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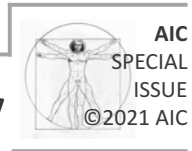
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# Writing Country: Aboriginality Through Poetry in the Works of Australian Aboriginal Authors Paul Collis and Jeanine Leane

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## Keywords

**Aboriginal languages; Poetry; Indigeneity; Country; Paul Collis; Jeanine Leane.**

Through a study of poetry by Indigenous Australian poets Paul Collis and Jeanine Leane, this essay focuses on the poetic form as a means of expressing aboriginality. This essay examines the grammatical shift from language and country to language *is* country. The aim of this essay is to highlight the role of the relation between language and country in the construction of Indigenous identity. As such, poetry in First Nations' languages gives form to Indigenous identity and allows for a reflection on the place of the English language in colonization, both historically and in contemporary contexts. Finally, Indigeneity emerges in this essay through the prism of language revitalization and autonomy, understood as a fundamental step in the reaffirmation of Indigenous identity.

For Indigenous Australians, “languages, or even mixtures of them, are directly placed in the landscape by the founding acts of Dreamtime heroes. From that point on, the relation between language and territory is a necessary rather than contingent one” (Rumsey, 1993: 204).<sup>1</sup> This necessary relation is illustrated by an ontological complementarity, whereby language *is* country and country *is* language. Through the study of a selection of poems by Wiradjuri writer, poet and academic Jeanine Leane, and creative writing academic and Barkindji man Paul Collis, this essay will consider how poetry in First Nations languages demonstrates a relation of identity between language and land, and how it gives form to an expression of Aboriginality.<sup>2</sup> Jeanine Leane’s first volume of poetry, *Dark Secrets: After Dreaming (AD) 1887-1961* (2010), recounts the stories of Aboriginal women’s experiences in colonial Australia; her first novel, *Purple Threads* (2011), provides insights into the country lives from an Indigenous Australian point of view. In *Walk Back Over* (2018), her most recent collection of poetry, Leane searches in the archives, memory, and story another history of Australia. Having worked extensively with Indigenous inmates in juvenile detention centres and prisons, Paul Collis relates the difficulty and injustices associated with being

<sup>1</sup> As the collective nouns ‘Aboriginals’ and ‘Indigenous’ are increasingly rejected by members of various Indigenous communities, in Australia there is a growing preference for the expression ‘First Nations.’ See: <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/australias-first-peoples>.

<sup>2</sup> This essay privileges the term Aboriginality instead of Indigeneity. Playwright, poet, and political activist Jim Everett, or Pura-ia Meenamatta, of the Plangermairreenner people of the Cape Portland Nations of North-east Tasmania, writes: “Aboriginality can be seen as being Aboriginal with an understanding of both your bloodline and your spiritual-cultural being manifested in your personal sovereignty. Aboriginality can be compared with the way that citizens of other nations know themselves in their being, in their identity”. See [https://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion\\_to\\_tasmanian\\_history/A/Aboriginality.htm](https://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/A/Aboriginality.htm).

Indigenous in contemporary Australia in his novel *Dancing Home* (2017). The first section of this essay will briefly focus on the use of a colonial form of expression to communicate with the land. The second section is an analysis of the poem “Un-named” by Paul Collis, aiming to reveal the ancient Barkindji names occulted by colonisation. Lastly, the essay explores the role of language in the physical, emotional, and intellectual response to First Nations identity in Jeanine Leane’s poetry.<sup>3</sup>

### Cultural forms, Country and Identity

According to Goenpul feminist scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson, “Indigenous people may have been incorporated in and seduced by the cultural forms of the colonizer but this has not diminished the ontological relationship to land. Rather, it has produced a doubleness whereby Indigenous subjects can ‘perform’ whiteness while being Indigenous” (2015: 45). Poetry is one of those cultural forms that both Leane and Collis exploit in order to express their Aboriginality. An important epistemic difference, however, distinguishes colonial European worldviews from Indigenous thought and influences the poetic content of First Nations writing: “the white way of knowing country is forged by ownership, possession, and control. The Aboriginal way of knowing comes through spirituality, identity and traditions of historical connectedness” (Watson, 2005: 46). Although neither Leane nor Collis offers a definition of Aboriginality, their poetry does express Aboriginal ways of knowing, thereby maintaining the epistemological distinctiveness of Australian First Nations.<sup>4</sup>

