else in the novel, Fokir shows that an organism is never a discrete individual disembedded from the world and from other people. Like the fictional outsiders to the Sundarbans, the reader is taken through this socioecosystem by Fokir and is shown its beauties and dangers.

Fokir does not speak English, and his voice and thoughts are only rarely reported to the reader. It is through the reported consciousness of the three foreigners – Nirmal, Kanai and Piya – that the reader gets access to Fokir’s system of knowledge. In a sense, Fokir is the figure of the subaltern par excellence. However, as descriptions of his interactional pattern are frequent, what he cannot express verbally Fokir expresses bodily, and he is therefore not devoid of agency and subjectivity.109 Indeed, the fisherman’s movements and actions are reported and offer important clues as to his experiencing of the Sundarbans.110 As the narrative progresses, Fokir’s interactional pattern enables the reader to reconstruct his interactional episteme, which is based both on an intimate knowledge of the Sundarbans that he has developed by interacting within it since his childhood, and on the story of Bon Bibi, which serves as a local frame of reference for reading the world.

The reader is first introduced to Fokir through Piya’s focalization. Fokir is a skilled practitioner of the ecosystem of the Sundarbans, and Piya reflects on this when she is carried across the channels of the delta. The first time Piya perceives Fokir is through

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109 As the editors of Bodies and Voices explain rather vehemently when faced with simplistic readings of Spivak, “[o]f course [the subaltern] can speak, and have spoken countless times. The problem is whether anybody listens!” (Clunies Ross et al. xviii).

110 In this context, Chakrabarty’s comment that the historian of subaltern studies should recuperate the experience of subaltern people through sources other than documents, archives or texts (Chakrabarty 22) is also valid for the reader who should not concern themselves only with Fokir’s voice, but also with his other means of expression.
binoculars; she first sees him as a “scratch,” a “pinpoint,” a “speck,” a “dot” (41), and then as an embodied practitioner who is “going through the motions” (41) involved in the activity of fishing. Through Piya’s sight augmented with the binoculars, the narration explains that “it seemed to her that he had the grizzled look of an experienced hand … His frame was skeletal, almost wasted, in the way of a man who’d grown old on the water, slowly yielding his flesh to the wind and the sun” (42-43). If Piya is not wrong when she detects a first-hand experiential knowledge of the river, she is however mistaken about Fokir’s age; when she sees him from closer, she realizes he is much younger than she first thought. The text describes Fokir’s body in detail, his “very lean” frame, his “stringy limbs … almost fleshless in their muscularity”, his “face … narrow and angular” (46). The text also mentions the presence of “salt crystals” (46) on Fokir’s beard, which is worthy of attention, for it signals the man’s function as a fisherman and it materializes his intimate connection with Tide Country. This strategy of blurring the boundary between Fokir and his environment does not, however, relegate Fokir to a mere object of the setting, for it is part of a wider strategy whereby the acknowledgement of their inseparability entails that for protecting the one, it is necessary to protect the other.

The combination of Piya’s observation of Fokir and of her misreading of his age makes clear that descriptions of Fokir are mediated by other characters. The fact that Fokir is mostly perceived by outsiders to the Sundarbans who are of a wealthier class contributes to positioning him as a subaltern figure who is rendered speechless before he can even begin to speak. However, his skills and knowledge of the ecosystem, as well as his intimate engagement with it, force the outsiders to acknowledge his active presence. Indeed, after spending time with Fokir, Piya gradually realizes the extent of his ecological knowledge of the region. She says of him: “It’s like he’s always watching the water – even without being aware of it. … I’ve never met anyone with such an incredible instinct. It’s as if he can see right into the river’s heart” (267). Piya’s metaphor of Fokir’s “see[ing] right into the river’s heart” is slightly paradoxical when compared to Kusum’s description of Fokir as having the river in his veins (245). Piya’s analogies entails that Fokir and the river are two distinct entities, and that Fokir observes the river as a separate object, whereas Kusum implies that
Fokir and the river coexist in intra-action, and that the river is not separated from Fokir, but make up his very existence. The difference in these two analogies may come from the fact that Piya’s interactional pattern of observation relies on sight and distancing from the perceived object, whereas Fokir and Kusum conceive of themselves as being much more closely embedded in their environment.\textsuperscript{111}

Alongside Fokir’s intimate knowledge of the deltaic ecosystem, the story of Bon Bibi is at the core of his interactional episteme. The story of Bon Bibi is a syncretic narrative that combines Muslim and Hindu elements to narrate how humans came to live in the Sundarbans. It depicts how the blessed twins of a childless Ibrahim, Bon Bibi and her brother Shah Jongoli are born in Medina “through the intervention of the archangel Gabriel” (103). The latter gives them the “divine mission of travelling from Arabia to [the mangrove forests of Bengal] and make it fit for human habitation” (103). But the jungles of Bengal are under the dominion of Dokkhin Rai, a “powerful demon king” (103) who hates humans and craves their flesh. Despite Dokkhin Rai’s apparent power, he is defeated by Bon Bibi and her brother. Merciful Bon Bibi decides to leave to Dokkhin Rai half of the mangrove so that it can remain wild; the other half she “claimed for herself” (103), makes it safe for human settlement and brings “order ... to the land of eighteen tides, with its two halves, the wild and the sown, being held in careful balance” (103). The fact that the notions of natural “order” and “balance” are the doing of a divinity who is the embodiment of mercy contrasts with the depiction of humans as driven by materialism, whose “greed intrude[s] to upset this order” (103).

\textsuperscript{111} The analogy between Fokir and the tidal and deltaic ecosystem is reinforced on numerous occasions when Piya makes Fokir’s relationship with the dolphins explicit. When Piya first shows a flashcard featuring a sketch of the Irrawaddy, Fokir “glance[s] from the card to her face and raise[s] a hand to point upriver [in a] gesture ... so quick and matter-of-fact” (47) that Piya wonders whether there is a misunderstanding. However, when Fokir actually brings Piya to a pool where dolphins assemble, she realizes that his knowledge of their “patterns of behaviour” (114) is more developed than she thought. As the text explains later on, the patterns of daily migration of the dolphins follow the tidal rhythm of the Sundarbans, and the location where the dolphins assemble is a pool near Garjontola, where the shrine of Bon Bibi is located.

Kusum and Piya are not the only ones who depict the relationship between Fokir and the cultural environment of the Sundarbans. Kanai, when translating Nirmal’s journal, explains to Piya that the song of Bon Bibi “lives in [Fokir] and in some way, perhaps, it still plays a part in making him the person he is” (354). By highlighting Fokir’s ability to empathize with the river, the text underscores the intimacy between Fokir and his environment.
The story of Bon Bibi is anthropocentric. Nonetheless, it brings to the surface the importance of respect and care for the world around, undermining the materialist ideology of the accumulation of wealth. One day a greedy man called Dhona and his crew enter the Tide Country, but are soon unable to continue, so Dhona makes a pact with Dokkhin Rai: Dukhey, a boy “cursed with misfortune” (104) will be abandoned for Dokkhin Rai to devour. In exchange, Dhona will become rich. After Dukhey is left alone on an island, “trapped between river and forest, his eye caught a shimmer of black and gold – he was being stalked by a tiger, hidden in the greenery on the far shore. The animal was none other than Dokkhin Rai in disguise” (104-5). At the sight of the demon, Dukhey loses consciousness, but before doing so he follows his mother’s advice and calls out “O Mother of Mercy, Bon Bibi, save me, come to my side!” (105). At that moment, despite her being far away, Bon Bibi joins Dukhey, rescues him from the demon, nurses him back to health, sends him home “with a treasure trove of honey and wax” (105), thereby “show[ing] the world the law of the forest, which was that the rich and greedy would be punished while the poor and righteous were rewarded” (105).

The story of the goddess is a manifest criticism of extractivist environmental attitudes whereby foreigners come to exploit the resources of the region. The story of Bon Bibi accounts for the arrival of humans in the Sundarbans. It even grounds it in a “divine mission” (103) and in a fight between good (merciful Bon Bibi and Dukhey) and evil (greedy flesh-devouring and demonic Dokkhin Rai and Dhona). Bon Bibi is the voice of the local interactional episteme: by “show[ing] the world the law of the forest” (emphasis added) with an ironic nod to Kipling’s “law of the jungle”, Bon Bibi reveals to humans the right way to interact within the Sundarbans.

The intimate connection between Fokir, the Tide Country and Bon Bibi is made plain when Nirmal witnesses Fokir’s ease at interacting with the river. Upon arriving on Garjontola, Fokir helps Horen to push the boat towards the shore; this surprises Nirmal, for “the water came up to [Fokir’s] neck” (245). However, Nirmal explains: “[n]o one else was surprised by the child’s adeptness. His mother turned to me and I saw she was choking with pride: ‘See, Saar, the river is in his veins’” (245). In this last sentence, the metaphor of the blood-as-
river evokes the fact that the river – and by extension the whole Tide Country – is a major constituent of Fokir’s body, and thus that his being is contingent on both body and environment. Kusum then adds that not only the ecological system is part of Fokir, the cultural system of the Tide Country is also part of the child. Indeed, when Nirmal asks Fokir to read the story of Bon Bibi out loud so that he can copy it, the child does so, but after a moment, Nirmal realizes that Fokir “can neither write nor read” (248) and tells Kusum about it. Fokir’s mother replies: “It’s all inside here [in his head]; I’ve told it to him so often that these words have become a part of him” (248). This episode where Kusum says that the story of Bon Bibi and the river are part of Fokir reveals the third aspect of the Aesthetics of the Tide, whereby an interactional pattern becomes a metonym for the rivers and cultures of the Tide Country. Besides, the ability of Fokir to recite Bon Bibi’s story echoes Duhkey the Sorrowful’s ability to call out Bon Bibi to rescue him. Here, knowing the story is also knowing what the “law of the forest” (105) demands (righteousness) and prohibits (greed).

After Piya’s first encounter with dolphins, she describes Fokir and Tutul as they sleep: “Their chests were moving in unison as they slept and the rhythm of their breathing reminded her of the pair of dolphins she had been watching earlier” (138). As was said above, the Irrawaddy dolphins are thought to be the messengers of Bon Bibi (234). Comparing Fokir to the dolphins therefore reasserts the ontological connection between Fokir’s interaction with the environment and the function of the dolphins in the story of Bon Bibi. In this context, Fokir’s pattern of activity can be understood as that of a messenger of Bon Bibi, but also a messenger of the Tide Country, for Fokir takes Piya deeper into the environment and allows her to experience more of it than simply its visual aspect. In Ghosh’s strategy of reconciling the survival of the subaltern and the protection of the environment, the development of Fokir’s ontological connection with the culture of the Tide as much as with its environment is crucial, for it implies that protecting the environment necessitates a protection of the human cultures that make up this environment.

Fokir’s function as a messenger is also revealed when he indicates to the foreign protagonists the presence of tigers in the vicinity. In the story of Bon Bibi, tigers are incarnations of the antagonist Dokkhin Rai, who preys on the sorrowful and innocent child
Dukhey. At the end of their first day together, Fokir attempts to explain to Piya that she cannot sleep uncovered near the prow of the boat (98). This episode features two important principles of Fokir’s system of knowledge regarding the interaction with the environment. The first one is the importance of the emotion of fear in regulating one’s behavior and guiding one’s interaction. Here, fear manifests itself in Fokir’s gestures; he is suddenly agitated, “in alarm,” warning Piya vehemently and insistently, going so far as clamping her wrists. The second principle is the causal connection between language and world, particularly the fact that referring to a tiger, whether with words or gestures, risks invoking the tiger. This connection is revealed a few pages after this episode, when in an analepsis Kanai remembers Kusum explaining to him that one “can’t use the word [tiger] – to say it is to summon it” (108).

This power of language to summon divinities and demons is an important aspect of the narrative of Bon Bibi, since it is the way Dukhey the Sorrowful is saved, but also the way Dhona summons Dokkhin Rai’s presence. Kanai explains this in his translation of the written version of the story of the forest goddess: after Dhona’s pact with the demon Dokkhin Rai, the latter says: “be sure to say my name when you go to the forest” (355). Speaking the name is a way of formalizing a covenant whereby a member of Dhona’s crew is to be left behind to be devoured by the demon tiger.

Piya at first considers Fokir’s fear as superstition,112 but in reality Fokir’s fear does not only come from Bon Bibi’s story, but also from the real hazards inherent in the Sundarbans; Fokir is well aware of the dangers of the Tide Country, his grandfather having been killed by a tiger (109). Later in the narrative, Nilima also warns Kanai about the dangers of the region, by describing to him the situation based on “unofficial records” (240) she has kept. She says that “for outsiders it’s very hard to conceive of the dangers” (239), that “it’s difficult for you to imagine yourself being attacked by a tiger. The trouble is that over here it’s not in the least bit out of the ordinary. It happens several times each week” (240). Here, it is only

112 It is to be noted that before the Morichjhãpi incident, Nirmal calls the story of Bon Bibi a “tale” of “false consciousness” (101). His opinion of it changes when he is shown the island of Garjontola and how Kusum, Horen and Fokir believe in its connection with Bon Bibi.
by combining Piya and Kanai’s storylines that the reader can have access to a more complete overview of Fokir’s interactional episteme, a view that does not reduce Fokir to a superstitious subaltern, but rather depicts him as a skilled practitioner of the environment. In contrast to foreigners who cannot experience and comprehend the extent of the tiger threats, Fokir and the inhabitants live with it daily and have encoded this hazard in their story of beginning. In this context, when Fokir attempts to draw the foreigners’ attention to the tiger, he is also attempting to embed Piya and Kanai more deeply into the cultural and ecological system of the delta. Fokir’s interactional episteme is therefore shared actively with the outsiders, and by extension with the reader.

4.5 “Life is Lived in Transformation”: The Confluence of Interactional Patterns and Epistemes

The chronotope of THT is based on the ontological connections between the cultural, linguistic and ecological diversity of the Sundarbans, which in the novel is symbolized by the term “mohona.” This confluent chronotope comes to the surface in the interplay between the characters’ function in the ecopoetic and metafictional configuration of the novel (Piya as focalizer, Kanai as inscribed translator, Nirmal as inscribed writer, and Fokir as embodiment of the storyworld) and the interactional episteme they embody.

The relationship between form and content in THT has been widely investigated, especially the relationship between the deep structure of the narrative system and the ecological phenomenon of the tide (Gurr; Bartosch). Basing his argument on Jens Martin Gurr’s, Roman Bartosch, explains that “the whole narrative [of THT] is organised around the movement of the tide with one section called ‘Ebb’ and the other ‘Flood’ and with a focalization that literally ‘sways’ between Piya and Kanai, and representations of land and water” (Bartosch 98). This interpretation of narrative structure and focalization works to a certain extent, but it becomes problematic when its emphasis on the environmental trope of tidal movement conceals another environmental process at play, confluence, and the way the narrative could be seen as a confluence of interactional patterns and epistemes, rather
than merely as an oscillation between binary focalizers. Indeed, the tidal structural oscillation favored by Bartosch and Gurr posits two poles of emergence of the storyworld embodied in the focalizers Piya and Kanai, who initially seem to respectively embody an ecocentric and an anthropocentric perspective (Bartosch 119). In a sense the structuring of the narrative in two sections “Ebb” and “Flow” seems to partly validate this interpretation. I argue however that focusing on focalization as a structuring device leaves out the voice of Nirmal and the body of Fokir as sources for the emergence of the storyworld in the process of reading. Rather, Nirmal and Fokir function as rivers of consciousness who permit the flowing forth of the storyworld at least as much as Kanai and Piya do.

I will argue that investigating the confluent chronotope of THT necessitates an investigation of the interplay of interactional patterns and epistemes rather than a study of focalization based on a tidal oscillation between water and earth, or between ecocentrism and anthropocentrism. By looking at how the interplay of interactional patterns and epistemes is configured, the reader can better understand how the novel emerges as a “mohona” of foreign interactional patterns and epistemes (mainly those of Kanai, Piya and Nirmal) that meets Fokir’s local interactional pattern and episteme. In my conception of the novel, the foreigners’ lines of life and their systems of knowledge function as metonyms for rivers of silt, and the local population’s lines of life and system of knowledge as metonyms for the tide of the sea of Bengal. Considering the deep structure of the novel as being based on the phenomenon of the mohona-that-meets-the-tide entails that Fokir and Nirmal can be integrated into the analysis of how the storyworld comes to be, despite the absence of their voice and body – Fokir’s speech is not reported much, although his embodiment is highlighted, and Nirmal is dead, and only his voice and knowledge remain in the discourse-now of Kanai and Piya. Integrating Nirmal and Fokir contributes to reassert the presence of the subaltern in history, historiography and more to the point, in narratology.

Seeing the meetings of the human organisms as a mohona-that-meets-the-tide (i.e., a confluence of foreign interactional patterns and epistemes that intermingles with local ones) permits a better understanding of the function of the transformative interactions between foreigners and local people in the emergence of the narrative world of the
Sundarbans. Due to these transformative meetings the “neat oppositions of insider to outsider and knowledge to ignorance break down and become untenable” (Fletcher 7). In the same vein, the boundaries between writer, reader, and text are blurred by the intermingling of rivers of life.

A large portion of the narrative system is devoted to Nirmal’s, Kanai’s and Piya’s reported experience of the ecosystem and of their transformative encounters with local inhabitants such as Fokir and Kusum. Above I have argued that the ontological connection between currents of water and currents of culture creates an Aesthetics of the Tide based on two ecological processes: a tidal oscillation and a deltaic confluence. In this Aesthetics of the Tide, the configuration of the characters’ lines of life may be understood as a confluence of trajectories of embodied minds and enminded bodies, a chronotopic mohona of interactional patterns and epistemes from which emerges the storyworld. In my conception, Nirmal’s interactional episteme is embodied in the notebook and merges with Kanai at first, and with Piya then (through Kanai), and enables both of their environmental worldviews to change; Fokir’s interactional pattern can be understood as a river that merges with Piya first, and with Kanai then, and transforms their relationship with their environment. This embodied and epistemic confluence is made visible by episodes of close intimacy between the characters. I will focus on the four protagonists Nirmal, Kanai, Piya and Fokir, but it is important to bear in mind that this metaphor of body-as-river is also visible in other characters, such as Horen and Kusum (364).

The confluence inherent in the Tide Country, the oscillating tidal pattern and the refashioning of islands due to floods become topics that underlie the meeting of lines of life and brings dynamism to the narrative system. As I will argue, this is particularly salient in the case of foreigners, for the confluence of interactional patterns also draws attention to the transformation of their interactional episteme. The environmental tropes of the mohona and of the tide described above accomplish what the geographer Doreen Massey describes as a response to the “chance of space”:

In spatial configurations, otherwise unconnected narratives may be brought into contact, or previously connected ones may be wrenched apart. There is always
an element of ‘chaos’. This is the chance of space … [I]n this other spatiality different temporalities and different voices must work out means of accommodation. The chance of space must be responded to. (111)

In the case of *THT*, the spatial configuration of the storyworld is given ecological, cultural and narrative coherence because the life trajectories of the protagonists are based on the confluence and on the tide inherent in the ecosystem of the Sundarbans and recounted early in the narrative in the form of Nirmal’s legend. As they enter the Tide Country, the “unconnected narratives” of the foreign protagonists Nirmal, Kanai and Piya flow into one another, thereby creating a mohona, and flow into the local culture, thereby producing a profusion of life and transforming one another and the storyworld. In this conception of the narrative, characters are not “points” of focalization isolated in space, but lines tangling up with each other, the interwoven strands of a mytho- and ecopoetic fabric. Finally, it is to be noted that the transformation of the protagonists’ interactional episteme is realized as much by their interaction with the environment as with their interaction with texts, songs, and other forms of communication.

**Kusum and Nirmal**

Chronologically, Nirmal is the first foreigner whose life is transformed by his interaction in the Tide Country, when his Romantic Socialist ideals are shattered by his experience of the poverty and destitution of the Sundarbans in the 1950s. However, twenty years later, around the time of the Morichjhâpi incident, Nirmal’s system of knowledge changes again as he gets to know the culture of the Tide Country from the inside. During his encounters with Horen, Kusum and Fokir on Garjontola and Morichjhâpi, he gradually discovers the circumstances that surround life in the Tide Country and it is then that he develops his analogy wherein the oscillation of the tide and the confluence of river channels pervade all aspects of life and knowledge, what I have called above the Aesthetics of the Tide.

The second transformation of Nirmal’s interactional episteme therefore occurs during his first stay on Morichjhâpi Island in 1979, where he reflects on the achievements of the new settlers who have realized Hamilton’s dream and built an egalitarian society (171). In this episode, Nirmal’s encounter with the community of the Morichjhâpi refugees can be
understood as an intermingling of interactional epistemes, the community being the physical manifestation of the Tide Country’s system of knowledge. As Nirmal’s mindset flows into the world created by the refugees, the two merge and create a profusion of meaning that manifests itself in Nirmal’s poetic language of pathos embodied in the notebook. Indeed, these reflections show that Nirmal’s system of values is deeply affected by the new community that he has just witnessed.

This epistemic transformation is made manifest in the description of his embodied self: the emotions and sensations associated with it are described in a poetic language that connotes water (“onrush,” “still-wet pathway,” “swelling,” “cast away”): his experiencing of the refugees’ new society fills him with hope, floods him with values he thought he had lost. The figurative use of the word “swell” in the statement that “[he] felt all of existence swelling in [his] veins” implies that he perceives himself as connected with the community of life of Morichjhāpi, which now contributes to shaping his consciousness from the inside. The “birth of something new hitherto unseen” in the world outside suddenly resonates within him and results in what I would call a cognitive rebirth. The entanglement of inside and outside, the blurring of the borders that separate self and place are made more manifest as Nirmal “open[s] himself to the wind and the sun” and “fl[[i][ng][s] back [his] head.”

The latter gesture adds a vertical component to Nirmal’s vision of the horizontal plane of the island, and it adds a sense of volume to the island. The inflation of his lifeworld reflects Nirmal’s new horizons. By looking at the sky, Nirmal not only fleshes out his environment, he also shows that a sudden realization of one’s function in society has something ineffable to it, something that can only be expressed in bodily gestures, something of the order of wonder. The action of unclutching and throwing implied by the phrase “cast[ing] away the emptiness [he] had so long held in [his] arms” reinforces Nirmal’s embodied reaction and the dissolution of the boundaries between body and environment. By witnessing the emergence of a healthy and egalitarian community, he is able to get rid of the feeling of isolation that was clenching his body from inside; he embraces the joy of knowing he can be part of a larger whole.
The impact on Nirmal’s life that his encounter with the Morichjhâpi community produces is visible in his wish to be more involved in the life of the Tide Country. After witnessing the rise of a new society, after feeling so elated by this experience, Nirmal decides to change his lifestyle. From a historian who studies and records the past, Nirmal decides to participate more actively in the shaping of the future. He explains to Kusum: “I want to have some part in what is happening here. I want to be of help” (171). After talking to one of the leaders of the settlement, he realizes: “There’s only one thing I know to do … That is to teach. … I could teach your children about this place that you’ve come to: the tide country. I have time – I am soon to retire. … I’ll teach them to dream” (173). It is at this moment that Nirmal decides to teach environmental history, geology, and mythology to the children of Morichjhâpi. In teaching them how to “dream,” he wants to impart them with his own transformed interactional episteme; he wants his newly-discovered system of knowledge to circulate from his mind to theirs.

This change in Nirmal’s system of knowledge reveals how environmental history, geology and mythology are intertwined. For instance, he knows quite well the history of the settlement of the Sundarbans, notably Hamilton’s failure. What he also knows is the geological history of India, that he imagines himself mixing with Greek and Indian mythologies to facilitate the learning of the children of Morichjhâpi island (180). In this episode, Nirmal’s pedagogical strategy consists in combining the “magical tales of the kind to which these children were accustomed” (180) with his knowledge of the geology of India.

Interestingly, this strategy is echoed by the overall structure of THT, in which Ghosh connects the ecology of the Sundarbans with the content and form of its myths. Besides, by characterizing the “stirrings of the earth” as a “kind of story” and the geological “epochs” as “episodes” (180), Nirmal’s assumption is that humans can and do interpret the world as a narrative; those who make sense of the world and express it through geology, mythology, ecology, or history thus function as storytellers.

