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Homo Ecologicus:

Animism, Historical Materialism and Planetary Mimesis

Sam Durrant

“[Terra del Fuegians] are excellent mimics: as often as we coughed or yawned or made any odd motion, they immediately imitated us. [. . .] All savages appear to possess, to an uncommon degree, this power of mimicry”

Captain Cook, qtd in Taussig *Mimesis and Alterity*

Nature produces similarities; one need only think of mimicry. The highest gift for producing similarities, however, is man’s.

Walter Benjamin “On the Mimetic Faculty” 720

And he [Bobby Wabalanginy] would tell you that he rose even higher into the sky that day, little boy that he was, and saw future graves: Dr Cross and Wunyeran, curled together, and two other curled tight, a man and a woman: one from here and one from the ocean horizon. It took him some time, but started then: Bobby looked into future graves, and into some people’s hearts and mind, went into the hollows with them, into the very sounds they made. All his friends and their goodness kept him alive. And he never learned fear, because he was not just one self. He was bigger than that, he was all of them.

Kim Scott, *That Deadman Dance*

What if Captain Cook had seen fit to follow the ways of Tierra del Fuegians? What if he had seen their capacity for mimesis as evidence not of their savagery but their refinement, their mastery of humanity’s “highest gift”? What if he had learnt from them how to inhabit the spirits of others, dead, living and yet to be born, and abandoned his curious belief in being “just one self”? What if this embrace of the mimetic faculty turned out to be decisive for the trajectory of an Enlightenment that no longer defined itself over and against the non-European? And finally what if the novel were to realise its properly universal, planetary

vocation only when it comes to be written by a Noongar man from South Western Australia steeped in the mimetic culture of his ancestors?¹

The contemporary return toward mimesis as an object of theoretical enquiry turns in at least two directions. The first doubles down on Plato's suspicion of mimesis as a contagious threat to rationality and the healthy functioning of the *polis* and in this sense advocates, at the level of human behaviour, a *turning away* from mimesis and what it believes to be the pathological, all-too-human nature of *homo mimeticus*. This strand of mimetic studies is associated most directly with a renewed interest in pre- and post-Freudian group psychology, Nietzsche and Girard, mobilised in order to mount critiques of the mimetic impulses at work in contemporary forms of populism and neo-Fascism.² The second form of the mimetic turn is a more wholehearted *turning towards* mimesis, seen not as contagious pathology but as potential cure, as ecological antidote to our all-too-human modes of being in the world. This essay is predominantly interested in this second, utopian turn towards mimesis, a turn consonant with the recent planetary turn in the humanities.³ In the field of mimetic studies, this second turn is often associated with new materialism.⁴ However, my essay pursues connections with the 'old' materialism of the Frankfurt School, in which mimesis is associated with an animistic relation to the world progressively superseded by modernity.

Where the turn away from mimesis seeks to preserve the borders of the individuated, rational human subject, the turn towards mimesis seeks to move beyond the sovereignty of the subject and reconceive of human agency and subjectivity as irrevocably entangled or enmeshed with that of other, nonhuman life-forms. Resisting the split between (human) subject and (nonhuman) object that structures Western philosophy, animist ontologies recognise the *anima* (breath, life, spirit, even personhood) of nonhuman beings, such as animals, plants, rivers and rock formations. This recognition gives rise to mimetic modes of relation exemplified most dramatically in the shaman's ability to move between (or *with*) different bodies, to become a bird, a jaguar or a tree. Radicalising humanist notions of

¹ One might be tempted to read the Terra del Fuegians as engaged in what Bhabha terms colonial mimicry. However, I am interested in mimicry here not as satirical attempt to undermine colonial authority but as playful yet ethically serious attempt to understand alterity. My account of mimesis has more in common with Lawtoo's notion of postcolonial mimesis as "not really mimicry at all," but rather a form of mediation between cultures and "the site of potential narrative reconciliations" (Lawtoo "A Picture of Africa" 42-46).

² See for instance Connolly's *Aspirational Fascism* and Lawtoo's *(New) Fascism*.

³ In the field of postcolonial studies, see Spivak, Gilroy and Mbembe. In the field of mimetic studies, see Connolly, *Facing the Planetary* and Lawtoo and Connolly.