Understanding the notion of country as an inseparable *physical* and *spiritual* entity is paramount to understanding its place in Indigenous poetry. In her study, *Nourishing Terrains*, Deborah Bird Rose explains that “country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy”; country also has a temporality, “[...] a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life” (1996: 7). Here country, understood as both a common and proper noun, has ipseity, an individual identity or selfhood, with which the First Nations *communicate*. Therefore, language is a pivotal part of Indigenous identity, since “the widespread conceptualisation amongst many Indigenous communities that ancestral languages ‘belong’ to certain tracts of land stems from the belief that language was planted by ancestral or Dreaming beings as a gift to the land and its people” (Rusho, 2018: 95). Consequently, poetry in First Nations languages needs to be understood as a contemporary expression of this ancient event, the recognition of the gift of language to Australian First Nations, and the confirmation of their connection to country.

The relationship between language and country is crucial to First Nations identity. In their study, *Reviving old Indigenous names for new purposes*, Laura Kostanski and Ian Clark cite the work of George Seddon who “theorised that the words of the landscape carry ‘cultural baggage’ that

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<sup>3</sup> As each poem contains both English and either Barkindji or Wiradjuri languages, specific language resources have been used. For Barkindji: Hercus, Luise A. (2011). *Paakantyi dictionary*. Canberra: National Library of Australia. Available online: [https://www.academia.edu/33565042/PAAKANTYI\\_DICTIONARY](https://www.academia.edu/33565042/PAAKANTYI_DICTIONARY). For the Wiradjuri language: The Wiradjuri Condbolin Corporation Language Program Dictionary based on the printed version published by Stan Grant and John Rudder *A New Wiradjuri Dictionary*; the online Wiradjuri dictionary is available at [http://www.wiradjuri.dalang.com.au/plugin\\_wiki/contact](http://www.wiradjuri.dalang.com.au/plugin_wiki/contact).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of different points of view on what constitutes Indigeneity for Australian First Nations, see Moses, Dirk A. (2011). *Race and Indigeneity in Contemporary Australia*. In Manfred BERG & Simon WENDT (Eds.), *Racism in the Modern World: Historical Perspectives on Cultural Transfer and Adaptation* (pp. 329-352). NewYork: Berghahn Books.

may ‘imply values and endorse power relations’” (Seddon, 1997: 15, *apud* Kostanski & Clark, 2009: 189). Furthermore, Aileen Moreton-Robinson emphasizes the importance of naming place when she writes “white possessive logics are operationalised with discourses to circulate sets of meanings about ownership of the nation, as part of common sense knowledge, decision-making, and socially produced conventions” (2015: xii).<sup>5</sup> Through their poetry, Collis and Leane, using the Barkindji and the Wiradjuri languages, respectively, challenge the colonial discourse and intensify a sense of belonging to country, since “despite the link between language and the land being independent of speakers, it is often expressed by Indigenous people in terms of actual ownership. There are a number of examples of land tenure being encoded in Aboriginal languages” (Rusho, 2018: 96). Using the Wiradjuri and Barkindji languages in poetry is all but anodyne, it is poetic activism, which defends First Nations’ ownership of country. Poetry in First Nations languages is a declaration of resistance and endeavour, whereby Aboriginal Australians can “gather again – restore – regenerate – remember” (“The Gatherers”, Leane, s.a).

### Possession and Knowledge in Paul Collis’ “Un-named”

The power relations inherent to words that describe the landscape, as well as the denial of Indigenous sovereignty as a result of white possession, are both present in Collis’ poem “Un-named,” where the Barkindji words enter into a process of confrontation and substitution with the English language (Collis & Leane, 2020: 30-31). Demonstrating the *necessary* relation between language and country, or *Kiira* in Barkindji, Collis’ poem brings into light the consequences of colonial practices and the implications of Indigenous language denial by colonial powers.<sup>6</sup> In “Un-named,” Collis restores Barkindji identity by giving voice to those who have been silenced. The beginning of the poem evokes place, person, and possession:

He strode the bank of the Darling, a stranger  
And claimed it his. (Spit)  
The stranger on the banks...  
– that white Jesus, didn’t even know her name. (Spit).  
Grandfathers’ seeing, black eyes wouldna told him –