Nirmal’s environmentalist attitude is ecopoetic, for he seeks not so much to teach children to exploit or protect the environment, but rather he believes that sciences and religions ought to make sense of the relations that compose the world, and particularly the
human-environment relationship. His experience of Morichjhāpi has made him less ideological and more literary by showing him the complexity of a situation that only immersion through storytelling could provide. Indeed, what storytelling can do that sciences or history alone cannot is to immerse the audience in the storyworld being spoken out aloud.¹¹³ This is made clear in a passage of page 181 where Nirmal makes use of numerous phrases that show how his audience would be connected to him through storytelling. He explains that by “telling them the story,” he “would take them back” and “would show them” (181). The word “take” reveals how storytelling is a form of “translation” (in its etymological sense of “carrying across”). Through telling, Nirmal is able to transport his audience and show them an unfamiliar space and time. Moreover, the alternation of the pronouns “I” and “you” in the passage presents storytelling as a kind of conversation in which readers and tellers are in turn “showing” or “seeing.” The passage also makes use of repetition of the phrases “they would see,” which is repeated six times, and “they would watch.” This emphasis on sight makes manifest Nirmal’s understanding of stories. The formal aspects of stories should be engaging the senses, especially vision, and evoke their content; listening to a story, reading a text is an aesthetic experience. Nirmal’s account of India is constructed as a dynamic map, where features are both topographical entities and embodied divinities.

In the previous paragraphs, I have shown how Nirmal imagines himself teaching the children of Morichjhāpi. These passages also illustrate the metanarrative aspect of THT. Indeed, what Nirmal really do in this episode is to identify his implied audience and to anticipate their interpretive responses. Besides, the combination of disciplines that Nirmal adopts is strikingly similar to what Ghosh achieves in the novel as a whole. The children of Morichjhāpi function as an inscribed audience that sheds light on the role of the reader of THT. This reader ought to be listening to the voice of the novel as though it was a teacher, but not an arrogant and dull one. On the contrary, the chronotopic mohona at the core of

¹¹³ Nirmal’s attitude is reminiscent of Ghosh’s. In an interview, Ghosh says: “history or anthropology cannot give you the emotion, it cannot give you the affect, it cannot give you what individual characters feel as they experience history. So this is why I write novels, because I think novels can synthesize geology, history, personal relationships, emotion, everything” (Kumar 103).
THT, with its ecopoetic and metafictional qualities, carefully arranges the events, and thoughtfully selects words, phrases and registers to achieve the specific goal of sweeping its audience into the translated storyworld of the Sundarbans.

Nirmal’s attitude towards life in the Sundarbans is transformed in another episode. This episode reveals the transformation of Nirmal’s interactional episteme. It takes place near Garjontola, when Nirmal realizes that the environment can be meaningful in different ways to different people. After being offered to go on a journey to Bon Bibi’s shrine on the island of Garjontola with Fokir, Kusum and Horen, he hesitates because he considers it a matter of “religious devotion” whose “beliefs [are] false consciousness” (222). He goes nonetheless and is first struck by the difference between Kusum’s mindset and his own regarding the location of the shrine. In what Nirmal perceives as “just open water,” Kusum sees much more: “in the very middle of that mohona, [they] had crossed the line Bon Bibi had drawn to divide the tide country. In other words [they] had crossed the border that separates the realm of human beings from the domain of Dokkhin Rai and his demons” (223-224). Nirmal then realizes that what he perceives as a “chimerical line [is] to her and to Horen, as real as a barbed-wire fence might be to [him]” (224). Nirmal realizes that for Kusum and Horen, the location of the shrine is on the same ontological level as the story of Bon Bibi. This passage about Garjontola stages how interactional epistemes fashion the way one perceives the environment, and thus experiences it. The historian indeed realizes that he and Kusum have a radically different understanding of the ontology of stories. The gap is bridged during Nirmal’s conversation with Kusum about borders, which allows him to see the Sundarbans with new eyes: “everything began to look new, unexpected, full of surprises … To me, a townsman, the tide country’s jungle was an emptiness, a place where time stood still. I saw now that this was an illusion, that exactly the opposite was true” (224). Then, he explains that “[i]t was as if the whole tide country were speaking in the voice of the Poet: ‘life is lived in transformation’” (225). Again, the connection between text and place, between poetry and environment is made overt when Nirmal, in an exalted awareness of ecoipoiesis, uses Rilke as a way of making sense of the chronotope of the inscribed storyworld he is producing. At first, Nirmal does not listen to the Sundarbans, and instead
projects his desires as “townsman” onto it; it is only when he sees through the “illusion”
created by his preconceptions that he is able to witness the incredible dynamism that
pervades the Tide Country. This transformation of Nirmal’s attitude towards the Sundarbans
is brought about by his conversation with Kusum and by her sharing her perception of the
Tide Country during this pilgrimage to the shrine of Bon Bibi. His conversation with Kusum
and Rilke’s poetry then become ways for Nirmal to better understand his environment, at
the same time this new understanding of his environment allows him to better understand
Rilke and Kusum.

Conceived as self-reflexive, this episode hints at the fact that stories have the power
of altering their audience’s worldview profoundly. This analysis is reinforced by the fact that
Kanai also says so, when he explains to Piya that to Nirmal, “what Kusum stood for was the
embodiment of Rilke’s idea of transformation” (282) and that “Nirmal soaked [Rilke’s] idea
[that ‘life is lived in transformation’] into himself in the way cloth absorbs ink” (282). The
connection between Kusum, Rilke and water produced by the simile suggests that on
Garjontola Nirmal’s interactional episteme has tangled up with Kusum’s, and this is
dramatized by using Rilke and the ecosystem as tropes.

By combining ecology, hermeneutics, poetry, but also environmental and social
justice, this episode reveals how Nirmal’s worldview has changed and how he now
embodies a peculiar knowledge system, through which readers are made to perceive the
Sundarbans. Nirmal sums up how his own way of apprehending the Tide Country is highly
influenced by his sociocultural background, especially his training as a literary scholar. On
pages 224 and 225, Nirmal creates a simile that analogizes the environment with a text: he
says that “in a way a landscape … is not unlike a book” (224). The environment is something
one reads, something one creates. As we all read differently, interpret differently the same
work, we all create a different environment for ourselves, seeing things, or “lines” (224) that
some other people may not see or pay particular attention to.¹¹⁴ By highlighting “taste and

¹¹⁴ This is of course what the whole novel of The Hungry Tide attempts to do: it makes visible
trajectories of life by comparing them to rivers; it makes manifest transculturation by analogizing it
with the biodiversity that results from the meeting of rivers of silt and tidal seawater.
training," “memories and desires” (224), Nirmal also shows that one’s interpretation of one’s surroundings is informed by one’s past experiences, but also by one’s intentions for the future. By reflecting on how one interprets both a text and an environment – in a text about the environment! – Nirmal draws attention to the similarity between reading and living, and by extension to the necessity for a hermeneutics that takes into account the circumstances that surround both the production and the reception of artworks and landscapes. Therefore, Nirmal’s attitude towards the environment is constructivist, and it is perhaps best expressed Nirmal’s statement that “A place is what you make of it” (283).

Nirmal’s third transformation takes place directly on the island of Garjontola, where Nirmal witnesses the ritual to Bon Bibi. It is there that Nirmal hears Horen reciting the song that mixes the rhythm of “Hindu puja” and “Arabic invocations” (246) in a language that is “a strange variety of Bangla, deeply interpenetrated by Arabic and Persian” (246); it is also there that Nirmal first gets to know about the written version of “The Miracles of Bon Bibi or The Narrative of Her Glory” (247). In its written form, “the pages opened to the right, as in Arabic, not to the left, as in Bangla. Yet the prosody was that of much of Bangla folklore” (247). The stylistics of the story also lays bare the system of ontological connections between text and environment that underlies the novel and that was first explained in Nirmal’s mytho-ecopoetic account at the beginning of the narrative. In a similar fashion to the confluence of rivers and tide that brings about the ecosystem of the Tide Country, the meeting of cultural rivers gives rise to the religious system of the Tide Country. The use of the phrase “waves of settlers” here infuses the representation of the process of migration and the syncretic story that ensues with the semantic field of water currents. The story of Bon Bibi is like a confluence of cultural genres and styles: the lines are said to “flow into each other”; prose and verse, legend and scripture, near and far, are mixed just like rivers are mixed with each other and with sea currents. The fact that the “tide country’s faith” is referred to as a “mohona” – a mohona being the Bangla word for a meeting of rivers – that allows people to “pass in many directions,” be they physical (“from country to country” with the waves of migrations) or cultural (“between faiths and religions”) not only finalizes the ontological connection between cultural system and ecosystem, but very much insists on
the tangible spatiality and materiality of transculturation. Besides, if the mohona is a place of border-crossing, the story itself – because it is connected to place – becomes a locus of blurred boundary; in this sense, the enunciation and reception of the story of Bon Bibi becomes a mohona that allows Nirmal as an inscribed writer to cross a cultural border, understand the interactional episteme of the Tide Country’s inhabitants, and share it with the inscribed reader Kanai, and through Kanai the inscribed translator to transmit it to the reader.

Nirmal is fascinated by the emergence of the Story of Bon Bibi as a literary form, by its hybridity. Nirmal’s reception of the story can be taken reflexively so as to investigate textual interpretation. By emphasizing both the cultural and ecological contexts that give rise to the narrative form of the story of Bon Bibi and the setting in which the story is to be told, Nirmal shows that a narrative is not disembedded from its environment of production and reception. Rather, the narrative contributes to fashioning these environments, all the while being fashioned by them. In his own way, what Nirmal detects is the metaleptic quality of the story of Bon Bibi, whose content spills over the border of the narrative and floods the environment of the Tide Country.

**Kanai and Fokir**

The change in Kanai’s interactional episteme is revealed in the episode where he is dared by Fokir to follow tiger tracks leading inland. In this episode, Kanai understands that knowing the language of the Sundarbans and knowing life in it are two different things, the former not necessarily being superior to the latter. This passage is a turning point in Kanai’s understanding of the Sundarbans; but it is also an epistemological shift that will transform Kanai’s interaction with the world as a whole.

In the chapter “Signs,” Kanai goes with Fokir on his boat to spot dolphins for Piya. As they are observing the river, Fokir spots tiger “[s]igns [and] marks” (320) on the shore. But to Kanai, “the depressions that had caught Fokir’s eye [seemed] too shapeless to signify

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115 The title of the chapter plays on the fact that Kanai’s understanding of linguistic signs will be transformed by his encounter with the environmental signs of the Sundarbans.
anything in particular” (321). Besides, Kanai thinks that Fokir is “playing a game with him … to exaggerate the menace of their surroundings [and] heighten the inscrutability of the surroundings through subtly slanted glosses” (321). Kanai believes that Fokir is tricking him, that the latter’s scary reading of the environment is faked, so he challenges him to explain himself as to the actual risk of a tiger being around. Fokir replies bodily by taking “hold of Kanai’s hand and plac[ing] it on the back of his neck. The unexpected intimacy of this contact sent a shock through Kanai’s arm and he snatched his hand back – but not before he had felt the goosebumps bristling on the moist surface of Fokir’s skin” (322). In this moment of intimacy and of empathy, Fokir expresses his feelings bodily, rather than verbally.

In this physical contact between the two men, a connection is created that was not there before. Near the shore where water and earth mix, where mangrove island and river of silt meet, Kanai’s river of life mingles with Fokir’s, and this is even alluded to by Kanai’s sensation of Fokir’s “goosebumps” on his “moist” skin. Fokir then explains: “[i]t’s the fear that tells me … And what about you? … Can you feel the fear?” (322). To Fokir, body reaction is central in communication and in interacting with the environment – the emotion of fear being paramount (Bartosch 113). By contrast, to Kanai it is verbal language that occupies those crucial roles. Indeed, Fokir’s question lays bare Kanai’s self-alienation from his body and environment through linguistics and discourse analysis. Kanai’s focus on linguistic analysis objectifies language and is made to the detriment of conceptions of embodiment and embeddedness in which language is only one form of environmental stimulus. The prominence of language to Kanai can be seen in the following passage:

The surroundings … were suddenly blotted from [Kanai’s] consciousness; he forgot where he was. It was as though his mind had decided to revert to the functions for which it had been trained and equipped by years of practice. At that moment nothing existed for him but language, the pure structure of sound that had formed Fokir’s question. (322)

Despite the threatening mangrove and river, Kanai’s consciousness leaves aside his physical environment to focus on the linguistic environment. Moreover, the phrase “nothing existed for him but language, the pure structure of sound” draws attention to Kanai’s ineptness in the Tide Country, as opposed to Fokir’s integration in it.
When Kanai finally answers Fokir’s question, it is negative: he is not afraid of the tiger at that particular moment – how could he be, after “blotting” his environment from his consciousness? So in his turn, Fokir challenges him to go onto the island and prove it. Kanai reluctantly accepts, but almost immediately he changes his mind and decides “not to play this game” (325) with Fokir anymore:

Stepping into the mud, Kanai shouted over his shoulder, ‘Stop talking nonsense. You may be a child, but I’m not——

Then suddenly it was as though the earth had come alive and was reaching for his ankle. Looking down, he discovered that a rope-like tendril had wrapped itself around his ankles. He felt his balance going and when he tried to slide a foot forward, to correct it, his legs seemed to move in the wrong direction. Before he could do anything to break the fall, the wetness of the mud slapped him full in the face.

At first he was completely immobile: it was as though his body were being fitted for a mould in a tub of plaster. Trying to look up, he discovered that he could not see: the mud had turned his sunglasses into a blindfold. Scraping his head against his arm, he shook the glasses off and allowed them to sink out of sight. When Fokir’s hand descended on his shoulder, he brushed it off and tried to push himself to his feet on his own. But the consistency of the mud was such as to create a suction effect and he could not break free. (325-326)

Kanai’s fall into the mud is a significant episode of THT. Not only does it prefigure Kanai’s loss of Nirmal’s notebook (375-376), it is also the turning point in Kanai’s way of thinking and way of life. In the passage from water to land, from the safety of the boat to the dangerousness of the island, Kanai crosses more than a spatial border. In this quote, what Kanai had left out of his consciousness – the Tide Country – presses itself on him in a striking way, indeed “as though the earth had come alive.” This latter phrase imbues the Tide Country with agency, and more particularly it implies that the liminal region of the mangrove has immersive and communicative abilities. The beautiful forest reveals its darkest aspects. When Kanai is face down in the mud, his body can no longer ignore the environment and its materiality. Kanai can no longer ignore his enmeshment, his entanglement with the fabric of the Tide Country; the “tendril … wrapp[ing] itself around [Kanai’s] ankles” means that the enmeshment is literal, physical not simply metaphorical (just like Kanai’s contact with Fokir was not verbal, but emotional through empathy and perceptual through touch). This accidental reunion seems to reveal to Kanai that he has been misled and blindfolded by his reliance on verbal language. The image of his
sunglasses being turned into a blindfold by the mud underscores the statement that follows on page 327 in which Kanai says that he sometimes conceives of language as a “transparent film, a prism” (327).

By focusing too much on verbal language, Kanai has forgotten – and is reminded in this episode – that our surroundings are alive, dynamic and speak to us, if we are willing to listen. Kanai’s function as an inscribed reader/translator in the novel therefore is replaced by that of an experiencer. This realization of the dialogic nature of organism-environment relationships is emphasized by Kanai’s interactional pattern in this quote, more precisely by both the repetition of phrases that denote an intimate and inalienable physical entanglement between self and place (“reaching for his ankle,” “a rope-like tendril had wrapped itself around his ankles,” “his body were being fitted for a mould,” “the consistency of the mud was such as to create a suction effect and he could not break free”) and phrases that express the destabilization of Kanai’s body (“He felt his balance going,” “his legs seemed to move in the wrong direction,” “Before he could do anything to break the fall”). In this moment when Kanai’s standing position collapses, when his balance and his sense of kinesthesia escape his control, when he crosses physical and metaphorical borders, his underlying personality comes up to the surface.

The disruption of Kanai’s interactional pattern due to his ineptness in the Sundarbans echoes the destabilization of the carapace of language due to the emotion of shame that Kanai feels by falling in front of Fokir: as it says before he falls, for him, “to fall in the mud … would be a humiliation too painful to contemplate” (324). After falling into the mud, entering Fokir’s game and failing, Kanai violently chastises the fisherman, insults him and tells him to go away. Kanai’s frustration is brought about by a reversal of authority: at that moment Fokir is in his element; he knows the terrain whereas Kanai is uncomfortable and ill-fitted. In Kanai’s meritocratic conception, the realization that he has been humiliated by a person considered socially lower is defiling and results in a violent verbal outburst:

The blood rushed to Kanai’s head and obscenities began to pour from his mouth: ‘Shala, banchod, shuorer bachcha.’

His anger came welling up with an atavistic explosiveness, rising from sources whose very existence he would have denied: the master’s suspicion of
the menial; the pride of the caste; the townsman’s mistrust of the rustic; the city’s antagonism towards the village. He had thought he had cleansed himself from these sediments of the past [but] they had only been compacted into an explosive and highly volatile reserve. (326)

As with Nirmal above, in the moment of revelation, the description of Kanai’s bodily reaction is soaked with imagery based on the ecology of the Tide Country. The first sentence of the passage sets up an analogy between blood and language, which are both described as flowing. The “blood rush[ing] to Kanai’s head” and the “obscenities … pour[ing] from his mouth” give a sense that Kanai’s words are continuous with his body and with his emotions; Kanai is no longer playing a game of language. In the second paragraph, the emotion of “anger” is “welling up,” “rising from sources” unknown to Kanai. Here again, anger is liquid; it is flooding Kanai’s mind and flowing out of his mouth in words. As anger flows out in verbalized hatred, it reveals the “sources” of Kanai’s personality. These sources are “sediments of the past,” and they are the foundation of Kanai’s interactional episteme. His encounter with the Tide Country sweeps these foundations and erodes the basis of Kanai’s consciousness.

By describing Kanai’s emotional reaction and self-criticism with an imagery drawn from the Tide Country itself, the text reinforces Kanai’s newly-discovered enmeshment in the deltaic, confluent and mangrove ecosystem. Kanai’s encounter with materiality reveals covert aspects of his character; these aspects emerge as emotions that in their turn trigger Kanai’s self-criticism and introspection.

After insulting Fokir and telling him to go away, which Fokir takes literally, Kanai is left alone on the island, imagining the worst after seeing something lurching “beneath the water’s surface” (327). In this moment, as he is alone, “Kanai’s head filled with visions of the ways in which the tide country dealt out death” (328) through tigers or crocodiles. Just as Kanai’s emotional turmoil leads to introspection, it also calls forth a more intimate interaction with the environment, which has now become the focus of his attention. As he walks on the mudbank, he feels the mangrove, its spores that are “spearlike point[s]” (328), and its “roots that connected them … just below the surface” (328). Wanting to “get as far from the river as possible” (328), Kanai goes “crashing into the vegetation” (329) of the
mangrove, whose "branches were pliable and sinuous; they bent without breaking and snapped back like whips. When they closed around him, it was as if he had passed into the embrace of hundreds of scaly limbs. They grew so thick he could not see beyond a metre" (329). He is so embedded in it that the mangrove becomes his only environment, and it is not a passive setting. Rather, the simile introduced by “as though” implies agency: the mangrove is indeed a full-fledged organism that develops (though not on the same temporal scale as human beings) and that has “limbs.” The enmeshment in the mangrove system is made even more vivid by the fact that Kanai’s “clothes were in shreds and his body was covered in cuts and scratches” (329). The permeability of clothes, skin and mangrove is emphasized. As the boundary of clothing loses its consistency, so does the boundary of skin, and indeed so does the mangrove, whose "barrier ended" (329), allowing Kanai to enter a clearing. The encounter with materiality exposes the fact that Kanai’s organism (his skin), environment (the mangrove) and culture (represented here by his clothes) are porous, are open to each other and are united in an organism-environment process that cannot be reduced to either of its parts.

In the clearing, Kanai is unsettled. In flight mode due to the adrenaline that has made him flee the shoreline, Kanai is so destabilized that he cannot remember the word for “tiger,” nor can he look at where the predator could be:

He could not bring himself to look around the clearing. This was where it would be, if it was here on the island – but what was he thinking of? He could not recall the word, nor even the euphemisms Fokir had used: it was as if his mind, in its panic, had emptied itself of language. The sounds and signs that had served, in combination, as the sluices between his mind and his senses, had collapsed: his mind was swamped by a flood of pure sensation. The words he had been searching for, the euphemisms that were the source of his panic, had been replaced by the thing itself, except that without words it could not be apprehended or understood. It was an artefact of pure intuition, so real that the thing itself could not have dreamed of existing so intensely. (329)

This passage shows how Kanai conceives of language as a necessary mediator between the organism and its environment. Kanai implies that the world external to the organism can “be apprehended or understood” correctly only through the mediation of verbal language.
The linguistic combination of “sounds and signs” is described as a “sluice,” as a gate that both separates and connects “mind” and body (i.e., the “senses”). Interestingly, what is kept out of the mind is both the body and the environment, which are both considered fluid substances that can flood the mind. But in the quote above, the intense interaction of organism and environment overcomes the ability of language to separate body and mind.

As he is confronted with the potentiality of an imminent death, Kanai loses his ability to express himself; he experiences what Fokir and the inhabitants of the Sundarbans undergo daily, the living-with-the-world, instead of the speaking-of-the-world.

For a foreigner, this experience of the way of life of the inhabitants of the Sundarbans results in a short cognitive breakdown where the emotion of fear submerges Kanai. Suddenly, Kanai experiences fear instead of simply speaking it; the bodily emotion of fear replaces the objectifying and mental language of fear. The passage again makes use of an imagery drawn from the ecosystem. Kanai is “emptied” of his linguistic skills and his “mind … swamped by a flood of pure sensation.” This image of being emptied of one’s culture and flooded with sensation is reminiscent of Nirmal’s experience on Morichjhãpi (171); it also shows how Kanai is made to adopt the point of view of the local inhabitants. The tiger is indeed an embodiment of the Story of Bon Bibi, for it is the form that the antagonist demon takes to devour humans. In this moment, Kanai becomes like Dukhey the Sorrowful about to be eaten by the demon tiger Dokkhin Rai. Kanai’s encounter with Fokir, with the ecosystem and with the local way of life transforms his values. Coming back to the word “sluices,” it also denotes an act of rinsing, which would tend to undermine its connotation as a gate. Here, the use of the word “sluice” exposes Kanai’s view while destabilizing it. In this peculiar context, the sign “sluice” is ambivalent, for it contains an excess of meaning that contributes to the sense that Kanai’s mind is saturated and overwhelmed by his surroundings, be they bodily, environmental or linguistic. Paradoxically, Ghosh makes use of poetic language to show that organism and environment are not entangled through

\[116\] The etymology of the word “sluice” comes from Latin *exclusa*, meaning “shutting out”.

\[117\] For a translator and interpreter, losing one’s ability to speak also means losing an aspect of one’s sociocultural identity.
language only, but through the activity of being-in-the-world. Language should not be considered as a tool that separates, as Kanai does, but rather as a process that reveals the entanglement of organism and environment, as his experience shows him.

In the episode on the island, Kanai’s personality is affected to an extent that he undergoes a fundamental epistemological shift. For a moment, Kanai becomes an inhabitant of the Sundarbans: a subaltern without a voice. He experiences the fear of being attacked by the tiger. He experiences the culture of the Tide Country in a new light, from the inside instead of as a foreign outsider. Influenced both by Nirmal and by Fokir, Kanai’s transformation is made explicit when he writes a letter to Piya. In the letter, he explains: “At Garjontola I learnt how little I know of myself and of the world” (353). What he has learnt in the clearing, however, is that he can make Piya happy by telling her what Fokir had sung the day before. Kanai now understands that language is used to communicate, to share with another being one’s understanding of the world. Kanai thus decides to translate Fokir’s song, in whose “words there was a history that is not just his own but also of this place, the tide country” (354). Of the story of Bon Bibi that Fokir recited, Kanai says, citing his uncle, that to Fokir those words were much more than a part of a legend: it was the story that gave this land its life. … It lives in [Fokir] and in some way, perhaps, it still plays a part in making him the person he is. This is my gift to you, this story that is also a song, these words that are a part of Fokir. (354)

These statements in Kanai’s letter show how Kanai has now acquired the ability to give the subaltern a voice and how his understanding of the relationship between language, organism and environment has changed. First, by saying that the story of Bon Bibi refers to the “history” of both Fokir and the Tide Country, Kanai makes clear that the fisherman and the ecosystem are connected by more than mere spatial contiguity: Fokir and the Tide Country are part of the same historical and ecological narrative. The fact that narrative, story and song are used as “structuring” devices for understanding the world is new to Kanai; before, it was linguistics that filled that role. Departing from his structuralist vision, Kanai now embraces a more ecopoetic understanding of the world. This is strengthened by Kanai’s comment on the fact that the story “gave this land its life,” and by his insistence on
the fact that the story and its words live in Fokir and contribute to shaping his being. I argue that Kanai's language is not figurative here: Kanai is stating that Fokir is part of the Sundarbans, part of its legends, and part of its culture, but Kanai is also saying that the Sundarbans, its legends and its cultures are part of Fokir.