⁴ See for instance Bennett, *Influx and Efflux*.

empathy, animistic mimesis produces a relational ontology, life lived as “not just one self” but “all of them.” This is neither the dissolution of subjectivity feared by Platonists, nor the suspension of subjectivity proposed by Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter*, but rather its radical multiplication, expansion or *dis-enclosure*⁵. Animism is a form of perspectivism in which, at least potentially, “everything is human” (Viveiros de Castro 63). It has the capacity to teach us anew how to see the world from the perspective not just of other human selves but of all those beings whom the Western philosophical tradition does not habitually think of as having selves at all.

Gebauer and Wulf argue that Plato’s attack on earlier, unruly forms of mimesis is intimately linked to the shift from an oral to a literate culture: “mimesis is, for Plato, an element of the prewritten, oral, obsolete culture now in the course of being overtaken by the new literate culture” (45). Oral poetic performance becomes understood as a form of contagion, “a series of elementary mimetic processes by which listeners achieve a sameness with one another and which spreads epidemically” (47). The Platonic characterisation of mimesis as epidemic would seem to have a striking contemporary relevance. In our digital, hyper-visual, post-truth era, the circulation of images appears more dangerous than ever: politics is reduced to populism and the rational exercise of free will is supplanted by a mimetic identification with the demagogue, shored up by hostility towards those deemed to lie outside the narcissistic circuit. For those who share Plato’s suspicion of mimesis, modernity is an incomplete but essentially right-minded project: the problem here is that we are insufficiently modern, insufficiently civilised, continually liable to regression.

The Platonic account of our present predicament has an undeniably persuasive power, even while it remains silent about the violence involved in attempting to make people think and act rationally. Plato’s desire to drag those hypnotised by the play of images up out of the cave and into the light of reason (an allegory that disavows its own reliance on image) foreshadows the totalitarian impulse at the heart of the European Enlightenment, its arrogant dismissal of other modes of thought and its fundamental cynicism regarding human nature.⁶ One only becomes properly human, properly rational, by leaving nature behind, by inaugurating a split between nature and culture, the nonhuman and the human, the oral and

⁵ In *Out of the Dark Night*, Achille Mbembe borrows the term “dis-enclosure” from Jean-Luc Nancy in order to think the possibility of planetary community and radicalise the decolonial project as a rejection of all the structures that enclose the human subject, including those of race, ethnicity and species.

⁶ See William Kentridge’s “In Praise of Shadows” for a performative critique of Plato’s allegory based on his own “stone-age” practice of animation and Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus* 80-92.

the written, the body and the soul, the emotional and the logical, a split that then licences various forms of repression, instrumentalisation and domination.

The Girardian account of mimesis remains haunted by Plato in so far as it characterises mimesis as pathology, even while it rehabilitates the importance of ritual as a way of containing or resolving mimetic tensions. However, starting with *Phantom of the Ego*, and more recently, *Homo Mimeticus*, Nidesh Lawtoo reroutes both Plato and Girard through Nietzsche (and vice-versa) in order to develop a more capacious, explicitly ambivalent model of mimesis. Building on Nietzsche's notion of a "pathos of distance," Lawtoo affirms the importance of a "critical, philosophical distance from forms of mimetic behavior" (3), while simultaneously arguing that the philosophical *logos* is necessarily animated by emotional ties that nourish philosophical discourse. If in his late work Nietzsche decries the hypnotic effect of Wagner on the masses, he still cannot bring himself to denounce his early enthusiasm for Dionysian ritual (63-64). This intertwining of intellectual distance and emotional identification means that mimesis, in Lawtoo's words, is not only a pathology but a "path(-)ology", denoting both "mimetic sickness, and critical discourse (*logos*) on mimetic affects (*pathos*)" (6). In this Janus-faced account, mimesis is not something to be banned. If it remains something to be feared in the context of fascism, as an unconscious, all-too-human reflex from which we must cultivate a philosophical distance, it also remains the source of sympathy, maternal bonds, friendship, and communal rituals (30-45, 295-304).