The first five verses of “Un-named” introduce a single geographical entity with two very different histories. Indeed, Collis highlights the underlying power relations of words, since the newly-arrived stranger, who “strode the bank of the Darling,” embodies and maintains, through naming, the Australian settler and the subsequent colonial confiscation of an already inhabited land. An aspect of colonial history of Barkindji people is made evident with the arrival of “the stranger,” who stands on the banks of what the British explorer Charles Sturt

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<sup>5</sup>Taking cities as examples, Aileen Moreton-Robinson explains how “[...] signs of white possession are embedded everywhere in the landscape”, and yet “[t]he omnipresence of Indigenous sovereignties exists here too, but it is disavowed through the materiality of these significations, which are perceived as evidence of ownership by those who have taken possession” (2015: xii).

<sup>6</sup> For the consequences of Indigenous language denial, see Fernand de Varennes and Elzbieta Kuzborska (2016). Language, Rights, and Opportunities: The Role of Language in the Inclusion and Exclusion of Indigenous Peoples. *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights*, 23(3), 281-305. Available online: <https://www.ijstor.org/stable/44631155>.

had named the Darling river during one of his expeditions.<sup>7</sup> However, the “white Jesus,” whose identity becomes explicit further on in the poem, ignores a much more ancient history of creation from which the natural features of the land inherited their name. Sturt, having named the river “Darling” in reference to General Sir Ralph Darling, governor of New South Wales from 1825 to 1831, seizes territory both physically and linguistically and, in the process, erases history and threatens identity. Colonial nomenclature is a calculated form of dispossession, insidiously undermining identity; those for whom the river *already* has a name are deprived of their spiritual and even physical link to country.<sup>8</sup>

However, Collis’ poem “Un-named” reminds the reader that only the Barkindji can *possess* the river, an act which is characterised not by the notion of property but also by that of knowledge.<sup>9</sup> It is the physical act of spitting described between the brackets which marks the speaker’s strong rejection of the settler language and subsequent appropriation of the river. Such a gesture of disgust reflects the forcing out from the body, as well as from language, of something pernicious and foreign to the Indigenous speaker. Spitting translates without words the violence of colonialism; it is the demonstration of the deep-rooted anger and frustration of being ignored and silenced by colonial powers. In “Un-named,” the reader thus becomes conscious of what settlers had ignored: “Grandfathers seeing, black eyes wouldna told him –.” Collis’ use of the genitive form in “Grandfathers,” when associated with the gerund-participle “seeing,” refers less to perception – anyone can observe and testify to the existence of the river – than to the possession, through the *knowledge*, of that which is perceived.<sup>10</sup> The ontological divergence of *how* something is possessed is reinforced by the negative form in “wouldna,” thereby accentuating the distinction between different forms of ownership. The notion of perception-possession is reinforced in the following verses:

*“Barka. Thas her name. Barka – that one, there. Nbantarna. Nbantarna. Barka. Barka.”*

But the stranger didn’t see the smoke of fires Barkindji.  
Didn’t smell gun powder that lingers on West wind, icy and old,  
the memory of colour.  
Instead, he strode the mountains, rum blind – and parked Lawson.

Indeed, reclaiming country becomes possible through the *un-naming* and subsequent renaming of place. It is through the use of the Barkindji language in the poem “Un-named,” that Collis

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<sup>7</sup> See the entry for Charles Sturt in the Australian Dictionary of Biography: H. J. Gibbney, “Sturt, Charles (1795–1869)”, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University. Available online: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/sturt-charles-2712/text3811>. Published first in hardcopy 1967.

<sup>8</sup> John Kinsella refers to the poetry of another Indigenous poet, Lionel Fogarty, as a means of “[reterritorialising] lost ground.” He argues that “this is especially true for a culture where the rites of naming are all important in establishing a map of social and cultural identity” (1999: 157).

<sup>9</sup> In the Barkjindi language, there is no distinction between the p-b, t-d and k-g, all of them situated “somewhere in between,” so that one can write either Paakantyi or Baagandyi (Hercus, 2011: 29). The name Paakantyi comes from the word paaka “river” and literally means “belonging to the river.” Here, Collis writes Barkindji.