After his encounter with the Sundarbans and with its embodiment the tiger, and after reading Nirmal's journal, Kanai now understands that words, stories and songs do not function as links between a mind separated from body and environment. On the contrary, Kanai now realizes that language reveals the already-existing link between mind, body and environment, that mind reveals the link between language, body and environment, that body reveals the link between language, mind and environment, and that environment reveals the link between language, mind and body. Because of their entanglement and their mutual enmeshment in space and time, each component of this system functions as metonym for all the others. It is from one’s attitude towards the system and from one’s interaction with it that meaning emerges. In a sense, Kanai has now made his own what used to be Fokir’s understanding of the world. The words he is writing to Piya thus become part of her too, and will influence her line of life. By evoking his love for her in the letter, Kanai creates an intimacy that is reminiscent of Horen and Kusum’s coming together on the eve of the eviction of the Morichjhâpi refugees (see above): through the letter, Kanai and Piya’s consciousness flow into one another and intermingle.

After explaining the motivation behind his letter, Kanai translates his uncle Nirmal’s own transcription of the written version of the story of Bon Bibi – the one that Nirmal had copied in the notebook as Fokir was reciting it to him, although the latter could not read and thus recited from memory (248). The letter is metanarrative, and it stages the translation into writing of environmental oral narratives, their subsequent circulation, their reception by Piya as an inscribed reader, and, through her, their reception by the reader. By unveiling the numerous processes of translation that underlie the story of Bon Bibi, and by drawing attention to its transmediality, the text shows that narratives are themselves the result of the confluence of many trajectories of life, each of the latter leaving a trace of itself in the work of art. Kanai makes this process of textual production explicit when he says that if “[s]uch
flaws as there are in my rendition of it \textit{i.e.}, the story of Bon Bibi] I do not regret, for perhaps they will prevent me from fading from sight as a good translator should. For once, I shall be glad if my imperfections render me visible” (354). Piya feels Kanai’s presence in the narrative when she asks Fokir to sing the song again for her: “he began to chant, and suddenly the language and the music were all around her, flowing like a river, and all of it made sense; she understood it all. Although the sound of the voice was Fokir’s, the meaning was Kanai’s” (360).

This passage shows that Kanai’s and Fokir’s voices and personalities have intermingled in the story of Bon Bibi. Moreover, the simile “flowing like a river” and the metaphor that “the language and the music were all around” reassert the interrelatedness of the narrative sung by Fokir and the Tide Country from which it emerges. More precisely, the narrative is sung \textit{and} read and it becomes part of Piya’s environment, of what literally \textit{surrounds} her. Piya’s physical environment, which is the Tide Country, is therefore augmented with parts of Fokir’s and Kanai’s personalities. At his point, Piya’s environment is also a mingling of consciousness. This is done in a similar fashion to the storyworld of \textit{THT}, which is an intermingling of all the protagonists’ interactional patterns and epistemes, including Nirmal. Indeed, the last part of Kanai’s letter, is a passage of Rilke quoted from the Third Elegy. The presence of Rilke’s poem in the letter is a manifestation of the fact that some aspects of Nirmal’s consciousness have become part of Kanai’s. Thus, in this letter, in its production, its transmission and its reception, the presence of all four protagonists can be felt. The fact that this confluence of the four voices take places in a written letter alludes to the possibilities offered by writing to connect various organisms’ minds, bodies and environments.

\textbf{Nirmal and Kanai}

The Aesthetics of the Tide, and particularly Nirmal’s metaphor of \textit{“the mudbanks of the tide country”} being shaped by \textit{“rivers of language”} (247) induces me to interpret Kanai’s inscribed practice of reading Nirmal’s notebook as a confluence of streams of consciousness. As was said above, Nirmal’s river of language – his interactional pattern as
a writer – is an embodiment of his interactional episteme. Therefore, I envision the act of reading the notebook as a mohona of interactional epistemes, where Kanai’s and Nirmal’s systems of knowledge mingle.

This confluence of consciousness through text is revealed when Kanai actually loses the notebook by accidentally dropping it into the water “as if the wind had been waiting for this one unguarded moment [and] spun [Kanai] around and knocked him sideways into the water” (375-376). Kanai’s loss of the notebook due to the wind is an echo of Nirmal’s transformation, when the latter says that he “open[s him]self to the wind” (171). The connection between the two episodes is not explicit, but the sentence “as if the wind had been waiting for this one unguarded moment” (375) at least alludes to the fact that there is an underlying meaning behind Kanai’s loss. And indeed, by “thrust[ing] his hands into the mud” Kanai for one instant becomes one with the mudbanks, which are, according to Nirmal in his metaphor, shaped by “rivers of language.” It is in this moment of intimate encounter with the materiality of the Tide Country and with its liminality – the mudbanks being the line of contact between water and earth, between river and island, between languages – that Nirmal’s voice is translated from the notebook into Kanai’s mind. Indeed, a few minutes after losing the notebook, Kanai tells his aunt Nilima about the incident and says to her: “[the notebook is not gone] in its entirety. A lot of it is in my head, you know. I’m going to try to put it back together” (emphasis added; 387). Paradoxically, by losing the notebook, Kanai has a chance to reassert Nirmal’s presence as a shaper of mentality. The importance ceases to be the notebook as a material object, and what is now at stake is the circulation of its content, i.e., Nirmal’s interactional episteme comprising “history, poetry, geology” (386) and his experiences in the Tide Country with Kusum, Fokir and Horen. Ultimately, Nirmal succeeds in “mak[ing] sure at least that what happened here [in Morichjhãpi] leaves some trace, some hold upon the memory of the world” (69); his verbal legacy now endures in the readers of his notebook, whose task is to share their understanding of the narrative. Of course, Nirmal’s transmission of knowledge to Kanai through the notebook is highly metafictional, and it invites readers to read proactively and share their understanding so that the stories told in books find their way back in life. The Aesthetics of the Tide, with its
blurring of cultural, ecological and narrative systems makes this transmission of knowledge seamless.

**Piya and Fokir**
It is now necessary to go back to the development of Piya's interactional episteme. At the beginning of the book, Piya's intention of studying the Sundarbans from the point of view of an objective observer detached from her object of study collapses soon after she meets Fokir. After she asks the fisherman, using flashcards, whether he knew where Irrawaddy dolphins are located, the guard who accompanies her boards Fokir's boats and confiscates money from him. When she tries to secretly give some money back to Fokir as compensation for helping her, the guard rushes to her. As he does, “[o]ne of his feet crashe[s] into the chair, throwing her forward, tipping her weight over the gunwale. Suddenly she was falling and the muddy brown water was rushing up to meet her face” (48). The phrasing of the last sentence emphasizes the centrality of Piya's body in the narration: it is the water that comes to Piya, and not the other way around. This phrasing strengthens the centering of the narration around her sense of sight. This all takes place at the very end of a chapter called “The Fall,” and indeed Piya’s fall is quite similar to Kanai’s fall face forward into the mud described above. As for Kanai, Piya’s fall is really a plunging into the material world of the Sundarbans that will enrich her interactional episteme to an extent she does not yet understand. The fall is the first phase of a deeper immersion in the Tide Country.

The beginning of the next chapter told through Piya's focalization develops the dramatization of Piya's epistemic change from observation to experience, first by enabling her to experience for herself the environment of the Irrawaddy dolphins, and then by immersing her in the confluent and deltaic rivers of silt that make up the Tide Country. As if to emphasize the change from a scientific focalization based on observation to an interactional pattern that emphasizes embodiment and embeddedness, the first two paragraphs of the chapter “Snell’s Window” offer an account of how dolphins perceive underwater.
After the description of Snell’s window as being a “transparent disk,” a “floating halo” through which the “oceanic dolphin perceives the world beyond the water” (54), and after explaining how this form of visual perception is impossible in “[r]ivers like the Ganga and the Brahmaputra [that] shroud this window with a curtain of silt” (54), the text shifts to Piya’s interactional pattern when she is underwater (54-55). There, the loss of her ability to situate herself using sight reinforces Piya’s “panic” and “disorientation.” The reduction of her vision to almost naught is followed by an emphasis on embodiment. The lack of oxygenation due to her “breath running out” makes her aware of her body and her environment more intensely; Piya “fe[e][s]” the contact of the “murk,” tastes and smells the “mud,” instead of merely seeing them. In her literal immersion in the waters of the Tide Country, the distance that she thought separated her organism from her environment has shrunk to nothing, and she suddenly experiences more vividly – dangerously so – her embeddedness in the Sundarbans.

The depiction of her literal immersion is enhanced with three analogies: her environment as bodily tissue (“enveloped inside a cocoon,” “its edges seemed always to recede, like the slippery walls of a placental sac”), her environment as textile (“it had become a shroud closing in on her, folding her in its cloudy wrappings”), and her body as environment (“her strength was ebbing,” “her nose and her mouth were swamped with mud and water”). The metaphor of the water as cocoon heralds Piya’s metamorphosis, which is really an epistemic rebirth that is echoed by the simile of the water as a “placental sac.” If the metamorphosis is brought about by the watery environment, the latter is not only elemental but textual (in the etymological sense): Piya is now enmeshed in the ecosystemic “shroud” of water and earth; she is caught within a tangle of mud. Piya’s immersion becomes entanglement, and this entanglement is made manifest by the last metaphors that compares Piya’s diminishing strength to the “ebbing” waters so characteristic of the Tide Country, and that describes her mouth as being “swamped,” which is reminiscent of the floods called forth by oceanic waters during the flow. In this episode, what was a simple fall into the water becomes through close-reading an episode that prefigures Piya’s subsequent transformation whereby she gives up her romantic idea of Nature freed of humans and is
forced to accept that human communities and cultures are as much part of the environment as animals, plants and minerals are.

Fokir’s importance in the emergence of the storyworld is due to his activity as a fisherman, especially in the first part of the novel “The Ebb: Bhata,” where Fokir’s fishing activity dictates where Piya goes, and what she experiences, and therefore also what the reader gets access to. Fokir’s influence on how she perceives her surroundings is made visible when he leads her to a location regularly populated by Irrawaddy dolphins. On her first day with Fokir, Piya had tried with no luck to locate the orcaella using her binoculars, that is, using her sense of sight augmented with technology. On the second day, while Piya is sleeping, Fokir navigates through a “dense fog [resulting] from the collision between the cold night air and the water’s warmth” (112), suddenly stops and drops anchor. Due to the fog Piya can no longer rely on vision only, but has to use her sense of hearing. The narration insists on the fact that Piya’s active listening is an embodied practice that engages her hands (“Cupping her hands around her ears”), her legs (“She sprang into a kneeling position”), her mind (“she listened hard,” “listened carefully, tuning her ears to the fog,” “close attention”), and also her sense of proprioception, for the sounds are mapped in relation to the boat (“there were several dolphins in the vicinity of the boat”) and by extension in relation to her body (“The sounds were scattered in direction,” “some [sounds] were close at hand”). It can be said that Piya’s shift in interactional pattern from sight to sound is brought about by Fokir, who has deliberately taken Piya to a place where she would be surrounded by dolphins.

Piya wonders about the reason for this newly found proximity with the animals; they are now literally populating her environment; they are part of her direct surroundings. She suspects it is thanks to Fokir’s skilled practice of navigating the channels of the delta, although she has trouble understanding how he could have known where the Irrawaddy dolphins would be located. Piya is indeed “baffled” (113) when she realizes that it was Fokir’s intention that called forth the encounter with the dolphins. What she thought was a chance encounter becomes a mystery for her and lays the foundation of a tension between scientific observation and traditional ecological knowledge. Piya indeed wonders: “how
could [Fokir] have known that [the dolphins] would be there on that day, at that time” (113), the latter being "anything but predictable in their movements" (113). At this point, Fokir serves as a guide that carries Piya across the Tide Country, takes her through the Sundarbans. Fokir becomes a translator in the etymological sense. He does participate in the weaving forth of the storyworld, although Piya does not yet perceive his agency.

The connection between Fokir’s trajectory of life and the mapping of the storyworld is made more explicit in an episode where Piya uses Fokir’s process of setting up fishing lines across the river to facilitate her mapping of the river’s depth. Although Piya is at first worried that “they might end up disrupting each other’s work” (140), she soon realizes that Fokir’s interactional patterns and hers are complementary both temporally and spatially, and their collaboration proves to be advantageous to both. This episode shows a shift in Piya’s attitude towards Fokir. Initially, she thinks that her accidental meeting with him may cause her problems, but she realizes that it is the opposite: Fokir is going to facilitate her research. The combination of the processes of recording the riverscape and of fishing in it is described from Piya’s perspective as a surprise, as a miraculous activity, and as a “seamless intertwining of … pleasures and … purposes” (141).

However, the one who is indispensable to this joint undertaking is Fokir, not Piya – despite her saying that it “was just as much to [his] advantage as it was to hers” (141). Without Fokir, Piya would not be able to do her measurements; by contrast, without Piya, Fokir could do the fishing just as well. The fact that the narration is focalized through Piya should not make one forget that her experience of the Sundarbans is contingent on Fokir’s interactional pattern; Piya’s overt interaction with the environment is subordinated to Fokir’s covert interaction, which was hinted at in the passage where Piya sleeps and is taken to the exact position where the dolphins are. The reader and Piya simultaneously learn about the fisherman’s importance in their fashioning a representation of a world. Piya’s reliance on Fokir’s interactional pattern is made manifest to her in the fact that Fokir’s fishing lines “act… like a guide-rail” that “serve… the same purpose” (141) as her GPS monitor. This analogy between Fokir’s fishing equipment and Piya’s positioning system can be extended to Fokir and Piya’s interactional patterns. As Piya understates, “their jobs had not proved to
be utterly incompatible” (emphasis added; 141), and “it had proved possible for two such different people to pursue their own ends simultaneously” (emphasis added; 141). In Piya’s mind, it is not simply their gears that match, but their very activity. It could be said that Fokir’s intention pervades all of Piya’s actions, perceptions and emotions; Fokir functions as an underlying process out of which emerges Piya’s interaction with the environment of the Sundarbans.

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The narrative strategy that consists in not reporting Fokir’s thoughts explicitly draws attention to the mediating function of language, and to the technique of focalization itself. I have shown above that in _THT_ the consciousness of fictional human organisms is not a bounded entity; it is a flow whereby various minds, languages, bodies and environments intertwine in movement and interaction. Piya is a good example of this process of confluence: from the moment she meets Fokir, her consciousness is no longer individual, but is entangled with Fokir’s. To the reader, Fokir’s thoughts are thus not voiced by the narrator, but by the character herself. This process of alterocharacterization lays bare the foundational connection that brings Piya and Fokir together. Because of the barrier of language, Piya is forced to deduce Fokir’s thoughts; she is forced to resonate with his being, to empathize with his emotions. This resonance is made manifest in an episode where Piya deduces Fokir’s intention by watching him: “Soon it became clear that Fokir was making preparations for a meal” (96). Although this sentence grounds focalization in Piya’s mind (she is the one who witnesses Fokir’s actions and deduces his intention), it is done implicitly, as if to emphasize not Piya’s perception, but Fokir’s activity, which is what is recounted in detail and thus vicariously experienced in reading.

The vivid quality of the scene is produced by the presence of visual (“their colours – red yellow, bronze – were bright in the light of the … flame”), aural (“the hissing flame,” “the spitting oil”), olfactory (“with pinches of turmeric and chili, coriander and cumin”) and kinesthetic (“he opened,” “he unrolled and laid out,” “his hands began to fly over the slips of the paper”) units of interaction. This creates a sensory profusion that permits an intense immersion in the described situation. Fokir’s use of spices and the smell it produces then bring back foundational memories of Piya’s past, thereby linking the foundations of her
being to the fisherman’s embodied practice; “The smells were harsh on Piya’s nose. It was a long time now since she had eaten food of this kind” (96). Fokir’s activity is mesmerizing, and Piya cannot “tear her eyes from his flying fingers” (96), which is a repetition of the previous passage (“his hands began to fly”) and a prefiguration of the following (“it was her mother’s hands she was watching, as they flew between those colours and the flames”).

The fact that Piya cannot stop watching Fokir points to a deep connection between them in the present, a connection that is then echoed by a re-connection between Piya’s present self and her past self through memories. The fact that Fokir’s hands become “her mother’s hands” without transition words suggests that Piya is now perceiving Fokir as a figure of care. This seamless analepsis gives the impression that Piya’s consciousness is flowing back and forth between now and then, between here and there, and all this thanks to the expressivity of Fokir’s hands. In a sense, Fokir’s “flying fingers” tell a story and carry Piya across the borders of time; Fokir’s embodied activity translates Piya back to a situation that she has experienced already. The narrative power that resides in Fokir’s embodied activity is made overt in the following paragraph, which mentions that the “[t]he spell of Fokir’s fingers [is] broken only when a breeze carried the acrid odour of burning chillies directly into her face” (97). The term “spell” to qualify how Fokir’s activity affects Piya is crucial in setting up the ontological connection between interactional patterns, water currents and interactional epistemes.

Moving forward in the story, in the second part of the narrative, after the incident with the tiger, Piya and Fokir leave Kanai with the large boat and take Fokir’s small boat to continue the geographical survey. They go too far away from Lusibari and are forced to face a gigantic tidal wave coming in. In order to protect Piya, Fokir uses his sari to knot himself and her around a tree, so that they will not be taken away by the tidal wave. As with Kanai before on the island with the tiger, this episode where Piya faces the dangers of the Sundarbans will irremediably change her attitude towards the Tide Country. But if the

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118 Etymologically, the word “fly” comes from pre-Germanic *pleugh*-, *plough*-, *plugh*-and means “to flow, float”, which is interesting in this context, for Fokir is compared continually to a river, and rivers in *THT* are metonyms for narratives.
description of Kanai’s transformation makes use of figurative language to describe how he is “swamped by flood of pure sensations” (329), Piya will be swept by the Tide Country literally when the tidal wave will reach her (383). The beginning of this episode prefigures Piya’s new attitude by making use of her embodiment and embeddedness to lay bare her metamorphosis. The peculiar position of Piya’s body between Fokir – a local inhabitant – and a mangrove tree – a plant typical of the liminal ecosystem of the Sundarbans – represents bodily Piya’s soon-to-be-found function as a mediator between humans and the environment rather than merely as a detached observer. The intimacy of this scene where her body gets “attuned” to her direct surroundings, and later, when her “lungs adapt… to the rhythm of [Fokir’s] diaphragm” strengthen Piya’s perception of her embeddedness in the milieu.

As Piya becomes enmeshed within the Tide Country’s ecosystem literally by being tied to one of its tree, she also enmeshes herself more tightly with its inhabitants when Fokir “knots” his fingers around her and when she begins imitating his actions consciously (“she did the same”). Piya’s merging with her surroundings is haptic – she is in contact with Fokir and the tree – but it is also physiological: Piya and Fokir are “joined by a thin membrane of sweat.” This particular sentence draws attention to the fact that the boundaries of the organism are permeable; the body is not hermetically sealed from its environment, but rather is in a continuous process of flux. In this climactic episode of the novel, the blending of their sweat is akin to the blending of rivers of silt and tidal current. As Piya resonates with Fokir’s breathing, as she encounters him, as she mirrors him willingly, she gets acquainted with something intangible: intimacy and entanglement.

The fact that this intimacy with her milieu takes place in the extreme situation of having to face a storm and a tidal wave reinforces the intensity of Piya’s emotional reaction. Her attention is heightened and the narration mirrors this, for instance when the text introduces Piya’s hearing vividly: the repetition of the word “noise,” the assonance of “noise,” “storm” and “roar,” and the overall onomatopoeic quality of “noise,” “storm,” “roar,” “heard” and “rumbling” all contribute to immersing the reader in the situation. The fact that all of Piya’s senses are engaged in her perception reinforces this feeling of withness. In the sentence
“Stealing a glance through her fingers, Piya glimpsed something” brings in Piya’s vision, but this time it is not binoculars that Piya uses to perceive what is ahead, but rather it is her fingers that function as mediators. The vividness of the narration is enhanced by the use of three similes that compare the phenomenon Piya experiences to a “cascading waterfall” (sound), to a “wall … hurtling towards them” (sight), and to “a cityblock” whose “pavement” is the river (sight). These apocalyptic visual analogies emphasize Piya’s fear, which is then touched upon with a description of her sense of proprioception being engaged after “Piya’s mind [goes] blank as disbelief yield[s] to recognition” and “[h]er fingers [go] numb in fear.” This strong emotional reaction where the mind ceases to function and to process the body is reminiscent of Kanai’s loss of ability to use language on the island. With Piya, the emotion is even stronger as she loses sensation in her fingers. Here, the fact that Piya is losing her ability to manipulate her hands can be linked to the beginning of the novel where Piya makes almost exclusive use of her fingers to hold the binoculars that allow her to scan the waters. By losing this ability, Piya’s function as an observer is also lost, and by losing her “mind,” her function as a scientist is undermined too.

In the last section of this episode on page 383, the tidal wave finally hits Piya and Fokir. The simile of the “dam … breaks over their heads” fleshes out Piya’s experience, but it also shows that Piya apprehends the tidal wave using images she is familiar with – as is the case in the second paragraph of the passage, with the simile of the wave as a cityblock. This passage is revealing of the major epistemic transformation that Piya undergoes in the novel. The tidal wave, as an overwhelming environmental phenomenon, is a defining feature of the Sundarbans. The tidal wave functions as a metonym for the ecosystem of the Tide Country – including its transcultural nature. As it sweeps over Piya’s body, the tidal wave also sweeps over Piya’s cultural system of value; as it “pull[s] at their bodies as if trying to dismember them,” it also attempts to refashion Piya’s interactional episteme. Piya’s difficulty in apprehending the stimuli produced by the wave in the second paragraph echoes her earlier difficulty in comprehending Fokir’s actions during the execution of the tiger. However, the fact that Fokir is so close to Piya while she is swept over by the embodiment of the Tide Country, and that the verbs “encircled” and “circling”
are used to refer to both the fisherman and the water, reaffirms the ontological connection between the local character, the Tide Country and the Tide culture. Fokir himself functions as a metonym for the Tide Country, and his closeness to Piya enables the latter to envision the relationship between humans, cultures and environment differently. As Fokir’s presence around her is so manifest, he becomes a part of her environment that she cannot discard as an interference, like she was doing regarding the inhabitants of the Sundarbans.

During this event where Fokir gives his life to protect Piya, she gives up her deep ecologist way of thinking and adopts a more humane and compassionate understanding of the situation in the Sundarbans, indeed an attitude closer to that of the local population. In the first part of her trip in the Sundarbans, Piya has “no … idea of what her own place [is] in the great scheme of things” (35), although she knows that “it [is] the exclusion of intimate involvements that ma[k]es a place into a field and the line\textsuperscript{119} between the two was marked by a taboo she could not cross, except at the risk of betraying her vocation” (112). But after Fokir’s sacrifice, she knows better: she decides to help Nilima in her undertaking of ameliorating the way of life of the local communities. After publishing some of the results of her survey, Piya receives offers of funding. Instead of simply dedicating those funds to preserving an idealistic ecosystem devoid of humans, Piya asks Nilima for her help (397). Clearly, Piya’s interactional episteme has changed; it now includes the local population into the preservation scheme. Instead of simply alienating humans from Nature’s intended structure, Piya now understands that humans play an important part in the ecosystem. She even explicitly mentions the “local fishermen’s” involvement (397), as an acknowledgement of Fokir’s contribution to her scientific survey.

The novel makes manifest the confluence of Piya and Fokir’s interactional epistemes in another way: through the recording of their overlapping interactional patterns. Before Fokir’s death, when he helps Piya determine the position of the Irrawaddy dolphins, she records their positions and their movements with her GPS monitor (398). Therefore, Fokir’s

\textsuperscript{119} The word “line” is interesting, as it may point to Nirmal’s statement some “\textit{pages are ruled with lines that are invisible to some people, while being for others, as real, as charged and as volatile as high-voltage cables}” (224). Here, the line of exclusion that Piya sets is hers only, and it is what separates her from the object of her study.
interactional pattern as a fisherman is embodied in the GPS monitor in the form of a map that traces the various river channels and where they spotted dolphins. A portion of Fokir’s situated knowledge, skilled activity, personal history – overall, a representation of his trajectory of life – is recorded in Piya’s device and will be used for scientific research. The GPS not only maps the rivers of the Tide Country, it also maps the “river” of Fokir’s life. Because it superimposes their journey together and their differing reasons for doing it on a map of the region, Piya’s GPS monitor becomes an embodiment of the confluence inherent in the Tide Country; it becomes a technological mohona that has captured the intermingling of Piya’s and Fokir’s interactional patterns and epistemes. The map thus occupies the same function as the Story of Bon Bibi and Nirmal’s journal: it becomes a metanarrative object that opens up a self-reflexive reading of *THT*, in which the representation becomes a metonym for the represented.

4.6 Reading *The Hungry Tide*, Reading the Tide Country

Reading *THT* cannot be disentangled from reading the Tide Country. The plot of the narrative and the world the narrative describes are two aspects of the same process whereby the misleading concept “Sundarbans” becomes the sensuous place called “Tide Country.” The “beautiful forest” connoted by the term “Sundarban” (8) is an exotization of a dangerous, inhospitable, threatening, lethal and mysterious place; it is a foreigner’s view of the Tide Country, the “*bhatir desh*” (8) whose qualities are unveiled as the protagonists enmesh themselves more and more into its texture. As the storyworld becomes dynamic through the topics of the tide, of the mohona, and of the mangrove, the place acquires a life of its own that encompasses and brings together local inhabitants and foreigners, animals, plants, and minerals, the natural and the built, the master and the subaltern, the urban, the rustic and the cosmopolitan, and so on. As the protagonists make their way through the Tide Country, as they navigate the many channels of the delta, as they experience the mangrove forests of the islands and the muddy waters of the rivers, their interactional patterns bring life to the storyworld and immerse the
reader into the intricacies of environmental ethics and politics. In reading, the reader performs each journey vicariously, and in trying to find coherence in the narrative through the Aesthetics of the Tide, the reader is invited to weave these lines of life into one and write the text of the Tide Country. The fabric of the storyworld that the reader produces is polyvocal, but it is also polymorphic. It is a fabric made up of voices, of texts, of representations, but it is also constituted by actions, perceptions, emotions, and imaginations. As one’s interaction with the environment is never disconnected from one’s ecological system of knowledge, when Piya, Kanai and Nirmal are carried across the channels of the Tide Country by Fokir and Horen, it is also what these foreigners embody through metonymy that journeys and leaves traces of its passage, colonizing each world, like the mangrove spores. But the foreigners are themselves colonized by their intermingling with the overflowing interactional episteme of the local inhabitants, whose narrative of hope and sorrow, of order and balance, and of interference and greed floods the protagonists’ minds and bodies forever. The metanarrative elements of THT then invite the reader to think of all narratives as journeys where they learn about themselves and about the world. THT becomes a history of the transformation of a place and of a person, and as Amitav Ghosh himself says to Dipesh Chakrabarty in December 2000, “[h]istory is never more compelling than when it gives us insights into oneself and the ways in which one’s own experience is constituted” (Chakrabarty and Ghosh 147).
5. Ecopoetics and the Law of Country in *Carpentaria*

5.1 Australian Aboriginal Literatures

Alexis Wright was born in 1950. She is from the Waanyi people, from the highlands to the south of the Gulf of Carpentaria. The novel *Carpentaria* was first published in 2006. It was Wright’s second novel, published nine years after *Plains of Promise* (1997) and seven years before *The Swan Book* (2013).

Wright’s literary style derives from Aboriginal traditions of oral storytelling, and as a result, it can be quite defamiliarizing to non-Aboriginal readers. As Kate Rigby puts it, “non-Waanyi readers … are made powerfully aware that they are entering foreign territory in reading *Carpentaria*” (124). However, Wright’s style is unique and somehow departs from other Aboriginal writings of the twentieth-century, especially from social realists form of literature, which emerged in the 1960s with Kevin Gilbert, Jack Johnson, and Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Van Toorn, 2000, 29). But unlike her first novel *Plains of Promise*, Wright’s second novel does not belong to magic realism either; quite on the contrary, far from social and magic realisms, *Carpentaria*, with its “equivocality in language and form” exhibits “an aesthetics reminiscent of modernism” (Ravenscroft 70).

One of the difficulties in reading *Carpentaria* is that its storyworld emerges from two contradictory narrative processes. The first process consists in setting up a satire of postcolonial politics that functions as a critique of Australian history and society, including internal Aboriginal politics. The novel juxtaposes politicized versions of Aboriginal systems of knowledge and let them play against one another. This process makes it difficult to understand Wright’s position in the debate, and to some readers it may be quite unsettling. The second process consists in the creation of a poetics of the Law that offers one all-encompassing knowledge system based on the Serpent Dreaming and through which the text demonstrates the beauty, complexity and equivocality of Aboriginal systems of knowing. This poetics of the Law comes out in the novel through the entanglement of Dreaming, Country and Story. If the allegory of postcolonial politics dismantles and unsettles, the poetics of the Law coheres. However, tensions are produced when the poetics of the Law
and the satire of postcolonial politics are read together. The problem of this tension is resolved as the politicized versions of the Aboriginal episteme are coalesced in Will Phantom’s environmentalist resistance, which takes the form of an initiation journey to find his wife Hope and his son Bala and rescue them from the clutches of the mining company.

One of the strategies of colonialism in Australia was to erase the presence of Aboriginal groups while asserting the presence of Europeans. Geography and cartography became tools that could rewrite Aboriginal history from a colonialist point of view. Maps thus acquire power and the process of mapping becomes a controversial undertaking, as much political as it is scientific, for the “precolonial” Aboriginal presence must be overwritten by denying that Aboriginal communities were grounded in space, time and ecology. This process of erasure was based on the doctrine of *terra nullius*, literally meaning “land belonging to nobody” (Macintyre 33). *Terra nullius* was a “fiction of Australia [as] a land that until its settlement in 1788 lacked human habitation, law, government or history” (Macintyre 4). This “legal doctrine that allowed the firstcomer to claim a vacant territory” (Macintyre 33) was used to claim Australia, but the “vacancy” of the land had to be shown. Colonial maps are therefore more than a representation of space; they are a representation of the erasure of a group’s function in ecology.

Postcolonial counterdiscourses, by contrast, reassert the presence of Aboriginal peoples in ecology, or Country, by providing a radical form of mapping based on oral storytelling. Partly because it requires a certain creative and critical effort to read it, *Carpentaria* asserts the presence and validity of Aboriginal ways of knowing by establishing an allegory of postcolonial politics, wherein the complex interplay of interactional epistememes, laws and the Law are translated and mapped into a narrative system. This translator of Aboriginal Country, Dreaming and Law is a kind of narrator, which I argue is also an *inscribed Aboriginal storyteller*. Therefore, whether in descriptions of colonial knowledge systems or Aboriginal knowledge systems, the presence of the indigenous community is always actively voiced.

By using extensively and aesthetically the authoritative figure of the *inscribed storyteller*, *Carpentaria* creates a new literary mode that combines principles of Waanyi
epistemology, ontology and storytelling (Devlin-Glass) with principles of the postmodern novel. *Carpentaria* is a hybrid between Aboriginal oral traditions, where stories are deeply related to journeys, features of the landscape and knowledge systems – *i.e.*, linguistic and experiential narratives are thought to co-emerge – and a postmodernist written tradition where rigid narrative and conceptual structures and categories are dissolved. Indeed, if a story cannot be separated from what it depicts, makes up what it depicts, and always relates to what it depicts, then the story can be understood as a metonym for what it depicts. The result is that stories, journeys, country and knowledge function as metonyms for each other.

The notion of interactional pattern enables me to include non-human beings in the emergence of the storyworld without discrimination. In the context of Wright’s Aboriginal counterdiscourse of resistance against European colonial history, it is important to take ancestral beings and spirits into account, for they constitute the original movement of creation whose poetic ripples are enacted by human trajectories of life. As for the notion of interactional episteme, it allows me to better apprehend the counterdiscursive nature of the text by showing how the latter crystallizes all sorts of narratives into a reflexive and transcultural system of knowledge. This all-encompassing interactional episteme of the Pricklebush community thus ironically subverts the colonial process of cultural assimilation by reversing it, thereby critiquing the colonial appropriation of Aboriginal lands and cultures.

### 5.2 Aboriginal Epistemologies and Ontologies: Country, Law, Dreaming, Story

In order to understand the configuration of the narrative system of *Carpentaria*, it is necessary to understand the system of knowledge that underlies the storyworld. Three entangled concepts form the basis of the contemporary Aboriginal epistemologies and ontologies that inform *Carpentaria*: Country, Law and Dreaming. In the first chapter of her monograph *Nourishing Terrains*, Deborah Rose explains that “Country is a place that gives and receives life. Not just imagined or represented, it is lived in and lived with” (Rose 1996, 7). She goes on and says that unlike the common use of the word, in the Aboriginal uses of
Country, it is a proper noun: “People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person [for] country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life” (7). In Rose’s interpretation, Country is the matrix of a “system of multisited, multicentred cross-cutting and overlapping subjectivities” (2002, 177). It is “multidimensional [and] consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air” (177). There is no equivalent term in English for the equivocalness and idiosyncrasies of Country. However, what is important to keep in mind is that Country encompasses both ecological and sociocultural systems.

In the extract above, Rose enumerates the various beings that compose Country. Among them, she cites “people, animals, plants, Dreamings” (emphasis added; 177). This inclusion of Dreamings into the matrix of intersubjectivity that form Country may look surprising: although it is known that in Aboriginal epistemologies, features of the ecosystem are said to have been created by ancestral being who roamed the earth and left their creative essence on various places (Morphy, 1998; Ingold, 2002; Devlin-Glass), it is less well known that the very terminology to describe these processes is contested. Rose refers to the creative beings as Dreamings, but she also points out that the concepts of Dreaming and Dreamtime hold semantic variations. However, as she explains, “[w]hether the world comes into being by Dreaming, by history, by Story, or in Dreamtime, Aboriginal people’s explanations about this on-going creation of the world are similar throughout the continent” (1996, 26). Indeed, if Rose includes Dreamings in the beings that compose Country and co-emerge alongside humans, plants and animals, it is because she very consciously avoids imposing onto Aboriginal understandings a Cartesian dualism that would separate the spiritual from the material. On the contrary, Rose’s understanding of Country as being multidimensional, multisited, multicentred, cross-cutting, and overlapping is completely compatible with the presence of Dreamings alongside humans, plants and animals.

120 Though the notion of “ecosystem” does cover most of the spatiotemporal aspects of Country, it lacks the personification – country is alive and speaks – and the cultural aspects – Country furnishes one with subjectivity.
Rose cites Mussolini Harvey, a Yanyuwa man from the Gulf of Carpentaria, to describe what Dreamings are in more detail. According to him, the “Dreamings are [Aboriginal people’s] ancestors, no matter if they are fish, birds, men, women, animals, wind or rain” (27). He goes on and explains that “[t]he kangaroo Dreaming has been there since the beginning, the wild fig Dreaming has been there since the beginning, many other women’s Dreamings are also there. In other places men and women’s Dreamings were together from a long time ago” (27). What is important is the continuous and manifest presence of Dreaming through the ages. The creative beings remain in the present and are thus very much part of Country. This presence manifests itself in various ways on features of the landscape, on ecological processes and on sociocultural practices. The connection between human cultures, Country and Dreaming resides in the Law.

The Law is the third important concept that underlies Australian Aboriginal epistemologies. The Aboriginal Law is to be understood as a collection of rules and statements that regulate social and ecological interaction and that are embedded in place. The Law is as much experiential as it is linguistic, and it is co-emergent with Dreamings and Country. Mussolini Harvey, cited by Rose, explains that the Law is the Australian Aboriginal way of life, the rules that underlie this way of life and the art that springs from this way of life (27). All of these come from the Dreamings – *i.e.*, from the trajectories of life of the ancestral beings who have left the creative essence in the features of the landscape. The Law is not simply a collection of knowledge; it is also the practices of life and the artistic reenactments of Dreamings. The fact that the Law is made from the Dreamings creates a connection between Law and Country. As is implied by the enumeration of entities that Aboriginal people must “keep up” (27) – country, Dreamings, Law, people – Aboriginal life is holistic and is dedicated as much to protecting *ways of being* as conserving *ways of knowing* and *ways of doing*. Respecting the Law means respecting both Country and ancestors, but it also entails actively keeping Country and Dreamings alive. The peculiarity of Aboriginal systems of knowledge is that they are intricately entangled with their environment. As such, preserving the ecological matrix of Country is a prerequisite to keep
the Dreamings of ancestral beings alive, thereby maintaining a sociocultural continuity between generations, a Law.

Following Paul Ricoeur, who himself follows Martin Heidegger, Jonathan Bate explains that in responding to works of art, “we open ourselves to another person’s ‘project’, to an alternative way of being in the world” (Bate 250). He suggests that artworks can be envisioned as “imaginary ideal ecosystems” and that “by reading them, by inhabiting them, we can start to imagine what it might be like to live differently upon the earth”. (250-251). Carpentaria is one such “imaginary ideal ecosystem,” but it is infused with such a peculiar sense of “being in the world” that, interpreted as an overlapping of reader’s and author’s horizons of experiences (Bate 249), it has the power to provoke a “horizon change” (Jauss 14) in both the reader’s sense of self and in the canon of Australian literature.

Reading Carpentaria really amounts to mapping the country round the Gulf of Carpentaria, but not from a European scientific and three-dimensional fabric, but rather from the triadic dimension of Country-Dreaming-Law. This triadic system could be roughly translated in narratological terms as storyworld/interactional pattern/interactional episteme, or in scientific terms as ecosystem/organism-environment processes/ecology. In that sense, mapping the relations of the storyworld cannot be done without taking into account the interactional patterns that make up this mesh of trajectories, which in turn entails that reading the novel causes me to map the interactional episteme of the fictional Aboriginal Pricklebush community. However, because of the allegorical mode of the text, and thanks to the metonymic quality of Aboriginal epistemologies, which both ground reading in the domain of everyday life, I am also made to think of the actual world when I read Carpentaria. To a certain extent, the reader is made to map the relations of the Gulf Country, which enacts its actants and unveils its ecological foundations. Of course, this mapping is far from complete, and the text on numerous occasions draws attention to this gap in representation, and I would even go so far to say that the text only scratches the surface of the Gulf. Indeed, if reading Carpentaria sheds light on principles of Aboriginal epistemologies, it is of course primarily a literary experience and not a guide to the Gulf Country or a full initiation into the Law.
5.3 Mapping *Carpentaria*: The Ecopoetics of the Law

The first three pages of the novel are crucial in defining the triadic relationship between Country, Dreaming and Law. As in *ADOS* with the voicing of the Dene lands and in *THT* with Nirmal’s mytho- and eco-poetic account of the Tide Country, reading the opening of *Carpentaria* plunges the reader into a defamiliarizing storyworld where the laws of Cartesian metaphysics, Newtonian physics and scientific geology no longer apply. The first paragraph depicts how the Serpent Dreaming roams around the Gulf, “mov[ing] gracialously” and “crawl[ing] on its heavy belly” (1). The second and third paragraphs explain how the traces left by the Serpent Dreaming become the features of geology and the ecosystem and create Country: the serpent is “scoring deep into – scouring down through” (1) the Gulf, leaving its traces and its marks on the land; it is “creating the many rivers in its wake” (2) and its essence is “attached to the lives of the river people like skin” (2); the tidal movement is the “breathing rhythms” (2) of the serpent. The fourth and fifth paragraphs explain how the Law emerges from Country and Dreaming: indeed the “inside knowledge about this river and coastal region is the Aboriginal Law handed down through the ages” (2), and in order to “catch this breath in the river you need the patience of one who can spend days doing nothing” (2). Finally the sixth and seventh paragraphs show how the colonial settlements in the Gulf of Carpentaria are inappropriate to the connection of Country, Dreaming and Law as envisioned in Aboriginal epistemologies: the “river … spurns human endeavour in one dramatic gesture … as it did to the frontier town built on its banks in the hectic heyday of colonial vigour. A town intended to serve as a port for shipping trade for the hinterland of Northern Australia” (3).

At the narrative level of discourse, eco-poiesis (as the movement of emergence of the storyworld) is therefore based on the Serpent Dreaming that creates the matrix of Country, and then on the Law that emerges in the engagement with Country. Ecopoiesis occurs at the junctions of Dreaming, Country and Law. However, at the level of the story, as pages 1-3 make clear, Dreaming both engenders and is Country: in story-time, Dreaming and
Country are isochronous, and in story-space they are isotopic,\textsuperscript{121} and this is shown by the use of metonymic\textsuperscript{122} expressions such as the “tidal river snake of flowing mud” (2) and “the serpent flows back to its own circulating mass of shallow waters” (2). Moreover, Dreaming/Country both engender and are the Law. Indeed, the Law is the “inside knowledge about [the] river and coastal region” (emphasis added; 2); the word “inside” suggests that the Law co-emerges simultaneously with Dreaming and Country. This is reinforced by the sentence about the “particular kind of knowledge to go with the river [which is] about there being no difference between you and the movement of water” (3). If the movement of water is the Serpent Dreaming and the Gulf Country, then the quote above shows that both are also the Pricklebush Law. The opening of Carpentaria thus establishes a matrix where interactional pattern and interactional episteme are metonyms for each other. This metonymic relationality plays itself out as an intermingling of interactional patterns (journeys and Dreaming), storyworld (landscape and Country) and interactional epistemes (knowledge system and Law), each of the three always co-refering to each other. Ultimately, this Aboriginal epistemology defies Euclidian space, linearity and causality, and also bypasses traditional linguistic referentiality, and as I will show, it is enacted by the multilayered and polysemous quality of the narrative system.

In his 1967-essay entitled “Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art,” anthropologist Gregory Bateson has a section called “The Corrective Nature of Art,” in which he explains that “the unaided consciousness (unaided by art, dreams, and the like) can never appreciate … the systemic nature of mind” (Bateson 145). Bateson argues that “art … has a positive function in maintaining what [he calls] ‘wisdom’ [i.e., a sense or recognition of the fact of circuitry, and] in correcting a too purposive view of life and making the view more systemic” (147). In the particular context of Carpentaria and in light of Bateson’s analysis, the question of the function of the written narrative must be asked: where does the written medium fit in the metonymic matrix of Dreaming/Country/Law? The answer may

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item They share the same space.
\item I call this a metonymy, and not a metaphor, because in the Aboriginal episteme, the relationship between the serpent and the river is not based primarily on similarity in appearance, but on contiguity in existence.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
appear simple at first glance, but it has wide implications: Story connects the three entities and enables them to form one. In the storyworld, then, Story tangles itself up within the already-entangled system of Dreaming/Country/Law. But Story is transdiegetic: it crosses the boundaries of the act of telling through metalepsis and metafiction and allows the reader to have a sense of the systemic nature of Aboriginal epistemologies. The metafictional and ecopoetic structure of Carpentaria provides a sense of the nonlinear, dynamic, multilayered, polysemous and, most important of all, holistic nature of the entanglement of Story, Dreaming, Country and Law.

The transdiegetic quality of Story comes to the surface in the opening of the narrative; the text, with its peculiar use of second-person pronouns, imperatives, interrogatives and onomatopoeia, draws attention to the fact that an inscribed storyteller is telling the story of the storyworld being created, and that this process of ecopoiesis is inextricably connected to the interaction of the implied audience with the novel. For instance, the serpent is said to have “moved graciously – if you had been watching with the eyes of a bird hovering in the sky far above the ground” (emphasis added; 1). Here, by including the second-person pronoun “you,” the inscribed storyteller creates a visual connection between the Serpent Dreaming and the embodied presence of the implied audience. By shifting the perspective from the sky to the land – the serpent “came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity” (emphasis added; 1) – and then back from the land to the sky, the inscribed storyteller gives the reader a bird’s eye view of the creation of Country, while creating a sense of oscillating focalization. The involvement of the reader in the creation of Country is reinforced when the inscribed storyteller directly addresses her audience using the imperative mode: “Picture the creative serpent, scoring deep into – scouring down through – the slippery underground of the mudflats” (emphasis added; 1). Here again, the consonance of “scoring” and “scouring” creates a sense of oscillating pattern, but more interestingly, it attracts attention to the marks and traces made by the serpent. The specific use of the word “scoring” here semantically and phonetically alludes to the practices of body

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123 The embodied presence of birds is a recurrent pattern in Carpentaria, the former indicating the convergence of Dreaming/Country/Law.
scarring and body painting in initiation ceremonies, thereby associating the Serpent Dreaming with important sociocultural events in Aboriginal communities. The passage suggests that witnessing the Serpent Dreaming in written form has some semblance to witnessing it in real life or in a performance. At the very least, the reader is requested to imagine the Dreaming roaming through Country, as the sentence “Imagine the serpent’s breathing rhythms as the tide flows inland” (2) also suggests.

Despite these elements, the inscribed storyteller makes it clear that experiencing the Serpent movement is no easy task, especially for an audience not initiated to Waanyi Country and Law:

To catch this breath in the river\textsuperscript{124} you need the patience of one who can spend days doing nothing. If you wait under the rivergum where those up-to-no-good Mission-bred kids accidentally hanged Cry-baby Sally, the tip of the dead branch points to where you will see how the serpent’s breath fights its way through in a tunnel of wind, creating ripples that shimmer silver. (2)

This passage makes it impossible for outsiders to completely comprehend the Serpent Dreaming. By grounding the position of the “tunnel of wind, creating ripples that shimmer silver” in a situation only half-described – what is the exact rivergum referred to here? what does the dead branch point towards? who is the person referred to as “Cry-baby Sally”? – the inscribed storyteller simultaneously and cleverly makes overt and covert the position of the river where the Serpent manifests itself in shimmering ripples. This play with overtness and covertness is a manifestation of the secret-sacred quality of this locus where one can “catch [the Serpent’s] breath in the river,” and the reader is probably without the requisite “patience,” the material means or the level of initiation required to explore that hint.

This semi-revelation of the Serpent’s whereabouts is developed a few lines later, when the inscribed storyteller, after affirming that the “inside knowledge” of the region is the Law “handed down through the ages since time began” (2), asks its audience:

Otherwise, how would one know where to look for the hidden underwater courses in the vast flooding mud plains, full of serpents and fish in the monsoon season? Can someone who did not grow up in a place that is sometimes under water, sometimes bone-dry, know when the trade winds blowing off the southern and northern hemispheres will merge in summer? Know the moment of climatic change better than they know themselves? (2)

\textsuperscript{124} Here, the Serpent’s “breathing rhythms” are said to be the origin of the tide (2).
Here again, the inscribed storyteller forces the implied audience to interrogate the impossibility for outsiders of finding a clear referent in the Serpent Dreaming, while at the same time mentioning those places and processes of Country so important to *Carpentaria*: the flooding of the plains, the merging of southern and northern wind currents. By teasing her readership in such a fashion, the inscribed storyteller shows that Aboriginal knowledge, the Law, is not about empiricism or scientific method, it is about enmeshment and initiation. Readers are reminded that their knowledge of the region of the Gulf is simply not enough to completely grasp the complexity of Country, Dreaming and Law. Knowing is a question of emplacement, of integrating oneself into the matrix of relations that constitute Country and of which Dreaming and Law are constituents. Reading *Carpentaria* does not automatically allow for such integration in the Gulf, but it offers the means to envision it. This is what *mapping* Carpentaria means: it is a mapping of the ecocultural processes of the region and of its oral tradition in literature.

The relationship between the Aboriginal people and the ancestral serpent’s Dreaming emphasizes the former’s importance as holders of the Law. After the serpent has finished creating the river system of the Gulf of Carpentaria and has found its resting place, the text says that the serpent’s “being is porous; it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin” (2). The text goes on to explain:

This tidal river snake of flowing mud takes in breaths of a size that is difficult to comprehend. Imagine the serpent’s breathing rhythms as the tide flows inland … Then with the outward breath, the tide turns and the serpent flows back to its own circulating mass of shallow waters. (2)

In these two passages, the creative being is said to reside in the river, in its tide and in the people, who live near the river. Moreover, the serpent’s Dreaming manifests itself in the tidal movement of the river; the trajectory of the Dreaming is here visible in the movement of water that gives its particularity to the ecosystem of the Gulf. Readers take part in that re-production of Country by Dreaming, for they are asked to “[i]magine the serpent’s breathing rhythms,” while being told that it is “difficult to comprehend.” It is to be noted that
the phrase “tidal river snake of flowing mud” is not a metaphor here: in Aboriginal epistemologies, the snake is not compared with the river; it is the river. Therefore, by using this metonymic connection and by asking its implied audience to imagine this oscillation of the tide, the inscribed storyteller demands that the reader participate in the ecopoiesis of Gulf Country, in the production of an ecology. Clearly here, the reader is made not only to witness, but to re-enact the movement of the Dreaming. In an Aboriginal epistemological framework, the reader produces both a storyworld and a storied world. The reader is able to do so because of the embodiment of the river in an organism. By imagining the serpent’s interactional pattern, the reader is made to vicariously experience the rhythmic breathing of the serpent. By associating this breathing to the rhythm of the tide, the inscribed storyteller not only merges fictional organism and fictional environment, but intermingles various spatiotemporal scales, thereby allowing the reader to conceive the deep time of the Gulf ecosystem in an experiential way.