<sup>10</sup> The reader observes an enallage, whereby the gerund-participle *seeing* also has the function of a noun. Therefore, *seeing* is as much the perception of an object as the possession of the object perceived. *Seeing* is related to *possession*, which in turn is understood as *knowledge* of country (Hercus, 2011: 46).

maintains and reinforces Barkindji identity. In restoring the Barkindji name *Barka*, the Darling river is *un*-named: Collis negates the colonial power's designation, just as colonisers had previously done to the Barkindji people.

The use of the Barkindji language in poetry becomes a form of activism, whereby an Indigenous poet replaces the voice of the settler poet. Accordingly, the identity of the stranger, the "white Jesus," becomes clear once the "Grandfathers" have spoken, with the mention of the settler poet Henry Lawson. Referring to the river as the Darling, the poet not only ignores Barkindji history, but also maintains and reinforces colonial domination through language. Yet, contrary to the turn of the century settler poet, the Barkindji poet, having taken the time to listen to the Grandfathers, recounts what Lawson *didn't* see or smell. Indeed, the negative form in "Un-named" reflects the negation of the Barkindji language, knowledge, and history. This is why Lawson "didn't see the smoke of fires Barkindji," those of the Traditional Owners who have occupied the river country since millennia. Lawson also fails to mention the colonial violence endured by the Barkindji, unwilling as he was to recognise the massacres, since he "didn't smell gun powder that lingers on the West wind, icy and old." The use of an anacoluthon in reference to a wind "icy and old," where one would expect *icy and cold*, encourages a reading which considers time as being an intimate part of country. Paradoxically, it is the negative form that subsequently revives the history and identity of the Barkindji nation. If naming the river *Barka* does not remove the violent history of colonial occupation to which Collis refers, the Barkindji grandfathers' call "*Nhantarna. Nhantarna. Barka. Barka*" reinforces identity through the use of language.

In "Un-named," readers are confronted with a history related by a particular language, that of the coloniser. With each reading, Lawson's poetry comforts a certain vision of the past; it maintains, through misidentification and misnaming, the seizure and appropriation of the land. However, in the poem "Un-named," the reader becomes aware that Henry Lawson's poetry is no longer the only literary reference to *Barka*. Depending on whether it is claimed through an act of colonial (*dis*)possession, or understood as being possessed through Barkindji *knowledge*, the same entity differs greatly in its appreciation, value, and history. If Lawson's poetry contributed to the persistent denial and ignorance of the Barkindji culture, it is also thanks to poetry that culture can be remembered:

Wrote white name upon Wiradjuri, in *that* town – where streets are filled white.  
There's ice wind of memory and, river voices unheard.  
But we won't dance with the fiddle, rummed-up, nor dance with the Banjo.<sup>11</sup>  
Instead, cool fires and smoke, re-new our Mother,  
and replace the smell of blood and gunpowder  
with small feet dancing Wiradjuri dreams in color.

Once more, it is the negative form that distinguishes the settlers from the Barkindji. It is also by using the negative form that Collis succeeds in showing a more positive portrayal of the Barkindji culture than the one habitually depicted.<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, there is all that is

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<sup>11</sup> Collis plays on the use of the word *Banjo* as a common noun as well as a proper noun in reference to Banjo Paterson, an Australian "bush poet" whose idyllic representation of the Australian bush contrasted with the poetry of Henry Lawson.

<sup>12</sup> Indigenous peoples around the world are "overrepresented as always lacking, dysfunctional, alcoholic, violent, needy, and lazy" (Moreton-Robinson, 2015: xiii).

“unheard,” namely the “memory” and “river voices” of the Barkindji Nation; on the other hand, the poem reveals what the Barkindji “won’t” do. Furthermore, in order to differentiate Barkindji identity from that of the settlers’, Collis employs the adverb “instead,” which replaces, suggests an alternative, thereby signifying what is *possible*, what *could* or even *should* be. In writing “instead,” Collis writes *in the place of*; he substitutes the writing of another, in an act of language designed to “re-new our Mother,” i.e. Barkindji country. Collis suggests a Barkindji identity determined by its connection to country *instead* of one determined by an oppressive colonial power, where the Barkindji language is used *instead* of another, subsequently replacing the false claims of possession. Through words or dance, Collis’ poem finds a place for “Wiradjuri dreams in colour,” dreams which define Barkindji history and identity.