The use of metafictional elements that draw attention to the act of reading and to its relation to the storyworld is moreover recurrently associated with patterns of oscillation: second-person pronouns and the vertical to-and-fro of the Serpent (1); imperatives and the Serpent’s horizontal scoring/scouring the landscape and its tidal breath (2); secret-sacred, and inside-outside and the Serpent’s shimmering patterns of silver ripples (2); interrogatives and second-person pronouns and the Serpent’s recurring floods (2) and the region’s merging winds (2). This situation suggests that self-reflexive elements of the narrative point towards the shimmering of the Dreaming. Self-reflexivity, in that sense, is nothing but the to-and-fro movement of referentiality from text to reader and vice and versa.

Seen in this light, the narrative system as a whole becomes an embodiment of the shimmering quality of the Serpent Dreaming, and the cover seems to point in that direction, for it is traversed by a reproduction of a tattoo of the creative being (on the cover page, it is stated that the Rainbow Serpent tattoo is Murrandoow Yanner’s, who was the spokesperson for the Carpentaria Land Council). Overall, this metafictional strategy entails that the moments of shimmering when a character witnesses the emergent dimension of Dreaming, Country and Law are akin to moments where the reader is made to reflect on his/her
involvement in the emergence of the storyworld. Mapping the storyworld of *Carpentaria* amounts to mapping the function of the reader in the Story/Dreaming/Country/Law matrix of emergence.

### 5.4 Shimmering with the Dreaming: The Affective Resonance of Country

The argument of this chapter is that the motif of storytelling in *Carpentaria* enables me to cognitively and affectively connect the storied world – or Country – of Aboriginal characters with the storyworld of the novel. The interaction of reading allows me to resonate with Country, to shimmer with the dimension of the Dreaming. Howard Morphy explains that in Eastern and Central Arnhem Land, "painting is seen as a process of transforming a surface from a state of dullness to that of shimmering brilliance (*bir’yunhamirri*)" (1998, 188). By doing so, the artist is “not merely producing an aesthetic effect but moving the image towards the ancestral domain” (189). *Carpentaria* uses *language*, not painting, to perform this shimmering effect and to move the narrative “towards the ancestral domain.” This in turn implies that reading is performative, that it affects reading organisms in empirical ways, and allows them to expand their sociocultural and ecological knowledge system. However, this also means that in the context of Aboriginal epistemologies, reading participates in the reenactment of Dreamings and thus contributes to produce Country anew and to keep Law alive.

Not only does *Carpentaria* make the reader participate in the creative dimension of the Dreaming and in the emergence of Country, it also makes them reflect on this process of production of the storyworld/storied world. Particular episodes of inscribed storytelling reflect both on the interaction of organism and environment and on the interaction of reader/listener with the text/storyteller. Ecopoetic encounters dramatize the creative principles of Aboriginal epistemologies, their “wisdom,” in Bateson’s sense.

The text uses the journeys of the protagonist Normal Phantom to develop the metonymical relationship between organism and river, and by doing so it offers a way into conceptions of Aboriginal traditional knowledge. Before going on this creative journey,
however, Normal is depicted as a stubborn and narrow-minded character, who is stuck in a traditionalist way of life, which ultimately alienates him from his wife Angel Day and from his son Will Phantom. This ambivalence in characterization is common in *Carpentaria*, for the text refuses to idealize Aboriginal people. Despite Normal’s flaws, one function of the first chapter is to draw attention to Norm’s knowledge of the Law, and to present Norm as a normative embodiment of the Dreaming to observe. Because “[i]t takes a particular kind of knowledge to go with the river, whatever its mood. It is about there being no difference between you and the movement of water as it seasonally shifts its tracks according to its own mood” (3), a non-initiated reader will have trouble imagining the river. However, in Normal Phantom the text provides the perfect example:

> [t]he Pricklebush mob say that Normal Phantom could grab hold of the river in his mind and live with it as his father’s fathers did before him. His ancestors were the river people, who were living with the river from before time began. Normal was like ebbing water, he came and went on the flowing waters of the river right out to sea. (5)

In this passage, Norm Phantom is described as holding the traditional ecological knowledge that allows him not only to know the movements of the tides, but also to understand the creative journeys of the serpent. As the play on his name implies, he is a normative entity. The phrase "grab hold of the river in his mind" points to Normal’s ability to understand the movements of the river in an experiential way. Here, the text makes use of the verb “to grab” to make it easier to understand what “knowing” the river feels like bodily. The grabbing simulation thus becomes a point of contact between the storyworld and the storied world, just as it is a point of metonymic connection between Normal, the Serpent Dreaming and Country. The simile “like ebbing water” moreover reinforces Norm as a dynamic metonym for the serpent’s breath. In effect, Normal Phantom is a sort of spiritual guide. He is an embodiment of the Law, and in his journeys he is an embodiment of the serpent’s Dreaming.

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125 Of course, the name “Phantom” also alludes to the loss of land rights operated by the doctrine of *terra nullius*. In that sense, Normal Phantom is a normative entity that has lost its claims to the land.  
126 Several cognitive psychology studies show that reading about a hand movement activates some motor areas of the brain usually dedicated to actual hand movement (Zwaan and Kaschak 375).  
127 Here the last name of the protagonist alludes to his role as a spiritual elder, while his first name points towards his role as a guide, as representing the norm, the Law.
Thanks to Normal, and through Normal, the reader is offered a privileged position to witness the emergence of Country. This is particularly salient in the episode where Norm takes his friend Elias out to sea. However, before proceeding to that episode where Normal’s interactional pattern is dramatized, it is important to have a closer look at Normal’s characterization, and especially his artistic skills.

Early on in the narrative, Normal Phantom is described as a holder of the Law; he is an Aboriginal elder whose skills at reading the ecology of the river as well as the spirituality of the serpent is unsurpassed. Further in the narrative, the text says that Normal is also a talented storyteller as well as a plastic artist. Like his ecological knowledge, Normal’s artistic practice is tied to the serpent’s journey. As the narrator puts it, “Norm had a hypnotic voice, his eyes cast spells, he distilled memory like the flooding river emptying into the sea. He made people wish they were there when it really happened” (86). The phrase “like the flooding river emptying into the sea” is a direct allusion to the descriptions of the serpent’s “outward breath” (2) and to Norm’s being like “ebbing water” (5) above. The fact that Norm’s storytelling is described with a simile that ties it to the serpent’s oscillating breath-tide and to his own experiencing of the river reinforces the connection between Story, Law, Dreaming and Country. More importantly, it inscribes Normal’s interactional pattern as a re-enactment of the Dreaming.

This is reinforced when the text compares Normal’s storytelling practice to his major artistic outlet: the taxidermy and painting of fish. Indeed, the narrator explains that “[w]hat Norm could do with stories he had practiced down to a fine art and glued it to surviving relics” (87). Normal’s pastime and passion is a sort of hybrid between taxidermy and Aboriginal painting. His art practice is ambivalent: while it functions as a satire of Aboriginal custodianship that seeks to preserve the natural world as it was and as a satire of Western art practice that seek to preserve Aboriginal culture as museum artefacts, it also demonstrates the sacredness of poiesis. Indeed, Normal’s Aboriginal taxidermy is said to be a “compet[ition] with the spirits of who knows what, to make fish from the sea come back to life, to look immortal” (173). This “who knows what” is evoked later, for the expressive craft is realized in the fishroom, which is built as an extension to Normal’s house, itself
“inadvertently built on the top of the nest of snake spirit” (13), which the story sees as the origin of the conflicts in the Phantom family. The juxtaposition of Normal’s fishroom with a sacred site of the serpent,\(^{128}\) as well as the fact that Normal refuses to claim ownership of the pieces he creates (173) underline the fact that Normal’s material life is inextricably connected with the serpent’s. It is no wonder, in this context, that the sequence where Normal goes out to sea must be understood as a significant element of the novel.

Indeed, Normal Phantom’s ceremonial journey to a sacred place in the sea to bury his friend Elias is not just an important event of the plot of *Carpentaria*. This is when Normal becomes an agent in the plot which will move the story forward, indeed change the whole cultural situation. At that moment, from a custodian, a holder of stories, and a satire of taxidermy, Normal turns into an agent of the Law, visiting and performing Country and reenacting Dreaming. The fact that he does so to bury a foreigner shows the power held by Normal amongst the Pricklebush and the possible inclusiveness of Law, Country and Dreaming. Moreover, the fact that this journey, after the burial, leads him to meet his grandson Bala almost by accident, and rescue him from the men of the mining company\(^{129}\) reinforces the importance of Normal’s journey in securing a future for the Pricklebush Mob.

Normal Phantom’s journey at sea is even more important because it constitutes a reenactment of a Dreaming – the journey of an ancestral being – that is to be but one other iteration of the river’s movement outwards to the sea (2, 5, 86). Indeed, the journey is characterized as a “pilgrimage” (199) that demands that Norm “map… the route well, [to] reach the spirit world, where the congregations of the great gropers journeying from the sky to the sea were gathered” (199). The journey is therefore “mapped” in Normal’s imagination and in his voice as much as it is lived physically and spiritually. Moreover, this sequence of

\(^{128}\) Of course, the fact that Normal’s house, his dwelling place, his *oikos*, is placed on the serpent’s sacred site is an allusion to the fact that the whole *ecology* of the Gulf of Carpentaria is the direct result of the Serpent Dreaming.

\(^{129}\) At first glance, this meeting is serendipitous, but ultimately, this meeting of the two branches of the family in Bala is but a logical consequence of the common interactional episteme held by Normal Phantom and Joseph Midnight.
event is aestheticized in a way that is reminiscent of Aboriginal paintings. Indeed the narrative journey is riddled with mentions of colors, patterns and other elements of painting that clearly associate the physical environment with an artistic representation. Among the latter, a sentence, “The world was no longer under the spell of the monochrome grey-coloured Dry season” (203), clearly suggests that this episode is here told with words, but that it could as well be visualized in painting or on stuffed replicas of fish. Moreover, by connecting the “spell” with the “season,” the sentence asserts that in Aboriginal Law, there is always a connection between ecological processes, aesthetic experiences and narrative representations. Finally, the journey is realized to allow Elias to accomplish his final journey to the skies. The fact that Elias is used as bait left in a lagoon by the mining company, and that he is often characterized as a “fishingman” living in a “fish-smelling hut stacked inside and out with fishing gear” (138), together with the statement that Normal’s taxidermist undertakings are supposed to “make fish from the sea come back to life, to look immortal” (173), both lead me to conceive of Normal’s sea journey with Elias as an artistic practice of world-formation, as ecopoiesis.

The sequence of events of Elias’s sea burial is better understood as a pattern of interaction accomplished by Normal. The episode is structured around the various entities that Normal encounters during the journey: a seagull (204), a manta ray (205), his wife Angel Day (205), a Spanish mackerel (206), a stingray (206), a rubbish bag that he interprets as a “sorceress of a wife” and a “witch” (208), and finally the gropers that indicate his destination (209). These encounters “structure” the reenactment. They indicate to Normal the way to go, and thus act as mnemonic and mapping devices for orientation. For instance, the manta ray is “moving through the depths of ocean below [and] suspending itself in the drift of tidal movement” (emphasis added; 205), thereby telling Norm about the

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130 In his book *Aboriginal Art*, Howard Morphy argues that “Aboriginal paintings are maps of land… [S]ome paintings and designs … represent quite precisely the topographical relationship between different features of the landscape” (1998, 103).
131 Only to mention a few: blue (202), grey (203), gold (206), silver (206), black (207), green (208), yellow (211).
132 For instance: waves (202, 203), patches (202), surface (203, 205), lines (204, 205), spots (204), tracks (205), horizon (206), circles (210, 213), “breaking pattern” (211).
currents at different depths. If the ray here functions as a mapping device, it also allows Normal to experience spirituality in a more profound way: he becomes “intoxicated by watching the prolonged movement of the suspended ray. The creature moved so tantalisingly slowly” (205). The ray’s peculiar pattern of movement makes Norm’s “vision slip… into and out of the waters, breaking the surface so many times [that] he became lost in time” (205). Here the rapid changes of focus between the deep waters and the surface create a sense of an oscillating perspective, a shimmering that “carrie[s Normal’s] subliminal mind on its back” (205) and brings back to the surface memories of his wife Angel Day “walk[ing] out of the water not far from the boat in a dazzling ray of sunlight” (205).

Here multilayeredness becomes a trope: the spatiotemporal, epistemological and ontological fabric of the storied world shimmers into perspective, for the numerous depths in perspectives are mirrored by a profundness of time and interiority, while at the same time being reflected in the chiaroscuro of dark waters and bright surfaces.\(^{133}\) The affective resonance of water country is manifest in these overlapping layers and it is even echoed by the poetic rhythm of the passage. Indeed, when Normal watches the “prolonged movement of the suspended ray,” the tempo of the narration is slow and regular, whereas suddenly the tempo speeds up as Normal’s vision swiftly “slip[s] into and out of the waters.” Through the change in rhythm, the reader is made to experience in language the journey of Normal in Country. In this moment of shimmering with Dreaming through Country, the style of the narration is made to closely resemble the reader’s impression of being hypnotized while watching an Aboriginal painting unfolding in front of their eyes.\(^{134}\) This rhetoric strategy of linguistic shimmering is highly complex and is devised to create a link between the reader’s experience of reading the storyworld of *Carpentaria* and Normal’s experience of reading the storied world of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

\(^{133}\) In the exhibition “Old Masters: Australia’s Greatest Bark Artists,” paintings of Birrikitji Gumana about stingrays can be found, such as “Stingray Dance Performed in the Yirritja Därra Ceremonies.” For more information, see [http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/old_masters/artists/birrikitji_gumana](http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/old_masters/artists/birrikitji_gumana).

\(^{134}\) Here, it is perhaps necessary to explain that from personal experience, watching attentively some Aboriginal paintings creates a dizzying effect akin to a sort of hypnosis.
This analogy between reading the storyworld and reading the storied world is dramatized even more when Normal encounters a plastic bag. In the following episode, the oscillation of the Dreaming is not manifested through a change of perspective, but through an ontological shift:

Another little wind blew an old green rubbish bag into the boat. Norm guessed it must have flown hundreds of kilometres, whirling its way across the water from Desperance’s dump. Believing it to be a second omen, a curse from someone in Desperance, someone from the Pricklebush mob on the other side, he kicked the tattered plastic overboard in the darkness, as though it was something alive, a Goddess woman who came flying low across the sea. When it blew straight back into his face, he read the change as a sign telling him that there were wild winds beginning to pour back into the Gulf from the north-east, bringing more storms … He was convinced this was a sorceress of a wife. (208)

In this passage, the plastic bag – a synecdoche of the pollution caused by consumerism, and by extension an embodiment of colonialism – is interpreted by Normal as denoting something else. First considered an “omen” that the Eastside mob is cursing him, the plastic bag acquires spiritual significance when it is substantiated as a “Goddess woman.” However, it is only when the plastic bag explicitly becomes a “sign” that is “read” by Normal that it acquires an ecological meaning that “tells” Normal that storms are on the way. As the nature of the plastic bag changes from material, to ideological, then to spiritual and to ecological, the actual object oscillates in midair as it is blown by the wind and kicked by Normal. This episode indicates that in Aboriginal epistemologies entities are multilayered and polysemous; as a result, the units of the interactional pattern are enriched through metonymy.

This episode also functions as a counterdiscursive strategy of appropriation. Indeed in this passage the Aboriginal way of knowing and being subverts the authority of mechanistic epistemology by assimilating an everyday material object signifying pollution into a shimmering of the Dreaming. The shimmering is here material, ontological and hermeneutic and it follows Normal’s constant shift in the interpretation and reading of the object. This passage dramatizes the process of interpreting the signs of the environment. Normal here exemplifies a reading organism whose interpretation of his surroundings is constantly updated by drawing on ecology and tradition, but also on modernity. In this
Aboriginal hermeneutics, meaning is relational and contingent on an evolving context of interpretation. It is to be noted that in this episode the reader and Normal’s interpretations are synchronous. As Normal unveils the stories that he believes populate his surroundings, and thus unveils the connections within the storied world, the reader is at the same time producing a storyworld based on this metonymic relationality, though perhaps not following the full extent of Norm’s logic.

Finally, the climax of the affective resonance of Country and the shimmering of the Dreaming takes place when Normal reaches the sacred location where sea and sky meet, where groper and seagull cooperate in symbiosis to catch fish, where spirits of the sea can begin their final ascension to the stars. Here again, the reader is taken alongside Normal, seeing through his eyes, reading his mind and experiencing his embodied trajectory of life as he reads his environment:

[Normal] noticed a different breaking pattern in the current line and when he touched the water, felt its temperature had risen. He thought he saw glimpses of the giant spirits as they clung, swimming closely to the sides of the underwater chasm. He imagined them looking up to the spirits of dead people twinkling as stars in the night ocean of the skies. While looking straight past Elias, he saw where the green-coloured water of the sea was beginning to swell as though there was something huge moving under the surface, forcing the water to surge up over the underwater reefs. Then, still many hundreds of metres away, he saw the sun spreading and hovering over the swell, the flashing, lit wings of all of the sea birds. Orienting his eyes through the glare, he saw the birds diving into giant schools of sardine fish and returning to the sky.

More gropers appeared, following the side of the boat; their fins cut through the water and in their wake, they left small trails of swirling water … The birds lifted themselves up from the water and floated through the hot thermals like angels high up in the skies where the night meets the Milky Way … [Normal] had brought Elias’s spirit to his final resting place while discovering man could do almost anything if it was meant to be. Even knowing he was an old man in reality, he could go to sea again and again, if he could still read the signs. (211-212)

The initial phrase of this passage (“a different breaking pattern in the current line”) draws attention to the importance of the episode. In poetry, when a line breaks the pattern, it creates a modulation where form itself becomes meaningful. Modulation in a poem sheds light on the bringing together of form and content in poiesis. Similarly, at the beginning of this passage, the reader is made to wonder about the significance of the visual and haptic modulation that Normal perceives in his environment. The allusion to the “breaking pattern
in the current line thus ties Story to Country. A first clue as to that meaning is given when Normal imagines the groper-spirits looking up and breaking the waterline to peer into the “night ocean of the skies” where the “spirits of dead people twinkl[e] as stars.” In this poetic sentence, Normal produces a connection between Sea Country and Sky Country. He interweaves these planes physically and spiritually, respectively by breaking the waterline with his hands and by imagining the bottom-up movement of spirits. This convergence is then mirrored by the groper’s swell upwards and the sun’s movement downwards.

At this precise moment in time and space where the gropers’ swell matches the sun’s reflection, Normal perceives on the seagull’s wings the shimmering of the dimension of emergence. Indeed, as the birds oscillate up and down, they work as a prism and produce a sort of physical refraction of the sunlight. Sky Country shimmers into existence and is then echoed by the shimmering of Sea Country, as the gropers’ fins cut through the waterline and create “trails of swirling water.” Then again, the pattern of oscillation is repeated, as Normal observes the birds “lifting themselves up.” The presence of birds in this sacred ceremonial moment echoes the presence of the bird “hovering in the sky far above the ground” (1) and observing the “serpent’s wet body, glistening from the ancient sunlight” (1). Clearly, birds function here as signs that indicate a connection between Dreaming, Country and body.

The repetition of oscillating movements and shimmering patterns render this episode ecologically, spiritually and symbolically important. Indeed, Normal feels “joy flooding from his heart” (212) and “alive again” (212), for he knows that thanks to the gropers’ swell and to the seagull’s delves, he has found the place where the spirit of his friend Elias, can ascend to the skies and take his place among the twinkling stars. The emotion of joy here is particularly relevant, for it attaches a positive somatic marker (Damasio, 2010, 175) to the shimmering of Country. The sentence in which Normal feels comforted by his ability to “read the signs” (212) transforms his experience into a reflexive activity that enables the

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135 It is to be noted that ecologically, the congregating of gropers and seagulls is a sign that sardine fishes have massed on that spot. It makes sense that in a hunter-gatherer community, groups of signs that ultimately permit to find sources of food would acquire spiritual significance over time.
reader to resonate with him. By presenting Normal’s experience of the convergence of oscillating patterns, the text enacts the ontological connection between organism and environment in journeys.

Like Normal, the reader is invited to read the signs and imagine the shimmering of the dimension of the Dreaming. The reader is made to analyze Normal’s ecological environment at least as much as they are made to analyze the textual environment. With a clever blurring of mimesis and diegesis, the text makes Normal’s interactional pattern a point of convergence between reader and character. In many ways, this episode is a locus of liminality. It is a threshold, a nexus of shimmering where character encounters reader, where groper encounters seagull, where sea encounters sky, where matter encounters spirit, where Country encounters Dreaming.

5.5 The Allegory of Postcolonial Politics

The Gulf of Carpentaria is a region known for its syncretism. There, “Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identities are co-constituted through complex social relations that have produced both mimesis and alterity” (Martin, Mead, and Trigger 332). In Carpentaria, these co-constituted identities are made manifest by the entanglement of “multiple cultural traditions” (332) and by the “co-temporality of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identities” (332-333). Wright makes use of this sociocultural situation: the power of Carpentaria resides in its radical reconfiguration of the representation of Aboriginal communities. Instead of merely depicting Aboriginal people as victims of the colonial state, which would be a reflection or mirroring of the Social Darwinist theories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that “[i]n gloomy anticipation [had] proclaimed a duty to smooth the pillow of the dying race” (Macintyre 145), the inscribed storyteller refracts colonialism and reconstructs it as a parody of itself. Taking apart the colonial discourse allows the inscribed storyteller to translate

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136 Like Normal, I also feel an immense joy at grasping the significance of the whole episode.
victimry into survivance\textsuperscript{137}: the inscribed storyteller gives back to Aboriginal people a heterogeneity, a voice, a presence, a motivation, a way of living, a way of knowing, a way of telling.

Two major different systems of intersubjective knowledge are represented in \textit{Carpentaria}: the Aboriginal knowledge system, or Law, which I have described above and which is based on the all-encompassing Serpent Dreaming; and the colonial knowledge system that is based on another “law,” a law of extractivism in which the accumulation of territory, resources and wealth is central. From these two major interactional epistemes, numerous politics of space (Massey 9) branch out. These politics of space depend on the personal and political motivations of the people holding them. The Aboriginal intersubjective system of ecological knowledge is embodied in the three Pricklebush elders Normal Phantom, Joseph Midnight and Mozzie Fishman. Each embodiment represents a variation on the Law that comes from the Serpent Dreaming, and each of these characters is also instrumental in the allegory that makes the fragmented plot cohere in the end: the environmentalist allegory of Will’s Journey to Find Hope.\textsuperscript{138} Will Phantom becomes the vessel through which all the politics of space come together.

Moreover, the dual narrative identity of the Elders as embodiments of the Law of Country and as catalysts for Will’s journey gives Normal, Mozzie and Joseph a role in keeping alive the traditional Law of Dreaming and Country and in fighting for environmental justice. The text suggests that environmental justice might be a way of federating diverse and sometimes conflicting agendas within Aboriginal communities: caring for Country might be the common ground that will unify the First Australians. It is however impossible for a narrative to have an allegorical struggle without a foil. In \textit{Carpentaria}, the colonial and capitalist systems function as the foils that allow Will’s Aboriginal environmentalism to come

\textsuperscript{137} Gerald Vizenor defines explains that the “nature of survivance creates a sense of narrative resistance to absence, literary tragedy, nihility, and victimry. Native survivance is an active sense of presence over historical absence, the dominance of cultural simulations, and manifest manners. Native survivance is a continuance of stories” (Vizenor, 2009, 1).