“Un-naming” undeniably refutes the signification of colonial possession and highlights the consequences of an ignored but never renounced Indigenous sovereignty. Un-naming country is the first step in speaking to country, in creating a dialogue and a discourse reaffirming Aboriginality.

### Jeanine Leane: Rebirth and Renewal of Identity Through Language

Naming country is fundamental to asserting a long standing and necessary connection to the land. In this regard, poetry in First Nations languages expresses not only Aboriginality, but also Indigenous sovereignty: engaging directly with country, poetry is a reminder of Indigenous sovereignty despite colonial laws of property.<sup>13</sup> Avowing Indigenous identity and sovereignty, in “Nurambang yali–Country speaks” (2020: 140), Jeanine Leane emphasizes the need to speak to country:

It’s been too long since I sat on granite in my  
Country and thought  
Too many years since I breathed this air –  
Bunyi-ng – ganha  
Felt this dirt – Ngamanhi Dhaagun  
Smelt this dust – Budha – nhi Bunan  
Listened for the sounds of her words that say  
“Balandha – dhuraay Bumal-ayi-nya Wumbay  
abuny (yaboing)” – History does not have the  
first claim. Nor the last word.  
Nghindhi yarra dhalanbul ngiyani gin.gu  
“You can speak us now!”

Once again, returning to country, or *Nguram-bang* in Wiradjuri, is closely associated with a return to language. In “Nurambang yali – Country speaks,” the poet comes to “[listen] for the sounds of her words,” those of country, which are inscribed into the Wiradjuri language. More than a translation into Wiradjuri, Leane replaces English to communicate directly with country.

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<sup>13</sup> In “Sovereignty, Mabo, and Indigenous Fiction”, Geoff Rodoreda argues that contemporary Aboriginal narrative prose “is no longer seeking to relocate itself within concepts of ‘White Australia’”, but rather it develops Indigenous characters who “[...] are shown to take for granted their sovereign custodianship of particular country *irrespective* of the legal status of their landholding in narrative” (2017: 347. Emphasis in the original). Although applied to prose, Rodoreda’s notion of ‘sovereignty novels’ is also of interest here.

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To illustrate this point, the third person accusative pronoun *us* in “You can speak us now!” is given in Wiradjuri as the pronoun “ngiyani gin.gu,” which signifies “for” or “belonging to all of us” (where *ngiyani* is the plural we), while the possessive pronoun “gin.gu” denotes *we all but not you*. This choice reflects the possessive and inclusive relation between the speaker of Wiradjuri and country and where the English language, used to negate Indigenous identity, loses its dominant position in regards to the Wiradjuri language, in a place where “[country] can speak us now!”

However, the poetic act of speaking to country and its impact on Aboriginality also comes with its own set of challenges. The use of either English or Wiradjuri is not without consequence, sparking an existential response that Leane tries to capture. In Jeanine Leane’s poem “Yanha-mam-birra – Release” (138-139), the poet’s sense of Aboriginality intensifies with her growing familiarity with the Wiradjuri language: “The space of my emptiness is a chasm so deep, so wide / I’ll fall to endless nothing without your words to cross it.” In these lines, the “space of my emptiness” enters into a paradoxical relation whereby the language that the poet masters, English, is not the language that the poet needs to fill the empty space within her. Falling to an “endless nothing,” the poet needs the Wiradjuri language to “cross” country, to name and connect with it and her Aboriginality. In other words, in order to alleviate the suffering, to fill what has become “a chasm so deep so wide,” the poet must reconnect to Wiradjuri country with the Wiradjuri language. The poem continues, alternating between English and Wiradjuri:

I have starved for you to feed my soul nourish my  
blood to strengthen my bones, Ngadhi Bagurany  
dhabul (ngadhi bugaray darbhul)  
I have craved for the taste of your sound on my  
parched lips the drip-drop of your coolness on my  
parched palette. dulba nginhu balaba nganda-birra  
mugumaga (mucu maga)  
[...]

Aware of what has become absent, the speaker is also aware of the renewed presence of her language. The English language is not rejected as such, as the poet identifies with both languages, but its place and role are contested by the visceral and spiritual need to speak Wiradjuri. The final stanza of the poem “Yanha-mam-birra – Release” is the rediscovery of one’s place not only within language, but also within country:

Life sentence lifted my tongue can liberate my heart  
with these words from you  
I am Wiradjuri... Badhu Wiradjuri  
I am proud... Badhu Dyiramadilinya  
I am here... Badhu Nginha

Such a liberation achieved through language demonstrates how language can determine an understanding of the self, how English allows the poet to communicate with others, and how Wiradjuri allows the poet to enter into a relationship with country and with her Wiradjuri identity.



This need for language also informs Leane's poem "Nginha-gulia nyiang – These words" (137). Poetry becomes an act of difficult reappropriation, where the mind and the body submit to the painful but necessary healing that language brings:

There should have been a time for such words  
for this word – 'Nginha Nyiang'  
And a word for such time Guwayu

Similar to Collis' use of the adverb "instead," the preterite modal auxiliary "should" captures the history of colonial displacement, violence, and oppression. Leane reminds the reader of words that *should have* been heard, "Nginha Nyiang" *these words*, as well as words that *should have* been spoken, "Guwayu," *still and yet for all times* (xi). "Guwayu" is a call for resistance maintained throughout time, reminding the reader of what has always been there, as well as what *shall be* in the future. However, in "Nginha-gulia nyiang – These words" resistance implies both a physical and an emotional effort:

[...]  
Now my clumsy tongue struggles over each new  
syllable my country "Ngurambang" gives me.  
Each one I want to devour like the sweetest thing.  
"Wiluray Bang Gula-dbay" I ever tasted.  
I want to suck every shred of the marrow  
"Dundumbirra" from each solid sound.  
I want to swallow it whole "Darra-Marra"  
to know to what it is to eat for the first time  
I want to feel like the child born to these words  
"Gudha Dhurrinya Nginha Nyiang".

The verbs "to devour," "to suck," "to swallow," and "to eat," verbal hyponyms found within the hyperonym "to nourish," reveal the speaker's hunger and desire for language. Such a metaphysical act of nourishment constitutes the *vital* process which leads to an act of poetic renaissance. As a result, "Gudha Dhurrinya Nginha Nyiang" becomes the source of a new identity defined through language, an emotional act of rebirth, renewed with every Wiradjuri word.

Whether it be Collis' Barkindji elder who spits out an inappropriate language or Leane's poetic voice that incorporates the Wiradjuri language, poetry in First Nations languages reveals, through the knowledge of country, a pathway to Indigenous identity. This idea is central to the poem "The Gatherers" (Leane, s.a), where the Wiradjuri language is fully integrated into verse.<sup>14</sup> Any reader unfamiliar with the Wiradjuri language must first determine the significance of the Wiradjuri words within the poem. Once this lexical base has been established, one must then learn to listen to "Gunhinarrung," the *grandmothers*, who possess a knowledge of Wiradjuri country unknown to settlers:

Gunhinarrung learnt to gather – map Country  
with little feet as morning's pink horizons bring heat

<sup>14</sup> The full version of the poem can be found here: <https://redroomcompany.org/poem/jeanine-leane/gatherers/>.

and light to long-water Murrumbidgee women gather  
 in the early air when dew drips from frond and leaf  
 while mibrulongs nesting in hollow gum sing a new day  
 gurru warbles – maliyan soars high above majestic  
 Baiame watches the balaagan-girbang with wide-eyed  
 ballis cooing on the sturdy hips of gunis as they  
 gather under the watchful eyes of balaagans  
 skilled with time and wise with age – custodians of  
 place – keepers of the secrets of women teaching  
 the young minhis and mingaans the lore of the land.

Here explorers no longer survey country for colonial purposes; rather, the Wiradjuri grandmothers map their country through language to preserve a deep, ancestral knowledge of the land. To map country in this context is to protect the Wiradjuri history inscribed into the various features of the land, and where the uninitiated are deprived of this particular knowledge of country. Knowledge is passed on through language to the “young minhis and mingaans,” *younger and older sisters*, who learn “the lore of the land.”