\textsuperscript{138} The novel achieves coherence because the process of storytelling is underlain by an environmental allegory, the Will to find Hope, based on Will Phantom’s struggle against the mining company to save his wife Hope and his son Bala. In Waanyi language, Bala means “fork in tree” or “forked branch” (Waanyi Dictionary).
to the surface. The colonial politics of space manifests itself in two main entities: the state-abandoned Outback town of Desperance, inhabited by the racist and bigoted population of what the indigenous community calls “Uptown”; and Gurfurrit International, a mining company who has appropriated the authority of the colonial state, its violence and its cynicism. Uptown embodies a failed version of colonialism, and Gurfurrit an all-too-successful version of extractivism and capitalism.

It is important to note that Wright’s use of allegories is not to be taken as authoritative, but rather as disruptive of the colonial matrix of identity. If all characters could be seen to have an allegorical meaning (Angel Day the not-at-all easy-going ex-wife of Normal Phantom and new wife of Mozzie Fishman; Elias Smith the amnesic and stranded European seafarer who becomes Normal Phantom’s best friend; Vance Truthful the perverse and deviant cop; Graham Spilling the boss of Gurfurrit International), one must be wary not to freeze the allegorical meaning of the complex Aboriginal characters. Indeed, I argue that the allegory of postcolonial politics is a narrative strategy that unsettles the reader’s interpretation of the Aboriginal characters. More particularly, the allegory seems at first to provide neat categories for the Aboriginal characters to fit in, but in the course of the narrative these categories become untenable and invite the reader to reconsider the imposition of colonial definitions onto Australian Aboriginal people. Therefore, characterization never fully reveals Aboriginal epistemologies and ontologies to the reader, but rather draws attention to the polysemy, metonymy and relational nature of subjectivity in Aboriginal epistemologies. Unlike Stan Bruiser or Graham Spilling, Aboriginal characters are not contained by what their name indicates, for their names point to several features and processes of their environment that evade the reader’s grasp. Perhaps more importantly, these relations are more often covert than overt, which makes it impossible to fully discover the enmeshment of Aboriginal characters in the sociocultural and ecological systems of the storyworld.
The Colonial Politics of Space

The allegory of postcolonial politics is first manifested in the spatial categories of the storyworld. The town around which the narrative unfolds is called “Desperance,” an archaism for “despair” that sarcastically alludes to the despair that plagues the Pricklebush population, but that can also be read as an antithesis of the main strand of the plot, based on the will and hope for environmental justice. Desperance is indeed an embodiment of the imposition of the colonial system of knowledge, and more particularly of the colonial practice of naming. This is made clear, when, on the occasion of the one-hundredth anniversary of the port of Desperance, the mining company and the city authorities decide to rename the local river “Normal’s River.” The ceremony does not go according to plan:

everything got ruined by a normal sort of dust storm thundering in from the south...139 Then came a violent electrical storm when the rain ruined the day anyway – as the town’s sceptics said it would. A taut occasion, despite these dramatic interventions; enough time for the now disposed-of State Premier to complete the ceremony of officially changing the name of the river from that of a long deceased Imperial Queen,140 to ‘Normal’s River’. Traditional people gathered up for the event mumbled, *Ngabarn, Ngabarn, Mandagi*, and so did Normal in a very loud and sour-sounding voice over the loudspeaker in his extremely short thankyou address, although those who knew a fruit salad full of abuse in the local languages knew he was not saying *Thank you! Thank You!* and belly-laughed themselves silly because the river only had one name from the beginning of time. It was called *Wangala*.141 (8)

This episode is particularly representative of the inscribed storyteller’s attitude towards colonialism. By ridiculing the ceremony of renaming, not only does she expose the wooing strategy of the colonial authorities, but she also shows that the Pricklebush are perfectly aware of this transparent manoeuver. This is made explicit when the inscribed storyteller presents Normal’s sarcastic comment “*Ngabarn, Ngabarn, Mandagi*” as being interpreted as a “thankyou address.” If the inscribed storyteller does not translate what this phrase means, in a first reading one is led to think that it is somehow an insult or at least some sort of sarcastic comment. The Waanyi Dictionary, run by the Waanyi Aboriginal Corporation, tells us that *mandaki* mean “white man” or “European man” and *ngaba* means “shoulder”,

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139 As was shown above, dust storms from the south usually come alongside Mozzie Fishman’s convoy.
140 This probably refers to Queen Victoria.
141 The Waanyi Dictionary says that *wangkula* means “crow.”
"bring" or "carry" or that ngabu-ngabu means "evening" and "sunset." Normal's phrase might well mean something like “Evening! White man!” or “Look what the Europeans bring!” Ultimately, it does not really matter, for Wright deliberately does not translate this sentence to create a comic and transgressive effect and to keep non-initiated (non-Waanyi) readers in the dark. More importantly, renaming the river is described as a ridiculous political attempt at gaining Normal's support for the mining project.

Clearly, this shows that the mining and state authorities are not aware of or do not care about Normal’s role as holder of the Law. As custodian of the land, he knows well that the river’s name cannot be changed by the state. This strategy of ridiculing the colonial renaming is part of Wright’s counterdiscourse of resistance: instead of falling prey to victimry, the storyteller uses humor to subvert the monological imposition of European names onto Country. By opening a gap in the discourse, symbolized by the non-translated use of Waanyi language, she reverses the configuration of power: she translates the transparent colonial practice into an opaque Aboriginal counterdiscursive practice. She reasserts the presence of Aboriginal language and its continuous connection to the features of the land. All the while, she mocks the inability of colonialism to understand the socioecological situation of Country.

The colonial interactional episteme also shows itself in the school system, and more particularly in the geography and history lessons taught to the Aboriginal children of Desperance (50-51). The storyteller ridicules the colonial practice of mapmaking that is transmitted to children through the education system. Instead of focusing on the deleterious effects of colonization, however, the storyteller translates the practice of cartography into an Aboriginal epistemology. For instance, she says that if the town boundary is “on paper” only (51), then it is “invisible” to those carrying “a different understanding of worldly matters” (50), which emphasizes the arbitrariness of colonialism, and more particularly its alienation and disembeddedness from Country. The tone of the storyteller contributes to the ridiculing of the town’s origin: the harsh characterization of the town boundaries as “puerile dreams” and as being “gammon” (50) contrasts with the ironic statement of the children, claiming that Uptown are “masters of their own dreams” and that their city limits were defined by “old
surveying methods” (51). This last sentence is particularly comical when one reads it in the light of the first characterization of Desperance as a port without access to water, the town being “several kilometres” (3) away from the river. This commercial uselessness might even explain why “[t]he town was marked on no map” (49), not at least before the mining company saw the economic potential of the region.

If the colonial politics of naming and mapping are severely undermined by the sarcastic counterdiscourse of the storyteller, the colonial practice of history is also under attack in *Carpentaria*, for instance when Elias Smith the stranded, amnesiac seafarer provokes an “era of self-analysis” (48) in which Desperanians are made to reflect on the shortness of their presence in Australia, their history reduced to “half-flick of the switch of truth – simply a memory no greater than two life spans” (49). The sarcastic commentary of European history-making is also seen in the name of the Aboriginal population on the fringe of Desperance. The Aboriginal community refers to itself as the “Pricklebush,” from the “thickets of closely-growing slender plants with barely anything for leaves, that never gave an ant an inch of shelter under a thousand thorny branches” (3). The pricklebush (the plants) are referred to as a “foreign infestation” (3) having been caused by the “seeds of mimosa embedded in camel dung [that] sprouted their hard little shoots in the Wet season” (5) and whose “[t]housands of seeds spread along every track and gully, flooding with sheetwater from the rain to regenerate in shallow mud pools. The shoots sent down their fat roots to take a steely grip on the claypans, holding the land together in a mirage that looked like it might last forever without water” (5).

If the plant pricklebush is a foreign infestation, the Aboriginal fringe settlement that takes its name is also characterized as such by the “descendants of the pioneer families who claimed ownership of the town” (4) and who said that “the Aboriginal was dumped here by the pastoralists, because they refused to pay the blackfella equal wages, even when it came int. Right on the edge of somebody else’s town, didn’t they?” (4). In this manifest counterdiscursive strategy of appropriation through sarcasm, the inscribed storyteller exposes the fallacy of wanting to find a historical origin to Aboriginal presence from a non-Aboriginal perspective. By sarcastically analogizing the Pricklebush Mob with the
pricklebush plant, the text shows that both the Aboriginal community and the ecology of the Gulf of Carpentaria have already been transformed by colonialism. Finding a point of origin on a linear temporal scale does not make sense in the light of the opening of the novel that creates a nonlinear dynamic world. By its very denomination, the Pricklebush community evokes the possibility of another epistemology and ontology.

In keeping with the sarcastic style of the inscribed storyteller, the enemies of the Aboriginal world have names that point to another meaning. The mayor of Desperance is thus the brutal Stan Bruiser, whose motto is: “If you can’t use it, eat it, or fuck it, then it’s no bloody use to you” (30). Bruiser’s name points to an allegory of state violence and extractivism. As Kate Rigby rightfully explains, Bruiser “figures as but the most brutal face of a more generalized pattern of systemic violence” (Rigby 125). The storyteller depicts Bruiser as “overshadow[ing] the town with his power” (Wright, 2008, 29); in many ways he embodies the authority of the colonial state, and performs some of its most atrocious deeds in the form of sexual assaults. Indeed, Bruiser often brags “about how he ha[s] chased every Aboriginal woman in town at various times, until he ran them into the ground then raped them. He had branded them all, like a bunch of cattle, he gloated” (35).

This violence remains unpunished by the state, although in some ways the storm that ravages Desperance at the end of the novel may be understood as a punishment from the Serpent Dreaming. Officially though, with the law of Uptown on his side, the mayor can keep on bruising the traumatized-yet-resilient Pricklebush community. However, by applying the metonymic relationality of her allegorical mode to Bruiser, the storyteller effectively translates the colonial regime into an Aboriginal epistemology and thus counter-appropriates the practice of naming.

After nomenclature, geography and history, economy is touched upon by the storyteller: the undermining of the colonial politics of space is complemented by a sarcastic comment on the unbridled capitalism of the mining industry. The extractivist branch of the colonial interactional episteme is embodied by the international mining company “Gurfurrit International,” which is said to be “pillaging the region’s treasure trove: the publicly touted
curve of an underground range embedded with minerals” (7). Environmental humanist Kate Rigby sees the mining company’s name as

an appellation that brilliantly conjoins an allusion to the colonial practice of appropriating or inventing Aboriginal-sounding names (Plumwood, “Decolonizing”), with a phonetic echo of the phrase, “Go for it!,” alluding to the assumption that Australia’s mineral wealth, like the bodies of Aboriginal women for older-style colonialists, are there for the taking by transnational businesses with insufficient regard for the local impacts of their operations. (Rigby 128)

Gurfurrit’s extractivist attitude towards the environment is manifest in the passage on page 7 that alludes to piracy and analogizes the company to an outlaw. However this early characterization of neoliberalism in the novel also establishes the foundations of a triadic system involving some profiteering locals (Joseph Midnight and the Wangabiya), the scheming “multinational mining company” and the state (of Queensland and the Commonwealth of Australia) who “touted” the land. This economic system works against the Aboriginal Law held by Normal Phantom, and thus Gurfurrit’s plan to take over the Gulf of Carpentaria has important consequence on traditional ways of life. Indeed, as Will Phantom’s words, mediated by the storyteller, explain: “Life had no meaning in this new war on their country… This war with the mine had no rules. Nothing was sacred. It was a war for money” (319). The “war for money” alters the matrix of Country: “Mining changed the way people had to think about looking after themselves. If a man was to survive, he had to first think of what the mine was capable of doing to him” (326). The capitalist undertaking drastically reconfigures the pattern of care and relations that make up Country. A direct confrontation is impossible, for the mining company is simply too powerful and has too many allies, including the national media (336-337) and mainstream public opinion. Countering this neocapitalist extractivist alliance demands the emergence of an Aboriginal union of forces that is founded on a protectivist attitude towards Country and people. Will Phantom embodies this quest for environmental justice.
The Aboriginal Politics of Space

The Aboriginal politics of space manifests itself first in three strands that come into one in the narrative: Normal Phantom’s traditionalism, Mozzie Fishman’s continental activism and Joseph Midnight’s opportunistic collaborationism are brought together when the three elders’ knowledge of the Law is passed down to Will Phantom and becomes the source from which his environmentalist resistance springs. However, at the beginning of the novel, Normal, Joseph and Mozzie are in conflict, each elder interacting with the colonial and capitalist authorities differently and eyeing the other two suspiciously. If these political differences reflect the heterogeneous quality of Indigenous Australian communities, their coming together in Will Phantom’s environmentalist resistance becomes a source of hope.

Normal Phantom is the spiritual guide, the embodiment of the Law of the Serpent, and he greatly contributes to Will’s quest. But at the beginning of the novel, Normal is also a conservative traditionalist and a rather passive character: he refuses to fight the mining company directly and becomes an active participant in the socioeconomic drama only when forced by his son Will (when the latter leaves Elias’s corpse in Normal’s front yard). Normal is the norm whereby the reader first makes sense of the interactional episteme of the Serpent, for Normal’s interactional pattern offers a manifestation of the Serpent Dreaming that the reader can enact. The area of the storyworld where the plot unfolds, the river of the Gulf of Carpentaria that flows near Desperance, is indeed Normal’s traditional country and is said to emerge from the Serpent Dreaming. Normal’s traditionalism, with its emphasis on place, storytelling, art and fishing is however not capable of fighting the mining company’s ruthlessness. If Normal is somehow respected by the outback town of Desperance for his artistic skills and his incredible knowledge of the local sea, he is powerless against the external influence of Gurfurrit International. In the free indirect speech of Will Phantom, the text explains that “[l]ife had no meaning in this new war on their country. This was a war that could not be fought on Norm Phantom’s and old Joseph Midnight’s terms: where your

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142 Normal is rather passive in his fight against the colonial and neo-colonial entities, and his resistance at first manifests itself in the preservation of traditional knowledge.

143 Mozzie’s activism spreads throughout the whole continent and attempts to unite Aboriginal resistance.
enemy did not go away and live on the other side of town, and knew the rules of how to fight. This war with the mine had no rules. Nothing was sacred. It was a war for money” (319). In this passage, Will’s version of the Aboriginal interactional episteme is revealed as a reaction to his father’s conservatism. Normal’s traditionalism and the interactional pattern that it engenders are critiqued by Will as inefficient in dealing with transnational corporate capitalism. In that sense, Normal’s pattern of interaction is not adapted to the sociocultural situation of the Gulf. Because of capitalism, a new system of attitudes towards the environment and another way of interacting within it need to arise within the Pricklebush interactional episteme.

If Normal Phantom is the norm of Pricklebush spirituality, the embodiment of the Law of the Serpent Dreaming, the character of Joseph Midnight has a contrasting and liminal allegorical function in the satire. He is both Normal Phantom’s foil and Will Phantom’s stepfather; he is both collaborating with the colonial state and helping out Will’s fight against the capitalist corporation. Joseph Midnight is the leader of the Eastside mob, and he embodies the selfish and corporatist aspects of Pricklebush political claims, for in order to survive he places his personal and material needs over the collective and spiritual needs of Country, Dreaming and Law. On page 44 and 45, the text offers a harsh commentary of the egotistical opportunism of Joseph Midnight and his Eastside mob, who are ready to sacrifice Country for profit. Joseph and the Eastside mob, due to their invention of a tribal name, the Wangabiya, and their phony Native Title Claims, are depicted as sell-outs.

The storyteller is uncompromising in her presentation of Eastside people as “nuisance dogs” and “rubbish,” and this is understandable, for the creation of a fictive community, the Wangabiya, indeed establishes a simulacrum of Aboriginality that saps other Aboriginal communities’ efforts at being recognized. Paradoxically, by falsely claiming ownership of the land for profit, the Wangabiya in turn have to produce a simulation of traditional way of life: language is faked and the metonymic and relational power of Story is abandoned for money, but so are traditional hunting and custodianship. Midnight’s scheme is indeed

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144 Here material is used in the worst sense: that of the greedy accumulation of wealth.
characterized as an “extortion racket” (45) that, by “agreeing to the mine,” provides the Eastside mob with a “lot of money, a thousand dollars” (45). Country is sacrificed apparently for a ridiculously low compensation. The acquisition of wealth is dramatized, and the careful cohabitation with the fabric of life is endangered, so that the Wangabiyas somewhat unfairly are held responsible for the introduction of “millions of cane toads living in the district” (45) into the “pristine environment” (45) of the Gulf.

Through the division of the Pricklebush between Eastside and Westside, the storyteller satirizes some of the consequences of the Native Title Act of 1993 that followed the famous Mabo Decision of 1992. The war of identities is caused by the fact that in order to claim native title, an Aboriginal community must demonstrate “‘traditional connection’ with a specific tract of Crown land” (Beinart and Hughes 348). In order to be accepted as an active presence, Aboriginal communities sometimes have to recreate Stories that were lost. Moreover, this traditional connection must be continuous, for “native title is lost if it can be shown that [continuity of connections with land and traditional law] have been severed” (Beinart and Hughes 349). In characterizing Joseph Midnight and the Eastside mob through the suspicious eyes of the Westside mob, the text underlines the contradictions of the Native Title Act and the complications it engenders. It also points towards the harmful effects of the assimilation of Aboriginal cultures under colonial rule.

However, despite his “extortion racket with the government” (45), the Eastside leader does indeed possess an intimate and traditional knowledge of Country. He even transmits it to Will Phantom so that Will can go out to sea and find Midnight’s daughter and Will’s wife Hope. Midnight’s knowledge takes the form of a ceremony in which he gives Will “the directions to the safe place in his far-off country – a blow-by-blow description sung in song, unraveling a map to a Dreaming place he had never seen” (316). There is an evolution in the characterization of Joseph Midnight. At the beginning of the novel, he is described as an opportunist who collaborates with the colonial and capitalist system and whose native claim is fraudulent. However as the novel progresses, Joseph’s system of knowledge is validated empirically by Will’s ability to follow his geographical instructions. The evolution in his characterization shows the limits of the postcolonial politics of recognition of Aboriginal
land claims, but most of all it shows that the Australian Aboriginal intersubjective systems of ecological knowledge are heterogeneous, sometimes independent from colonialist epistemologies (in the case of Normal), sometimes contingent on it (in the case of Joseph). This apparent schism in the Aboriginal interactional episteme is however overcome through Will’s interactional pattern of environmentalist resistance.

Normal Phantom and Joseph Midnight’s versions of the Pricklebush interactional episteme are localized around the Gulf of Carpentaria and could thus be said to be regionalist. A third Pricklebush elder however embodies a nationalist and continental version of the Aboriginal interactional episteme: Mozzie Fishman. Mozzie’s system of knowledge is articulated around a struggle for land rights and spiritual revival. Whereas Normal Phantom does not want to have anything to do with the colonial state, and Joseph Midnight shrewdly tries to take advantage of it, Mozzie Fishman is keen to publicly fight the state and the mining company for his rights (115). To do so, Mozzie grounds his activism in the Serpent Dreaming whose journey connects places spread out on the Australian continent. The characterization of Mozzie and his men as “holy pilgrims of the Aboriginal world … bringing a major Law ceremony over the State border” (100), and continuing “an ancient religious crusade along the spiritual travelling road of the great ancestor, whose journey continues to span the entire continent and is older than time itself” (100) extends the scale of the storyworld, which expands from the Pricklebush of the Gulf of Carpentaria to the Aboriginal people of the continent of Australia. Moreover, the combination of traditional Aboriginal spirituality with modern imported technology grounds Mozzie’s “never-ending cavalcade” (100) in contemporary Australia.

The Judaeo-Christian religious overtones scattered throughout characterizations of Mozzie and his followers (“religious zealots," “holy pilgrims," “religious crusade”) transform the fight for land rights into a continental fight for the freedom of sociocultural practice, all the while reasserting the Aboriginal, ancient, extensive, continuous and active presence on what is now called Australia. Indeed, in Aboriginal epistemologies, because of the connection between Country, Dreaming and Law, journeying, storying and knowing make
up an inseparable ecology of life where organism and environment are to be taken as a totality (Bateson).

This assertion of a national Aboriginal spirituality is reinforced by the allegorical meaning of Mozzie Fishman, which derives from his first name. As a reference to Moses, Mozzie occupies the function of savior, prophet and lawgiver of the Aboriginal world. By leading the religious convoy throughout the deserts of Australia in an attempt at federating Aboriginal communities all around the continent, he wishes to free his people from the authority of the colonial and capitalist powers. Mozzie’s last name, Fishman, points to Jesus’s first apostles, which nuances this title of savior; indeed in this second allegorical configuration, Mozzie is only a follower of the savior. The latter would then be the Serpent Dreaming that brings cohesion to the Aboriginal people. However the Fishman can also be understood sarcastically as a means to undermine grand claims made by Aboriginal cult leaders (108).

The conception of a continental Aboriginality demands a dense crisscrossing of the continent in order to connect the various scattered communities together. This is not surprising, then, that the “spiritual Dreaming track of the ceremony in which [Mozzie and his men] were all involved, moved along the most isolated back roads, across the landscape, through almost every desert in the continent” (104). By connecting the most remote areas of Australia together and by unifying them with the Serpent Dreaming, Mozzie’s undertaking becomes an attempt at producing a continental Aboriginality. This continental Aboriginality would demand an overarching Dreaming story to achieve coherence. This is where the religious aspects of Mozzie Fishman’s convoy come into play, for the Law of the Serpent Dreaming spiritually connects the disseminated Aboriginal communities of the continent: “The crossing of the continent to bring the ceremony north-east to the Gulf, to finish it up, was a rigorous Law, laid down piece by piece in a book of another kind covering thousands of kilometres” (104). By roaming across the continent following the tracks of the Serpent, Mozzie actualizes the Aboriginal religious “book” – in this context, it is a reference to both the Torah and the Bible – by binding its places together. The “ceremony” of traveling thus becomes a dynamic substantiation of the Law, and because of its continental scope, it...
effectively performs and thus brings to life a continental Aboriginality. Moreover, the characterization of Country as a "book of another kind covering thousands of kilometres" opens up a self-reflexive field that emphasizes the fact that scenes and interactional patterns of the storyworld are "other kinds" too and have in reality to be understood as features and processes of the ecosystem. Moreover, the conceptualization of the continent as a book enables the literary achievement of *Carpentaria*, where the oral interactional episteme of Country, Dreaming and Law come to be expressed convincingly in writing.

It is to be noted that Mozzie Fishman’s system of ecological knowledge is not only spiritual and religious; it is practical as well. Indeed, if despite his name the Fishman is “a failure as a water man” (108), he has an “unbeaten title of water divining … He would get out of his car, sniff, and, without fail, detect in the dry air the moist smell of water coming out of wet ground and plants a hundred kilometres away, or of a hidden soakage in the flat spinifex plains" (108-109). This ability to sense water in the desert makes of Mozzie a formidable tracker, but also a keen ecologist. Moreover, this gives him a function in the main allegory of the novel, the Will to find Hope, for it will allow him to rescue Will from the mining company and to escape the search parties.

**5.6 Environmental Justice: Bala, or The Will to Find Hope**

Finding a unity among heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting Aboriginal communities is not a given, as demonstrated by the hostility among Aboriginal leaders Normal Phantom, Mozzie Fishman and Joseph Midnight. The storyteller bypasses this issue by creating an allegory of postcolonial politics, which establishes a sense of a common purpose: the journey of Will to find Hope. In spite of their irreconcilable differences, the three Aboriginal elders have a commonality: they all participate in Will’s journey to find and rescue Hope that is itself embedded in a larger narrative of Will’s fight against the mining company. Will Phantom thus occupies the role of cohesive identity: he is Normal Phantom’s son, Joseph Midnight’s stepson and son-in-law and Mozzie Fishman’s protégé. In Will’s interactional patterns the three politicized manifestations of the Aboriginal interactional episteme. In the
allegory come together. Will effectively embodies three strands of Aboriginality that strive respectively to keep alive the traditional Law, to coexist with the state and to resist colonialism and capitalism.

However it would be a simplistic reduction to regard Will as merely an allegorical figure, for the purpose of the allegory is to keep intact the dynamism of its fictional organisms while pointing to another meaning and reading. Indeed, not only do Will’s journeys contribute to the emergence of the storyworld and thus to the revitalization of Country, but they also participate in the production of a new Aboriginal environmentalist discourse based on the entanglement of Story/Dreaming/Country/Law. By investigating how Will’s pattern of interaction is represented in the discourse of *Carpentaria*, I hope to show that Will’s journey is not a linear movement, but a multisited, multispecies, multiperspectival and multilayered Story about Dreaming, Country and Law. Will’s struggle to rescue Hope from the mining company therefore functions as a dynamic actualization of an Aboriginal interactional episteme geared towards environmental justice.