Moreover, a paradoxical situation arises whereby the familiar becomes the *unknown*, the non-Indigenous reader rediscovering *what has always been there*. In a process where country is *re-presented* through Wiradjuri language, immediate understanding is troubled or at least impeded, as a new conceptual relationship between the signifier and the signified disturbs the identification of the linguistic sign. In other words, the referent to which the sign refers remains the same, however the relation between the sign and reality engenders a new conceptual association that the reader must first apprehend and then accept. Accepting country is therefore conditioned by the acceptance of this unaccustomed relation that represents the seemingly same country *in another way*. For the uninitiated, reading Leane’s poem demands research, discovery, acquisition, and acceptance *before* fulfilling its figurative role. This process induces a new vision of country for the English-speaking reader and renews a much more ancient relation for members of the Wiradjuri Nation. It is within this difference that one discovers an expression of Aboriginality, one that is consolidated through the relation “language *is* country” and where country *is* identity.

The representation of country also occurs through the sonority of the Wiradjuri language. For example, both the consonants *b / g* and the *a* assonance in the line “Baiame watches the balaagan-girbang with wide-eyed”—where the Wiradjuri “balaagan-girbang” replaces a phonetically less appropriate phrase *a group of women*—reinforce the balaagan-girbang’s connection to Baiame, the original creator spirit. Leane also maintains the poetic connections between Wiradjuri and English, the same line containing the consonant *in* “watches” and “wide-eyed.” The Wiradjuri Baiame therefore “watches” “balaagan-girbang,” with their “wide-eyed” “ballis,” *baby*, while the same *b / g* consonants associate phonetically “ballis” to “gunis,” *mother*. Here, the physical connection between country, mother, and child is represented through repeating sound patterns. In much the same way, the “mibrulongs,” or *rosellas* in English, that “sing a new day,” enter into a new poetic association: the consonant *m* in Murrumbidgee, an important river to the Wiradjuri, is phonetically reiterated, *parroted* from tree to tree, in the consonant *m* of all the mibrulongs heard along the length of the river. Furthermore, the double *r* consonant in the word “gurru” seems to *warble*, or *trill*, in the reader’s

mouth much more than the word *magpie*.<sup>15</sup> Finally, the “Maliyan,” *wedge-tail eagle* in English, rediscovers within the *m* consonant of the English adjective “majestic” an alliteration which is absent in its English name: Maliyan majestic. Indeed, by either replacing English words with Wiradjuri words or by associating the two languages, Leane demonstrates the poetic power of the Wiradjuri language, as well as its independence from and relation to English.

Poetry in First Nations language contributes to a sense of Aboriginality by creating and recreating conceptual pathways between sounds, words, and their referents. Combining the two languages within the same verse, Leane reveals a language liberating itself, albeit slowly, from the constraints of the English language and its associated colonial oppression. In this regard, if certain grammatical categories remain in English, namely verbs, prepositions and adverbs, they introduce Wiradjuri nouns. Moreover, the present tense perpetuates the action denoted by each verb and the permanence of their Wiradjuri subjects.<sup>16</sup> Leane develops the idea of transition from the English language to one that is more closely connected to her country and her Aboriginality:

Uloola marks time – rises high burns Country cobar-red  
 migays forage for guddi and nharrang – catch warramba  
 by Wollundry shores – net marrumin in the gudha of clear water  
 dig for cumbungi in the marshes – gather budyaa’s eggs  
 among the reeds – search for buugang among miniature mountains  
 of moss – Gunhinarrung learns to look for small things that matter –  
 to take carefully – leave some always – to gather is to share.

The two languages therefore interact not only grammatically but also phonetically with each other, showing both dependence *and* autonomy. For example, in the verse “migays forage for guddi and nharrang – catch warramba,” the *g* consonant and the *a* assonance, in both English and Wiradjuri, capture the “movement” between the two languages and subsequently create the image of the “migays,” *young women*, “moving” between the vegetation. Henceforth, the English nomenclature ceases to determine what country is for the Wiradjuri and, without a substantial effort from the English-speaking reader, neither “guddi,” *snakes*, “nharrang,” *frilled-neck lizards*, nor “warramba,” *turtles*, can be captured in the readers’ minds in the way these animals are captured by the migays. Even the reader’s mental perception of water changes with an understanding of the Wiradjuri language, for “marrumin,” *crayfish* or *prawns*, are no longer found in the *glitter* of clear water, but within the “gudha.” In much the same way that the Wiradjuri language indicates the elements located within a certain space, the Wiradjuri word for *sun*, “Uloola,” marks time. Whereas the single syllable word *sun* offers no phonetic division of the duration of a day, the pronunciation of “Uloola” divides the daytime into three separate periods: the first short syllable marking the brief period of *sunrise* (yiramiilan), the longer second longer syllable reflecting the daytime “[burning] Country cobar-red,” while the final short

<sup>15</sup> The consonantal sound ‘rr’ is an alveolar stop with a rhotic manner of pronunciation that produces a trill consonant sound. It is the trill sound in the double consonant ‘rr’ in *gurru* that reflects more closely the sounds in the song of a magpie. See: <https://ab-ed.nesa.nsw.edu.au/go/aboriginal-languages/practical-advice/the-sounds-and-writing-systems-of-aboriginal-languages>.