I argue that Will Phantom’s trajectory of life gives coherence to the epistemic heterogeneity of *Carpentaria*. In a sense, the chaos caused by the collision of colonialism and Aboriginal communities must be responded to, and this is what Will Phantom’s interactional pattern constantly performs in the novel. The text suggests that it is only through a *practice* of environmentalist resistance that Indigenous people can overcome colonialism. The word “practice” is important here: I argue that in *Carpentaria* there is a shift from counterdiscourse as resistance to *counterpractice as resistance*.

By reasserting an Aboriginal practice of space as the way to defeat of colonialism, the storyteller avoids the pitfalls of representation alluded to in the section above. Environmentalist resistance thus becomes a way of reasserting the presence of Aboriginal communities and thus of overturning the doctrine of *terra nullius* and replace it with a *practice* of *terra habitabilis*. However, in keeping with the Aboriginal conceptions of Country set up at the beginning of *Carpentaria*, Will’s trajectory of life is not represented in a linear way. It is broken down in fragments and it has to be reconstituted in reading. Finding a common ground for Aboriginality is a complex and long process, but it is a self-reflexive
creative undertaking that enables the inscribed storyteller to analogize the act of reading with the practice of resisting.

Will Phantom’s first action in the plot is to set the dump that borders the city of Desperance on fire to finish the dispute over ownership of the land. The dispute itself is nothing but a reenactment of an old war between the Phantom and Cyclone families. Before colonialism however, these disputes would have been settled and would not be festering as they have under colonial rule. The war between the Eastside and Westside mobs is indeed caused by Angel Day trying to protect her findings from other members of the Aboriginal community: a clock (19) and a statue of Virgin Mary (22). The clock here functions as a metonym for a Euro-Australian form of temporality and is an instrument of power that would give an advantage to Angel Day’s kids, for they could be “going to school on time” (19). The statue would confer power and prestige on the Phantom house, for they “would become like the white people who prayed and said they were of the Christian faith” (20). Of course, this episode is highly ironical and demonstrates Angel Day’s naïve syncretism. At the same time, however, it works as a manifestation of the internal strife in Aboriginal communities caused by the forced agglomeration of conflicting groups during the colonial era. This episode not only shows that the homogenization of Aboriginality by colonial discourse has failed, but it underscores the fact that colonial rule has created problems of its own.

Will Phantom, by “li[ghting] the dry grass around the edge of the dump so there was fire spreading over the claypans in every directions” (24), momentarily puts an end to the internal conflict of the Aboriginal community. The fact that he does it by using fire is an allusion to Aboriginal traditional fire agriculture. Environmental historian Tom Griffiths says that “[f]ire is at the very heart of Aboriginal civilisation, as it is of the nature of Australia” (Griffiths, 2002, 236). He and Libby Robin explain that “firestick farming [was a ] major tool of landscape modification” (Robin and Griffiths 21). Stephen Pyne goes even further and

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145 This event foreshadows Will’s involvement in bringing cohesion back to the Pricklebush later in the plot. Moreover this episode will be echoed later in the story when Mozzie Fishman’s men set the mine hangars and bowsers on fire so as to rescue Will from Gurfurrit International (341).
affirms that for Aboriginal groups, “[u]nburnable landscapes were generally unlivable ones” (Pyne 46). Therefore, by setting the dump on fire, Will performs four practices of resistance: he reasserts the presence of Aboriginal firestick farming and undermines the doctrine of *terra nullius*; he destroys a major manifestation of consumerism, the dump; he shows that what is considered an offense by the city of Desperance is inherent in the Australian environment and a corollary of Aboriginal existence; and he puts an end to the ridiculous internal fighting exacerbated by colonialist practices of homogenization. Thus, Will Phantom’s first action prefigures his endeavors to promote environmental justice and land rights; this first episode involving Will opens up a space for overturning the colonial and capitalist politics of space imposed onto Aboriginal communities.

Will Phantom’s first appearance as an agent of resistance during the dump episode is developed all along the story. Before proceeding there however, it is however important to note that an important element of the plot is the fact that Will coalesces the various versions of the Aboriginal interactional episteme: an episode embodies this junction of Normal, Joseph and Mozzie by staging a meeting about land rights where Will first meets Hope:

> The very first time he [Will] had seen her [Hope], she was walking in the rain, and from where he was sitting on the ground, the first thing he noticed was how her bare feet slushed through the mud. Wet yellow grass blew on both sides and he had watched her from a distance, coming his way, with a dirty, sodden, royal blue doona wrapped around her. She looked like a big child amidst the smaller children who walked with her. He knew they had come from the Eastside camps to join the people he was sitting with next to the river. Everyone had been talking for hours about the mining company Gurfurritt. Will was listening, sizing up the mixed reactions to the mine.

> Sabotage playfully plagued his mind… Will had come hoping to recruit helpers with his fight for land rights. The fires were getting out of hand. Half of the plains was burning. He had to be careful whom he trusted. Allegiances were changing constantly. (330)

This episode strikingly juxtaposes Will’s meeting with Hope, the land rights talks and Will’s sabotage of the pipeline. At this turning point of the story, Mozzie’s resistance, Midnight’s collaboration and Normal’s tradition and knowledge intermingle. Even more interesting is the way this encounter is narrated. The paragraph starts with Will’s perception of Hope, and then moves to Will’s position on the ground, and back to Hope walking in the rain. All along
this oscillation of focalization (sight, proprioception, sight), Will is listening to the Pricklebush voices talking about the mine. Here, the units of perception of seeing and hearing are combined with the perception of proprioception and movement. As Hope comes towards Will, a feeling of hope emerges in the young man’s mind and translates into the action of sabotage. This passage is crucial because it shifts environmentalist resistance from sterile talks to practical actions. Will is well aware that the mining company is triggering dissent amongst the community: “Over many months, he [Will] had watched Gurfurritt play the game of innocence with bumbling front men who broke and won the hearts and minds of more and more of his own relatives and members of their communities, both sides of Desperance” (330). Indeed, the narrator, through Will’s free indirect discourse, explains that the mining company is playing the Aboriginal community by making them fight each other verbally: “Talk was always cheap. Cost nothing” (331). Thus, instead of acting, the Pricklebush talk; they are lost in discourse and in internal fights and politics, which gives the mining company freedom to do as they wish. Evoking Will’s and Hope’s first encounter as an embodied, silent and dynamic pattern of interaction is therefore significant, for it implies that hope and will cannot happen in talks, but have to co-emerge in action.

If this encounter of will and hope initially manifests itself in sabotage and in the fight against the mining company, it is also embodied in Bala, their son. The Waanyi Dictionary says that bala means “fork in tree,” “forked branch,” “hook,” “skewer,” “sky,” “spindle.” Interestingly enough, all these definitions (even that of sky) denote a junction or the act of joining, of holding or pulling together. Bala is the junction of the Phantom and Midnight family branches; Bala is what pulls them together into a family tree, a cohesive Aboriginal community. The child is also the spindle that allows the amorphous mass of Aboriginal peoples to become one thread. But in an indirect way, Bala is also related to land rights and to traditional knowledge. The forked branch is indeed the primary tool of the water diviner. Mozzie Fishman is said to be a diviner (108), and during the ceremony that he directs to bury his sons killed by Bruiser, he leads “the way with a long stick, pushing along an ancient path invisible to the naked eye [where he and his men] threaded through golden papery grass” (emphasis added; 366). In this sense, the bala used by Mozzie to lead the way sheds
light on Will and Hope’s son Bala, who can then be understood as a child that will lead the way and thread a new Country for the Aboriginal people of the Pricklebush. Finally, this understanding of Bala as the sky, whose great-grandfather is Old Cyclone and whose grandfather is Joseph Midnight (44) acquires a particular significance in the ending of *Carpentaria* when the town of Desperance is written off the map by the storm (412). Ultimately, just like the reunion of the two branches of Pricklebush by Bala through filiation, it is *bala* (the sky) that will reconcile Will, Hope and Normal Phantom.

Setting fire to the dump and marrying Hope Midnight form the genesis of Will Phantom’s environmentalist knowledge. In the novel, this environmentalist strand of the plot develops as Will Phantom begins combining his traditional ecological knowledge of the Gulf of Carpentaria with his desire to stop the mining company. The first episode that stages this struggle takes place after Mozzie’s convoy discovers the corpse of Elias Smith left in a lagoon by Gurfurrit to flush Will out of his hideout. However, as soon as Will sees the corpse, he intuitively realizes that something is not right and decides to “chart the river course from the sea,” and to “map… the journey and stalled at the many gaps in the river where Elias would have stalled too” (139). Will bodily enacts the movement of the river;¹⁴⁶ the river and Will enter into dialogical resonance, and through this interactional pattern what is emphasized is not their separation, but their relatedness, their entanglement into a totality. Indeed, Will’s charting of the river is actually a reenactment of the river’s tidal movements and of the ancestral serpent’s production of the ecosystem of Carpentaria. The use of the verb “to map” to refer to Will’s imagining his course of action, indeed his interactional pattern, can be read reflexively. Mapping country, within the Aboriginal interactional episteme, is similar to imagining one’s interaction within it. In reading, the reader imagines the characters’ interaction within country, and therefore they map it. Here Will’s imaginary production of the

¹⁴⁶ The text’s use of the simile “Will knew this river backward, like the palm of his hand” (139) is an allusion to his father’s ability to “grab hold of the river in his mind” (5), and the phrase about the “river and Will Phantom ha[ving] many secrets to share” is an echo of the beginning of the novel, where the storyteller tells us that it “takes a particular kind of knowledge to go with the river, whatever its mood. It is about there being no difference between you and the movement of water” (3).
river is based on embodied and situated knowledge. More importantly, his knowledge of the river cannot be disentangled from the river itself.

If the river connects past, present and future, it also connects body, environment and knowledge. This metaleptic materiality\textsuperscript{147} is reinforced as the storyteller explains that “[i]n the happy days [before their argument about Hope], following his father’s shadow all around this country, [Will] already knew a little tin boat could not go through the steep-sided gorges on a wallaby track” (140). Here the connection between the traditional and the ecological is made overt, but the passage serves another purpose: it shows that Will’s knowledge of the river arises from his practice of Country with his father. Normal Phantom has a clear influence on Will’s pattern of interaction here. The revelation using traditional ecological knowledge of the truth of what has happened to Elias contrasts with the concealment operated by the mining company, whose ruthlessness in killing an innocent man in order to track down a political opponent is also revealed.

During his investigation of the circumstances of Elias’s death, Will is suddenly interrupted by the mining company’s men, who attempt to shoot the young man from a helicopter. Will attempts to hide in the lagoon’s muddy waters for a while, and then makes a run to go hide in the woods: “He ran as a wild zigzagging animal in full alert to danger, knowing it was being hunted down, became like rubber, flexible, bouncing, too hard to catch” (147). It is important to note that, as attests the conjunction “as,” Will becomes an animal. As with the river earlier, Will enters in resonance with an element of Country in order to interact – here the word “bounce” suggests that Will becomes a wallaby. If in the lagoon, Will was using his father’s traditional knowledge to investigate Elias’s death, on solid ground Will borrows from another system of knowledge, that of Mozzie Fishman, to survive. Indeed, catching his breath and trying to figure out how to rescue Elias’s body before the mining company catches up, “Will felt Mozzie Fishman’s presence, standing behind him, grinning and pointing between flashes of lightning to where the spirits flew around in the wet skies

\textsuperscript{147} Here, metaleptic materiality refers to the fact that in Aboriginal epistemology, materiality cannot be understood as a plane of reality apart from spirituality and knowledge. Materiality in fact transgresses and transcends traditional Western ontological categories.
… Will could never escape the words he heard in his heartbeat” (148). Clearly, in the spearwood Mozzie’s shadow stands alongside Will, just like Normal’s shadow stood alongside his son in the lagoon. The phrase “the words he heard in his heartbeat” moreover alludes to a strange form of resonance, almost synesthetic, where sound, touch and proprioception intermingle, and where language, ecology, spirituality, materiality and perception blend. Here again, the insertion of an Elder’s presence in Will’s pattern of interaction contributes to link Will’s journey to the dimension of the Dreaming. What is more, by guiding Will, Mozzie’s words allow the young man to escape the clutch of capitalism.

After having rested a little while, Will decides to get hold of Elias’s body and canoe and to put them to safety. Again, Will enters in resonance with Country in order to achieve his aim: “Satisfied he had them both secure in the hills, and sheltering from the rain under a rocky ledge he had located by sniffing where the kangaroos sheltered, [Will] looked down in the distance and saw headlights below” (149). In this passage, Will is able to orient himself by “sniffing where the kangaroos sheltered.” The kangaroos do not simply provide a totemic connection with Country as in the example of the previous paragraph; most of all the traces of their existence are sensorily interpreted by Will, which allows him to find his way around the Gulf country. Here, Will reads Country, which allows him to interact properly. The notion of shelter in this passage is crucial: it symbolizes what it means to be embedded in Country: the shelter not only alludes to the notion of habitat, of dwelling, of oikos, it also points towards storied knowledge and implicit experiential knowledge.

The headlights that Will perceives are those of a car of the mining company tracking him. In order to escape their gaze, Will has to dissolve into place (Ingold, 2002, 56): he becomes so entangled with Country that he becomes one with it:

[Will] moved in closer, moving next to [the men of the mining company] through the spear-wood. Silently his feet joined the paws of the wallaby and kangaroo, feeling the ground in the darkness, belonging as if to nothing of life. So, close, he listened to their heartbeat, so nearby, almost standing as his brothers’ shadow. He penetrated their laboured breathing inside their lungs, and could see when they waved the torches across the flooding lagoon. (150)

In this episode, Will Phantom’s body dissolves into place: his feet, touching the ground, “join” the wallaby and kangaroo in a sort of “mirroring” choreography. By semantically associating
Will's footsteps with the marsupials’ paws, the narrative modulates Will's experience and enmeshes him in the lives of animals. The character’s experience is comparable with the experience of a hunted wallaby hyper-attentive to its surroundings. In this episode of “becoming-animal” (Abram), Will is like a prey, hunted ruthlessly by the mining company. He feels what it feels to be a hunted kangaroo, silent and motionless. The sentence “belonging as if to nothing of life” is striking. It forces the reader to pause and wonder what this experience would feel like. The sentence also draws attention to the spiritual quality of the moment. This moment of dissolving into place allows the character to enter his brothers’ bodies, feel their heartbeat, breathe the air in their lungs and see through their eyes. Through empathy, the reader is made to enact Will's experience. In this complex series of resonance, perspective is shattered and dispersed everywhere. This has for effect that the reader experiences Country not from one objectifying vantage point – as in a traditional Western landscape painting – but from within its diffuse dimension of emergence, from within its shimmering. And indeed, the lights of the torches and of the headlights waved by the men of the mining company also contribute to create an aesthetics of shimmering chiaroscuro that mirrors the shift in proprioception felt by Will.

Will’s function in the plot becomes even more connected to Aboriginal traditional knowledge when he hears from Joseph Midnight about Hope’s and Bala’s situation. After Will has secured Elias’s corpse and dropped him at his father’s place so that Elias can be taken to his final resting place among the stars, Will visits Joseph Midnight so that the old man can tell him where to find his wife and son: “Old man Joseph Midnight had one hope. He knew once Will heard about Hope and Bala, he would go looking for them, because if there was still some good in the world, and heavens know it was rare, it was the love between Will and Hope, and their little boy Bala” (316).

Midnight’s indirect speech is revealing of the main allegory of the plot of *Carpentaria*, but most of all it grounds Midnight into the quest, as a facilitator of it. After Normal and Mozzie’s in the previous paragraphs, now it is Joseph Midnight’s version of the Aboriginal interactional episteme that is staged as coloring Will's interactional pattern, as Midnight gives “the directions to the safe place in his far-off country – a blow-by-blow description
sung in song, unravelling a map to a Dreaming place he had never seen” (316). Here Story and telling become instruments in the fight against the mining company’s control of the region. By telling Will how to get to Hope, Midnight not only helps Will resist capitalism, but he grounds this resistance into both traditional ecological knowledge and kinship systems while at the same time reasserting the narrative, artistic and cartographic quality of Aboriginal modes of knowing. Interestingly, Story involves both telling and showing – diegesis and mimesis, which intermingle in the ceremony, just like memory and anticipation. Indeed, the very form of the song shows the way like a map. Telling the sequence of events (diegesis) is akin to showing the map of the region and to performing it (mimesis), both in the mind, through language and through the body. This episode stages storytelling and allows the reader to think about the performativity and materiality of Stories: Midnight’s performance functions as an allegory of storytelling.

In that sense, Midnight’s instructions to Will are also instructions to the reader: it is only by understanding that Stories are as much journeys as maps and performances that one may find the deepest meaning of the novel and be able to understand the creative emergence of the storyworld. This is reinforced by the fact that the story is actually kept secret: the reader has only access to a generic version of it (it is shown in words such as “that place,” “this way,” “like there”), which means that it is not the hypodiegetic Story itself that matters, but its function as meaning- and world-maker. The last four phrases moreover point towards the dynamism of Country: by characterizing the entities and processes of the Gulf’s ecosystem as being alive, the storyteller contrasts with the mining company’s attitude in considering the region as a “treasure trove” (7). In every way, Country is alive, just like Dreaming is alive, and as was shown, the Dreaming is both the journey and its Story. Extending this view of Story-as-Dreaming-as-Journey-as-Country thus allows me to conceive of Carpentaria-as-Serpent’s Interactional Pattern-as-Will’s Interactional Pattern-as-Storyworld.

After Will has left Joseph Midnight, the storyteller describes how reenacting a Dreaming track is spiritual and social as much as ecological. The passage however also
shows that the ceremony performed by Will Phantom and Joseph Midnight allows Will to expand the storyworld of the novel to a place that his father could not reach:

He sailed impatiently for several days, after having had no difficulty in finding the currents old Midnight had told him to ride, and finally, he had the low, flat isles in sight. The previous night he had felt the changes of movement in the water – the slower flow, the rise of the water, which pleased him. Now, he sighted land ahead. The number of sea birds increased until he felt that every bird in the world was heading towards the same destination. Their piercing calls became louder and deafening until the familiar sound of the ocean had been drowned to a murmur.

Occasionally, Will felt he was becoming disoriented. It was difficult not to be overcome with curiosity, and unconsciously, his eyes would be drawn to look skyward at the low-flying feathered clouds that swarmed noisily through the skies. His stomach lurched and he felt his mind slipping into a state of dizziness from which he could only escape by concentrating on the sea. (322)

This strange episode where the swarm of seabirds and their racket leave Will “disoriented” and almost “overcome with curiosity” is a moment of wonder. The aesthetics of the passage suggests that Will’s “one-man search party to find his wife and child” has transformed into an encounter with the dimension of the Dreaming. As the “number of sea birds increase[s]” and their “piercing calls bec[o]me louder and deafening,” Will is put into a trance where he dissolves into place. This sonic shimmering of seabirds is so pervasive that it “drown[s the familiar sound of the ocean] to a murmur.” From an ecological knowledge perspective, the presence of the seabirds is a sign that indicates to Will that land is close by. The effect that the shimmering of the birds has on Will, however, is more spiritual than ecological: Will’s dizziness itself becomes a sign that he is on the right track. In that sense, just as Will is pleased to feel the water rise and slow down, he is equally surprised to be so drawn towards the seabirds. Of course, this passage is to be read in light of Normal Phantom’s previous journey to bury Elias, where the text writes that “Norm became intoxicated by watching the prolonged movement of the suspended ray” (205). In this context, the presence of the birds is another echo that connects Will to both the creation of the storyworld (1) and to the ceremony that Normal undertakes (211-212). Moreover, from the beginning of the story, Will’s mother Angel Day has had a strong connection with seabirds, the seagulls of the dump.
The last sequence of interaction that features Will prominently is to be found in the thirteenth chapter of *Carpentaria*, “The Wash,” when the storm has hit the city of Desperance. At that moment of the story, the mining company’s pipeline and bowsers have been destroyed by Mozzie’s men trying to rescue Will. If the embodiment of capitalism has been subverted in the allegory, the city of Desperance, which is the embodiment of colonialism, has not yet been overturned. This chapter recounts Will’s journey towards Desperance to find Hope and Bala, his staying there while the cyclone rages, and his survival off the coast of Australia drifting away on an island of plastic. This chapter therefore stages Desperance’s destruction as perceived in the eyes of Will’s pattern of interaction during his attempts to survive and find his family. The fact that the destruction of Desperance is told from the line of experience of Will Phantom is crucial, for it allows the inscribed storyteller to retell the history of colonialism and capitalism in Australia and replace it with an Aboriginal Story that combines Dreaming, Country and Law.

Indeed, the destruction of Desperance is no banal storm, as is shown by this sarcastic comment of the storyteller when Will witnesses the evacuation: “He knew instantly the town was evacuating. The Bureau of Meteorology had called and translated the message from the ancestral spirits” (394). This sentence is representative of the whole characterization of chapter 13 as both a reenactment of the “ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds” (1) and of the Law that through art and stories translates this Dreaming into ecological knowledge:

> he heard the spirit waves being rolled in by the ancestral sea water creatures of the currents, and conspiring with the spirits of the sky and winds to crash into the land as though it was exploding. The earth murmured, the underground serpent, living in the underground river that was kilometres wide, responded with hostile growls. This was the old war of the ancestors making cyclones grow to use against one another. (397)

In this passage, the cyclone and tidal wave are understood by Will as manifestations of the Dreamings of sea, sky and wind attacking the creative serpent. Perceived from the point of view of the white population of Uptown, the storm is *destruction*, but in Will’s mind it is *creation*:
It was at this point [that Will] realized how history could be obliterated when the Gods move the country. He saw history rolled, reshaped, undone and mauled as the great creators of the natural world engineered the bounty of everything man had ever done into something more of their own making … The sight of the devastation was nothing short of salubrious as far as he was concerned. The macabre construction resembled a long-held dream of the water world below the ground where the ancient spirits of the creation period rested, while Aboriginal man was supposed to care for the land. (415-416)

In this passage, the history of Desperance is “obliterated,” leaving space for a resurgent Aboriginal conception of the organism-environment relationship. The way this reshaping of the colonial environment is depicted is significant; by using contrasting terms such as “mauled” and “engineered,” the destruction of the town is alternatively depicted as wild and deliberate. This use of antithetical terms is sarcastic, for it attributes to the storm the quality of a distinctive organism while at the same time hinting at the cold and abstract qualities of engineering. What the Uptown population of Desperance could not do – founding a perennial city – is actually realized by the ancestral beings behind the storm. The Dreaming is here personified and takes the role of an engineer restoring a corrupt environment to a more respectful state. Moreover, the destroyed environment is qualified as a “construction resembling a long-held dream of the water world below the ground.” Not so much chaotic, the aftermath of the cyclone is more carefully planned than the city of Desperance, and the Aboriginal population can finally go back to caring for it. In a sense, if colonial and capitalist history is “undone,” it is also replaced by a Story of “the great creators of the natural world” that resembles “something more of their own making.”

The reversal of destruction into construction is introduced before the passage above by the way Country is made to sing and perform:

All day and night the wind played ancestor music. The sounds rolled in the skies, gathering up the waters of the ocean in heavy clouds, whistling while they passed through rocky ledges of the highlands and through the gorges where the twisting river tracks led … The magnificent hand of the wind pushed into his back, and its song whistled into his ears like a devil, and into his mind. (387)

In this passage, the ontological levels of Dreaming and Country, of organism-environment and ecosystem, are connected by the “ancestor music,” or Law. Here, art and music are not conceived anthropocentrically as uniquely human modes of expression, but rather they become immanent in the co-constitutive relationships of Country. The “hand of the wind” is
orchestrating this Aboriginal song, and in Will Phantom’s mind, this “listening” to the processes of the ecosystems is inseparable from the songs he himself has heard as a child:

Light rain flew horizontally from the mist hung in clouds hugging the hills against the wind. He saw through all this, navigating the atmosphere, like a fish, where predetermined knowledge dwelled from a world full of memories, told, retold, thousand upon a thousand times from the voices of all times, through his father’s voice. ‘A homeland,’ a great creation site covering these hills, ‘this is the story of…’ that somehow, Will felt, was creating the tension he felt in the air. … He was breathless from the simplicity of all that he saw, and continued, finding his path through the machinery of water.

Somehow he knew he was being prepared for change, instinctively, like an animal sniffing the air and sensing danger approaching, sensing a quickening of the atmosphere, sensing the future of a place. He wondered if indeed, he did carry a sense of knowing. (389)

This deep attention to and observation of the surrounding Country is associated in Will’s consciousness with “the story of” and to the “homeland” of a deliberately untold Dreaming, this covertness enacting the secret and sacred quality of some Aboriginal stories and sites. More than a simple correlation between stories and sites however, the environmental patterns that Will takes in trigger “predetermined knowledge,” “a world full of memories” and “voices of all times” that ultimately are bodily interpreted by Will as signs that something is about to change dramatically and dangerously. Here, the Law is translated through Will and is manifested into his embodiment; the “tension he fe[els] in the air” and his “breathless[ness]” are bodily interpretations of the Story of the ancestor roaming the land; both narrative, environmental and bodily signs converge in Will’s “sense of knowing.” The ability to “see through all this” refers to the skill of reading the Dreaming through its shimmering manifestations that can be bodily, narrative or ecological. Here, this shimmering is visually manifested in the phrase “machinery of water,” which points towards the “light rain fl[ying] horizontally” and forming intricate and multilayered patterns of horizontal lines. Aurally, the shimmering manifestation of the Dreaming is enacted by the repetitions in the phrase “told, retold, thousand upon a thousand times from the voices of all times, through his father’s voice.” Here the repetition of the word “told,” “thousand,” “voice” and “time” mimic the saturation of signs that Will interprets as danger.

In the two passages above, Will reads the visual, aural and proprioceptive signs – indeed songs – of Country; the narration extends this to olfactory and haptic senses as well:
He thought about something else he could not see, a smell perhaps, travelling in the breeze, which might have triggered a single vision in the minds of perhaps a quarter of a million seagulls, who had without doubting, taken flight and headed towards the flooding lakes carrying fish that had fallen like food from the skies. This was the root of ultimate trust he thought, the knowledge of intuition, of understanding the vibrations of subtle movement in the environment. Birds, acting in unison on this slim chance, like a note struck on a piano, and no different to himself, a simple creature after all, were sealing the fate of the next generation. (389-390)

In these lines, Will does not directly “smell” the sign, but vicariously experiences it through the seagulls’ pattern of movement. He experiences a sort of hypersensitivity, a cross-species empathy which mingles with his deep knowledge of the ecosystem and which allows him to “read” his lifeworld. Will’s connection with seabirds is once again stressed, the “ultimate trust” here connecting Will’s interactional pattern to his totem. What he thinks to be the “knowledge of intuition,” he really describes as an “understanding of subtle movement in the environment.” This latter phrase clearly points towards the resonance of Country. This resonance is felt intuitively by Will, but also intellectually as he is able to interpret and understand the various signs that make up the Story and songs of the ecosystem. This twofold combination of embodied intuition and semiotic reasoning is what allows Will to survive. It is to be noted that the final sentence features a simile that complicates the resonance of Country by analogizing the birds’ pattern of action to “a note struck on a piano”: the resonance is artistic and musical, as much as it is embodied and ecological; it is orchestrated by the Dreaming being’s trajectory of creation, and it is interpreted through Story.

When Will finally reaches Desperance, the city is being evacuated. After the evacuation, Will takes refuge in the pub, where he attempts to withstand the creative destructivity of the cyclone. As the cyclone “[is] attacking the building, ramming into it like sledgehammers, trying to tear it apart” (406), Will begins envisioning that the cyclone might be retaliation against a Law breaker. The text is not clear about who is the Law breaker exactly – it might be Will, because he has broken the taboo of marrying Hope, or it might be the whole city of Desperance for not caring for Country. If the text is not clear about who might be the Law breaker, Will however imagines – though also reminds himself of the
impossibility of that image – that the one behind the cyclone is none other than old Joseph (406). Clearly, this confusion as to who is targeted by the cyclone and who is wielding it is not so clear; what matters however, is that as he is hearing the “storm-making ceremony” (406), Will also hears his father’s voice, which is “capable of drowning out the storm racket with incantations” (406), and which in turn will allow the young man to connect with Normal and Hope and Bala through his imagination (406-412). Here Normal’s voice exists on an ontological level that both transcends and explains the material fabric of the world; the “incantations inciting Will not to fly to where the white lilies bloomed in the swamp, no matter what the orchestra was playing” (406), exist in the Aboriginal epistemology of the Dreaming, where Law, Stories and Country coexist in a matrix of emergence. If it might seem that this episode of storied connection between Normal and Will transgresses Euclidian space, it should rather be seen a creative metalepsis that gives the reader a sense of Aboriginal epistemologies.

This sense of an appropriation of the notion of reality and of a translation of it is further dramatized after the storm has hit Desperance, and the flooding currents of the ancestral serpent take back to the sea the rubbish created by the cyclone:

What a catastrophic requiem took place in those floodwaters racing out to sea … On and on the floodwaters raced until receding far out in the ocean waters. It was there during the night, that Will was washed onto a wet, slippery object. … He struggled out of the water, by clawing into the slipperiness, and climbing, not knowing if he was crawling onto the body of a sea serpent. … The clouds broke, the new moon shone its halo of peace. Relieved for such an absolution of light, he looked down to find he had been dumped onto an extraordinary floating island of rubbish.

While the serpentine flotation rocked in the waves, the sum total of its parts rubbed, grated and clanked together, as it became more tightly enmeshed into a solid mass that squashed every inch of oil and stench out of the dead marine life it had trapped in its gut. Will listened to the embryonic structure’s strange whines echoing off into the darkness, then, he realised the enormity of those sounds was familiar to him. He was astonished and then weakened by the feeling of helplessness, that a man feels, hearing the sounds of labour. He felt like he was an intruder to be clinging to a foetus inside the birth canals, listening to it, witnessing the journey of creation in the throes of a watery birth. (416-417)

This passage is an echo of the opening of Carpentaria, where the ancestral serpent fashions the features of the land. However, this time the reader is not merely a member of the audience listening to the voice of the storyteller, but rather the reader experiences the
aftermaths of creation through Will’s interactional pattern. The process of reading the novel offers an *insight* into Aboriginal epistemologies that allows the reader to participate in its emergence during the journey of the creative being. Perceived from Will’s line of experience, the “catastrophic requiem” has become a “journey of creation in the throes of a watery birth.” Again, the perception of catastrophe is translated into an Aboriginal epistemology: through language, the “island of rubbish,” which is the embodiment of destruction, is transubstantiated into the “serpentine” body of the newborn foetus of the serpent – the embodiment of creation. This transubstantiation is realized through Will’s vivid experience of the haptic “slipperiness” and aural “enormity” of the “serpentine flotation.” In that context, the fact that Will is “clawing, climbing, crawling” onto the body of the serpent is significant: this tactile interaction with the serpentine movement of water is a clear reminder of the first chapter of *Carpentaria* that states that “Normal Phantom could grab hold of the river in his mind and live with it ... Normal was like ebbing water, he came and went on the flowing waters of the river right out to sea” (5). In Will's case, the “grab[bing] hold” of the embodied river and his “liv[ing] with it” are literal, which points to the fact that Will has perhaps even surpassed Normal’s mastery of the Law.

By going through the cyclone and surviving it, Will has gone through an initiation ceremony. This is hinted in a passage situated before Will reaches Desperance. The young man hesitates to go through with his plan of reaching Desperance. He contemplates going back to Mozzie Fishman. In a sort of epiphany however, Will feels Normal Phantom’s presence:

> Will saw his father’s presence in his dreams where Norm was always standing behind him like his own shadow, looking searchingly at the back of his head, deciding — *Do you match up?*. Locking him into a duel. Will turned, concentrating his attention ahead to Carpentaria. If he was to be a member of his homeland he knew he could never afford a Mozzie Fishman distraction. *There could only be one road.* He wiped the vision of ever wishing to return to the Fishman’s haven clean from his mind. (388)

The episode of the cyclone, and Will’s new life learning about the serpent on the island of rubbish (418-419) therefore demonstrate that Will the environmentalist has “matched up” with his father the preservationist. Now a fully-fledged “member of his homeland” (388), Will
can enter the “one road” (388) and “become a scholar of the sea” (418). This new life on the island is punctuated by the environment to an extent never alluded to in the novel. Will is now more than simply conscious of his reading the environment: he is doing it actively by “chart[ing] nautical routes in his mind,” “comprehend[ing] the feeling of water beneath the weight of his island and mak[ing] its currents his map” (418), and “order[ing] the patterns of water beneath him” (419). As Will observes his surroundings with such precision, almost scientifically, he begins resonating with his environment: “When the rhythm changed with the seasons, he would stop measuring star movements for the current flow, or move through these endless days of charting the flight of birds. Then, like these changing rhythms, he would switch the activities of his daily life” (419). By enacting in his daily routine the changes he observes in his environment, Will has accomplished the ultimate feedback loop: he is analogizing Country and Dreaming, as well as interactional episteme and interactional pattern, and he is mapping out their co-constitutive shimmering. Finally, this new life of Will’s is characterized as a textual undertaking: “[T]hese were the rhythms of his life which he lived through like lines of poetry” (419). This sentence creates an ontological connection between Will’s pattern of interaction and his pattern of reading, and therefore opens up a space for rethinking reading as practice inserted in the ecosystem.

All in all, this resonance with Dreaming is the basis of Aboriginal epistemologies. The system of intersubjective knowledge indeed arises from one’s resonance with one’s environment; but because the environment is never congealed and is also always a dynamic journey of a creative being, resonance with Country is actually a resonance with Dreaming. And since knowledge of Country and of Dreamings is the Law that is first produced by Dreamings and interaction with Country and then handed down through the generations, the Law is also a resonance with Country and with Dreaming. This is the metonymy inherent in Aboriginal epistemologies: when one tries to disentangle the inseparable triad of Country, Dreaming and Law, one realizes that they are causes and effects of each other, co-emerging in a shimmering movement of poiesis. The genius of Alexis Wright is that she manages to ground the production and transmission of traditional knowledge in an environmentalist combat that overcomes the internal fighting inherent in
postcolonial Aboriginal communities. Wright does not, however, romanticize indigeneity, for she also draws attention to the negative emotions that plague local leaders: greed, jealousy, pride, disdain. Through Will’s pattern of interaction, which brings together traditional readings of the environment and a modern and critical reading of the ecological situation engendered by colonialism and neo-colonialism, the reader is made to engage with the Gulf of Carpentaria, and more broadly with the dire situation in the north of Australia. Wielded by the hands of Alexis Wright, the written medium can become that which allows the reader to map Carpentaria by chronotoping a dimension of emergence.

5.7 Towards a Literary Mode of the Law

Carpentaria defies the limits and principles of the field of Australian literature: the process of ecopoiesis from which its storyworld emerges is based on an indigenous movement of creation, the Dreaming of the Ancestral Serpent. The entanglement of Story/Dreaming/Country/Law that the novel sets up at the beginning of the narrative through the metafictional figure of the inscribed storyteller creates a storyworld that resists classical understandings of space and time. On the contrary, the semantic loops brought about by the co-constitutive relations between diegetic narratives, journeys, ecosystems and knowledge systems give the storyworld a nonlinear dynamic quality, a shimmering quality, which is enhanced even more by the polysemousness, the multilayeredness and the gaps and blanks in the narration that mirror the sacred-secret initiatory quality of Aboriginal storytelling.

There is a threefold process at play in reading the novel. Firstly, in Aboriginal knowledge systems and ways of life, the journeys (lines of experience) of Aboriginal beings (ancestral beings, Aboriginal people, animals, etc.) participate in the creation of a storied world. Secondly, the interactional patterns of the fictional organisms of Carpentaria bring about its storyworld. Thirdly, in reading one brings together the storied world of Aboriginal worldviews and the storyworld of the novel; the metafictional elements of the novel draw attention to this combination. Due to this threefold process, Carpentaria is in a constant
movement of semiotic emergence: the point of origin of its meaning moves between reader’s world, storyworld and storied world, between Story and Country, between narrative system and ecosystem. In this oscillation, meaning shimmers into existence and makes manifest a dimension of emergence.

The novel’s complex and fluid narrative configuration dramatizes the connection between story/storytelling, text/reader and environment/organism. It establishes a matrix for apprehending the relationality of narrative, language and experience. It reasserts the importance of stories in shaping life. Indeed, the storyworld produced in reading is connected through metonymy to the storied world emerging through Aboriginal interactional patterns and Dreamings, and this connection is brought about by the overwhelming presence of the Aboriginal interactional episteme – or the Ecopoetics of the Law. The storyworld and storied world are thus superimposed and fused during the act of reading. In this fusion, the reader’s world becomes infused with both the stories of Aboriginal characters and the storyworld of *Carpentaria*. The textual articulation of the connection between the reader’s world, the storyworld of *Carpentaria* and the storied world of Aboriginal Australians has the potential to bring about a shift in the reader’s worldview. The radical nature of *Carpentaria* has the power to trigger a “horizon change” (Jauss, 1970 14).

In effect, *Carpentaria* gives the reader a chance to experience the systemic quality of Country, with its geology, its climate, its beings, its landscapes, its stories, its communities, its conflicts, its advantages, its ugliness, its beauty, and its relations to colonialism, to cite only a few. This systemic nature is refracted in the interactional patterns of the protagonists and in the Aboriginal interactional episteme. Wright’s stroke of genius is that she is able to avoid the pitfalls of dichotomy. She is not merely countering colonial and capitalist discourse – this would place her narrative in a position of being the binary opposite of colonial discourse; instead she is asserting the presence of Aboriginal epistemologies by crafting a new Aboriginal form of the novel, where Story, Law, Dreaming and Country are translated from an oral worldview into literature.

One aspect of this is certainly the parody of colonial modes of knowledge, politics and Western mechanistic metaphysics. However, *Carpentaria* does more than simply parody
as a form of postcolonial: it reveals the entanglement of language, knowledge, organism and environment. The metonymic matrix at the core of the text – where narratives are metonyms for journeys that are themselves metonyms for features of the land that are themselves metonyms for the individual and collective knowledge systems – makes the novel unsettling to standard practices of reading. Especially the strange combination of sarcasm and poetry forces the reader to reflect on the practice of interpretation.

Bearing in mind this metonymic relationality is important in the context of a written narrative. If the connection between a Dreaming and the feature of Country associated with it is clear when a Story is told and enacted orally and bodily – perhaps by pointing in the direction of the landscape features a Story is about, or by telling the Story in a particular place – this metonymic connection is less clear when the reader is faced with a written narrative that cannot easily create situations of contingency. Therefore, episodes that stage the contiguity of Story, Dreaming, Country and Law become examples of a new mode of understanding texts, a hermeneutics informed by the Law. Because of the fluidity of Aboriginal epistemologies, these metafictional moments also offer new ways of interpreting the organism-environment relationship. *Carpentaria* reveals a form of environmental hermeneutics.

This combination of environmental and textual hermeneutics can be summed up in the notion of ecopoiesis. Reading *Carpentaria* not only takes the reader on a journey that redefines and reconnects the reader-text and organism-environment relationships. *Reader-text and organism-environment processes become metonyms for one another*. In other terms, the novel makes overt that in interacting with an environment, one is also interacting with a text, and in reading a text, one is also interacting with an environment. This principle should be liberating and exciting for literary scholars.

The entanglement of reader-text and organism-environment in *Carpentaria* allows us to rethink the function of narratives, even in a non-Aboriginal context of interpretation. The novel shows that stories are useful even when they pertain to places which the

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148 Here contingency is used in the literal sense meaning a situation where objects touch each other, c.f., contiguity.
listener/reader does not know. The example of Will Phantom learning from Joseph Midnight about a sequence of unknown places is telling (317). In this context, stories do more than simply represent, for they function as maps. In the same vein, the novel also tells us that stories told by a storyteller we disagree with may nonetheless be instrumental in one’s life.

The conflict between Will Phantom and his father does not prevent Will from using his father’s teachings (140). These episodes present stories as connecting the organism (1) with a core environment – the circumstances that directly influence the organism; (2) with an extended environment – the circumstances that indirectly influence the organism; and (3) with a collective environment – the circumstances that influence the organism and other organisms.

The contiguity of Story, Dreaming, Country and Law lies at the core of Aboriginal epistemologies. It is revealed in Aboriginal painting in the passage from “rough dull state to shimmering brilliance” (Morphy, 1998, 188). These moments where the dull starts shimmering become moments that connect narratives, journeys, ecosystems and knowledge systems. The literary mode of the Law, I have shown, arises from the aesthetic appraisal of the interconnectedness of experience and representation. This aesthetic appraisal is an embodied experience: it is itself a resonance with Country, but most of all, and in the storyteller’s rendering of Will’s thoughts, it is “the root of ultimate trust …, the knowledge of intuition, of understanding the vibrations of subtle movement in the environment” (389). The cartographic quality of Carpentaria does not reside in mapping the land topographically, but in letting the principles of Aboriginal epistemologies shimmer into existence without rendering them static, and therefore in making plain the entanglement of Story, Dreaming, Country and Law.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued that, at the end of the twentieth century, the junction of literary postcolonialism, postmodernism and environmentalism has planted the seeds for the growth of a new genre, which I have coined *postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction*. Through self-reflexivity, the incorporation of indigenous epistemologies, and a close attention to organism-environment interactions, postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction draws attention to the production of textual storyworlds in postcolonial societies.

In the first chapter “Environmentalism and Empire,” I have shown that the attitudes of contemporary societies towards the physical and material environment and towards the concept Environment have changed in the twentieth century. These epistemic changes are visible in the development of national literatures such as Australia’s, but they are also dramatized in individual texts, such as Jane Urquhart’s *A Map of Glass*. These changes were brought about by developments in science and technology, by the acknowledgment of anthropogenic disruptions and destructions of ecosystems, and by rapid transformations of economic and social regimes. Not only have the epistemic shifts influenced scientific perspectives, They have also pervaded literary representations of the relationships between human organisms, communities and their surroundings. But literary texts, it is to be noted, are not removed from the episteme from which they arise, and the flow of information is not purely one-way from science to art. On the contrary, literature can influence the scientific episteme (the Gaia hypothesis is just one striking, if controversial example) and transform scientific practices as much as it is transformed by them. So when one maps the relationships between science, literature and ecosystem, one realizes that to find causal relationships is a quasi impossible task: science, literature and ecosystem make up a *complex* and *nonlinear* dynamic system based on feedback loops, and therefore their relationship is one of *entanglement*, not of causality.

In the second chapter “Econarratology and Postcolonial Ecopoetic Metafiction,” I have laid out the features of the new genre. I have explained that the relationships between literary texts, sciences and ecosystems are complicated in postcolonial ecopoetic
metafiction. Indeed the latter thematizes, aestheticizes and dramatizes the connection between storytelling, organism and environment, and offers a way of making sense of the entanglement of science, literature and ecosystem in postcolonial societies. I have also argued that this new genre demands a form of narratology more in tune with postcolonial and environmentalist concerns, and therefore more apt to describe the narrative phenomena at the core of the texts studied.

I coin the term “interactional chronotopes” for the storyworld in which the principle that ontologically connects space and time, but also interactional patterns and interactional epistemes, is embodied in a dynamic process of the ecosystem. The three novels of my corpus allow the reader to experience the dynamism of organism-environment relationships. In chapters three to five, I have looked closely at how the interactional chronotope manifests itself in Wiebe’s, Ghosh’s and Wright’s novels.

In *A Discovery of Strangers*, ecopoiesis takes place in the *storymaker’s* creation of dialogical relationships. The interactional chronotope of *ADOS* is the most complex of the three novels, for there are two very different *topics* upon which the storyworld is based: the *collision* of interactional epistemes and patterns during the “Columbian exchange” and the skilled practice of *making* in Tetsot’ine interactional patterns. In other words, there are two ecopoetics at play, two ways of making sense of the organism-environment relationship. One is the sociocultural monologism of the English explorers, which is based on colonialism and is made manifest in the *monologue of guns*. The other is the sociocultural dialogism of the Tetsot’ine people; it is based on traditional ecological knowledge and is performed in the cooperation demanded by the aridity of the Arctic ecology. The colonial ideology and the indigenous ecopoetics overlap in the novel, and it is impossible to disentangle them. However, I have shown that there is a shift from what I call a poetics of collision to a hermeneutics of discovery. In the course of reading, what is perceived as a clash of cultures is slowly replaced by a gradual and deeper understanding of the stranger. As the sound of guns recedes in the background, the cooperation of strangers comes to the fore. What

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149 Here, “topic” is understood as a process that coheres space and time.
appears initially as a collision of genres (history and fiction) becomes a dialogue made manifest in the discourse of historiographic metafiction. In that context, storymaking, toolmaking and worldmaking are enacted by the historiographic metafictional structure of the novel, and ecopoiesis can emerge as dialogical cooperation rather than colonial domination.

In *The Hungry Tide*, ecopoiesis takes place in the translation of audiences into storyworld, whether it be the foreign characters’ being carried across the intradiegetic storyworld of Bon Bibi, or the reader being carried across the boundaries of the diegetic world. The interactional chronotope of Ghosh’s novel is more straightforward than that of Wiebe’s, for the *topic* of *The Hungry Tide* is the ecology of the region. The tidal, confluent and mangrove region of the Sundarbans is the ground upon which all aspects of the narrative system come into existence. The circulation of water, the confluence of river channels, the meeting of river and sea, the constant transformation of mangrove islands, all these processes are described at length in the novel and they become a way of making sense of and of giving coherence to the trajectories of life of the protagonists and to the numerous waves of migration. Moreover, due to the transcultural nature of the region, there is always a process of translation at play in the novel. In the metafictional structure of the text, it is Kanai the inscribed translator who serves to carry other characters as well as the reader across the Sundarbans and across the language barrier. The socioecosystem therefore pervades the narrative configuration and the interplay of interactional patterns and epistemes. But the relationship between the circulation, confluence and transformation of interactional patterns and interactional epistemes is not unilateral, for this interplay feeds back into the very ecosystem from which they emerge, thereby changing the very ground upon which they stand. It is not surprising, for after all the Sundarbans are a dynamic region in constant transformation. It is this oscillation between the ecosystem as cause and the ecosystem as effect that is the core of the narrative system of *The Hungry Tide*.

In *Carpentaria*, ecopoiesis takes place in the Dreaming movement of creation, which on the one hand parodies the extractivist episteme of colonialism and capitalism and on the other reasserts the creative presence of indigenous interactional epistemes and patterns.
The topic at the source of the interactional chronotope of the storyworld is the Dreaming of the ancestral serpent. Only a sophisticated understanding of the Aboriginal conceptions of Country, Dreaming and Law however permits to understand this narrative configuration. Through a dramatization of storytelling through the figure of the inscribed Aboriginal storyteller, the novel connects the three concepts inherent in Aboriginal epistemologies and enables Wright to translate the colonial world she depicts into a postcolonial counterdiscourse of resistance in which the Aboriginal episteme has assimilated the colonial episteme and transformed it into a parody of itself. The storyworld thus emerges as a dimension of the Aboriginal Law that resists any attempt at congealing meaning. In this dimension of emergence, the reader, by struggling to make sense of the interactional patterns of Will and Normal Phantom, contributes to keeping the principles of Dreaming, Country and Law alive, all the while undermining the colonial politics of dispossession and assimilation.

All three novels draw attention to and play with the similarities between the production of a storyworld within a narrative system and the production of a world through narrative systems. I argue that through the self-reflexive use of inscribed processes of textual production and reception, postcolonial ecopoetic metafiction actually produces an ontological connection between the production of a storyworld and the production of the reader’s world. This claim has important repercussions and should be taken seriously, which is what I have been trying to do in this doctoral thesis by identifying the metafictional structures of the three novels and relating it to their configurations of ecopoetic processes. Taking seriously the ontological connection between storyworld and reader’s world indeed demands a profound reconceptualization of the act of reading, which cannot be understood as a discrete and individual process, but has to be thought as a continuous, relational and open-ended process of world-formation.

However, in writing this thesis, I have also realized the difficulty of summarizing my readings of these incredibly complex works of art. The entanglement of storytelling, organism and environment in these narratives has made me aware of the dynamism of reading, but this very dynamism, when coupled with the metafictionality and self-reflexivity
of these novels, entails that they resist stasis, and thus synthesis. Paradoxically, in trying to account for the process of reading as a dynamic ecological process, I necessarily have to reduce this process so that I can express it in words that make sense to my audience. I realize now that relating the act of reading to the interaction of living is hard to achieve well in writing. It is a skill that demands constant work. Ultimately, it calls for a profound reconfiguration of how we conceive and practice textual analysis.
Bibliography