<sup>16</sup> See Stuart Cooke (2013), “Tracing a Trajectory from Songpoetry to Contemporary Aboriginal Poetry.” In Belinda WHEELER (Ed.), *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature* (pp. 89-106). It highlights the use of a “language as an articulation” and “Aboriginal polyphony,” namely in Aboriginal song poetry.

syllable encapsulates the period of *sunset* (yirawulin). Poetry here acts on readers' understanding of the world, as new ways of perceiving both the quotidian passage of the sun and time bring into question the primacy of the English language and Western worldviews, while also reactivating and stimulating Indigenous perception and understanding of natural phenomena.

As in Collis' poem, Jeanine Leane's "The Gatherers" casts doubt on colonial *knowledge*. References to Hermann Klaatsch and Herbert Basedow highlight the contrast between what has been "collected as artefacts," or "displayed as scientific specimens," and Gunhinarrung's knowledge, which has become scattered words after colonial dispossession. However, it is these very scattered words which have become the base of a restored identity, as "Gunhinarrung cradles secrets between walls that capture her – sees her history manhandled – watches like a silent prisoner in someone else's story." No longer is identity to be found within textbooks that relate someone else's story, but rather through earthy archives, those which tell the story of the Wiradjuri through their relation to country and their history. Indeed, the Wiradjuri language used in these poems provides both the soil and the seed for the generations to come: "Gunhinarrug learns to sow seeds gathered."

If *language* is *country*, then *memory* is *Gunbinarrung*, and this memory is shared through language: "Guringuns listen to the gatherings buried safe/as seeds in the Country of Gunhinarrang's memory." Leane expresses Aboriginality as the memory of country, inextricably linked to language:

[...]  
 like the yinaagirbang before us we look for small things –  
 listen for silences – weave our own basket of  
 gatherings to keep safe for our galin-gabangbur – gather  
 and gather again – restore – regenerate – remember.

For Jeanine Leane, the memory of country is woven into "our own basket of gatherings," where the Wiradjuri language can "restore – regenerate – remember" both the texture *and* textuality of history. As such, the adjective "own" refers to a Wiradjuri culture and memory, and therefore identity, passed onto "galin-gabangur," the *next generation*, through language. For Jeanine Leane, poetry acts as a safeguard against fading memories, it heightens awareness of belonging and instills a sense of Aboriginality through the use of the Wiradjuri language.

Leane's poetry accentuates a move toward an autonomous Wiradjuri language, albeit in its uneasy relation to the English language. It is noteworthy that the only verb that Leane has chosen to write directly in Wiradjuri is "Wagirra," *to step or to walk on ground*: "Wagirra softly" the balaagans tell her – tread carefully on Country they say – "Balumbambal always watching." Hence, the English adverb *softly* is a reminder for both Wiradjuri and English speakers of how country should be treated, a way of life that is already part of the Wiradjuri culture: the "Balumbamba," the *ancestors*, are "always watching." The use of the Wiradjuri language constitutes an act of resistance, where the Gunhinarrungs continue to be the source of an irrevocable knowledge, safeguarded within the intimate relation where language *is* country.

### Conclusion

The use of First Nations languages in the poetry of Paul Collis and Jeanine Leane reaffirms the ontological relation between language and country. Although their poetry does not offer a fixed definition of Aboriginality, the use of both the Barkindji and Wiradjuri

languages exemplifies a poetic form of Aboriginal identity. The association between English and First Nations languages in poetry reveals new ways of understanding the world, as language transcends the forms of exclusion imposed by colonialisation and provides a way of communication between First Nations and country. The presence of country as both a spiritual and a physical entity in First Nations' poetry shows how language *is inseparable from* country, and this condition of indivisibility contributes to the identity of both the Barkindji and the Wirandjuri Nations.

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