The historical materialist approach to mimesis is similarly ambivalent; indeed explicitly dialectical. Mimesis is primarily understood as a vital, mutually animating mode of relation to the external ("natural") world that is repressed by Enlightenment and the objectifying force of instrumental reason but then re-emerges in modern art. However, this is not to say that mimesis is irrational or that reason should be abandoned *tout court* in favour of unconscious or instinctual drives. In fact, in aesthetic experience, mimesis *gives rise* to philosophical reflection. For Adorno, as for Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*, art mediates affect, simultaneously engendering both intimate identification and philosophical distance. Indeed, mimesis is not opposed to critical thought but *is itself a form of thought*: "The continued existence of mimesis, the nonconceptual affinity of a subjective creation to its non-positing other, defines art as a form of cognition and to that extent as 'rational' (Adorno qtd in Weber Nicholsen 147). In this account, it is the destructive bent of instrumental reason that is pathological and the recovery of our mimetic faculty is seen not as regressive but as

liberatory, pointing a way beyond the various forms of alienation induced by the Enlightenment disavowal of human embeddedness in nature.

To grasp how mimesis takes on such an affirmative character in historical materialism, I return to Horkheimer and Adorno's famous reading of *The Odyssey* in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For Plato, Homer is untrustworthy because he is a poet, one who mimetically solicits our emotional identification by creating "false tales" that only *seem* to contain knowledge [II, 377d]. But *The Odyssey* emerges out of a long tradition of oral performance retrospectively unified by the proper name Homer, and for Horkheimer and Adorno, the poem is itself implicated in the shift from the oral to the written. Like Plato's dialogues, it attempts to distance itself from mimetic modes of being in the world despite itself being a fundamentally mimetic form. Indeed, its plot allegorises the conditions of its own emergence, its own "escape" from the pre-historic, mythical world in which the human has not yet fully separated itself from nature. Odysseus becomes the modern, calculating figure of *homo economicus* only by renouncing the mimetic attractions of the mythic world—the lotus eaters, the sirens, Circe—in which *homo mimeticus* is not yet alienated from (his own) nature in favour of returning to the homeland and violently reclaiming his sovereign, patriarchal rights.

Rather than advocating a regression to a prehistorical state of nature, Horkheimer and Adorno's dialectical critique of the way in which *homo economicus* replaces *homo mimeticus* leads to the emergence of a third figure that I dub *homo ecologicus*. This negation of the negation brought about by Odysseus' flight from nature produces a radically utopian image of human being reconciled both to its own internal (human) nature and to external (nonhuman) nature. The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* thus enacts a mimetic (re)turn that is an important precursor to the contemporary planetary turn, in which humanity is urged to renounce the heroic, world-conquering *telos* inscribed for it by epic and take up its place within a post-sovereign world. Having established how *homo ecologicus* emerges out of the negation of the negation of *homo mimeticus*, I consider how a similar figure emerges from Kim Scott's retelling of the story of First Contact in his extraordinary novel, *That Deadman Dance*.

My turn from theory to novel is itself part of the mimetic turn. Postcolonial literary studies has largely been dominated by a neo-Platonic conception of the novel as a realistic representation of history, despite the fact that "few cultures outside the West have regarded

realism as an important goal . . . Art in these cultures is closely intertwined with ritual or daily life, much as it seems to have been in archaic Greek culture before Plato’s intervention” (Potolsky 93-94). Aimé Césaire explicitly seeks to recover this archaic, ritual conception of poetry as “the primitive sentence, the universe played and mimed” (1384),⁷ while Emmanuel Eze argues that the African novel is a work of “resubjectification” that recovers ancestral ties between the living and the dead, thereby “mending a broken tradition” (26). Building on Eze, I have suggested that the postcolonial African novel becomes a surrogate rite of inheritance, structured by a complex chain of identifications between characters, authors and readers.⁸ Here I want to extend and shift that claim slightly in order to explore how Scott’s novel demands a specifically cross-racial form of inheritance from its readers. In other words, it doesn’t simply *represent* the mimetic rites of the Noongar but *is* itself a mimetic rite that demands our own participation in, and inheriting of, its ritualised renarrativisation of First Contact.⁹

Homo Economicus *contra* Homo Mimeticus

One of Adorno and Horkheimer’s most arresting arguments, informed as much by Freud as Marx, is that the violence and cunning with which Odysseus overcomes his assumed adversaries is ultimately directed against himself, that in overcoming the prehistoric forces of nature he also sacrifices his own nature:

At the moment when human beings cut themselves off from the consciousness of themselves as nature, all the purposes for which they keep themselves alive . . . become void. [. . .] The human being's mastery of itself, on which the self is founded, practically always involves the annihilation of the subject in whose service that mastery is maintained, because the substance which is mastered, suppressed, and disintegrated by self-preservation is nothing other than the living entity, of which the achievements of self-preservation can only be defined as functions—in other words, self-preservation destroys the very thing which is to be preserved. (42-43)

Odysseus’ cunning calculations ensure his own survival but only at the cost of his own happiness. The *nostos* of epic is, for Horkheimer and Adorno, already a corrupted,

⁷ For a full discussion of Césaire on mimesis, see Allen-Paisant.

⁸ Durrant, “Surviving Time” and “Creaturely Mimesis”

⁹ Lawtoo’s notion of postcolonial mimesis also encompasses questions of inheritance and identification.

misdirected longing. The history of enclosure, the shift from nomadism to settlement, means that Odysseus rejects the possibility of a home in nature in order to return to the homeland, that “fixed order of property implicit in settlement [which] is the source of human alienation” (60).

At stake in the mimetic turn is thus the degree to which the human subject should seek to separate itself out from its surroundings. For the Enlightenment tradition which champions an individuated, rational, sovereign subject, mimesis cannot appear as anything other than a threat, a regression to earlier, primitive, less fully conscious states of being. But for those who see the process of human individuation as itself a foundational violence, mimesis holds out the possibility of another mode of relating in which the human stops pathologically seeking to set itself apart from what the environmental philosopher David Abram describes as our “more-than-human world.” Mimesis here becomes the name for experiencing the world by becoming similar to it, but for Adorno, as for Nietzsche before him, this process is reflective as much as it is affective. The Benjaminian experience of becoming-similar encounters a limit that gives rise to a form of self-consciousness, a reflexive mode of understanding the world that Adorno sharply differentiates from instrumental reason. Mimesis brings us into proximity with other beings without seeking to subsume them within a unified knowledge system. While instrumental reason reduces the world to objects, items to be known, classified, used and discarded, mimesis apprehends the world in all its multiplicity or non-identity, producing the human as one amongst many subjects, rather than a transcendent subject in a world reduced to objecthood. Where mimesis in the negative, Girardian account is a largely unconscious circuit of desires, mimesis for Horkheimer and Adorno becomes a highly self-conscious ethics, a form of “loving the alien” that operates as a check on desire and as a letting-be of other life forms (Caruana 89).

The distinction between negative and positive versions of mimesis is in part a distinction between *homo mimeticus as he is* (narcissistic, pathological, propelled by desire, hatred and a devouring rage against the object) and *homo mimeticus as he ought to be* (self-reflective, reconciled to a world that remains proximate but non-identical):

The reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its happiness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogenous and beyond that which is one’s own. (Adorno qtd in Caruana 104).

This utopian dimension to mimesis is captured in Adorno's famous Wildean proclamation that "the doctrine of imitation should be reversed", that "reality ought to imitate artworks, not the other way round" (*Aesthetic Theory* 89). At the same time, the artwork is determined by the history out of which it emerges, and Adorno and Horkheimer have to read a work such as *The Odyssey* against itself in order to isolate a liberatory impulse: its hero is a *negative image* of what we ought to imitate if we seek to move beyond the history of domination. *Homo ecologicus* only arises out of a properly critical reading of *homo economicus*. Precisely because Odysseus disavows his mimetic ties to nature, we as readers must abjure our own mimetic tendency to identify with the hero of Homer's epic.

Homo mimeticus is for Horkheimer and Adorno a prehistoric figure, associated with the animistic/shamanistic cultures that Western civilisation seeks to suppress. They draw on a Eurocentric anthropology that erroneously assumes such cultures have now been destroyed and superceded, but their dialectical method means that they do not succumb to uncritical nostalgia. What they value in shamanism is the possibility of a subject-subject relation to the world, the refusal to reduce the world to an object of knowledge:

The rites of the shaman were directed at the wind, the rain, the snake outside or the demon inside the sick person, not at materials or specimens. [. . .] Magic like science is concerned with ends, but it pursues them through mimesis, not through an increasing distance from the object. (5-6)

The shaman identifies with nature as an agency or force, as a being with a spirit analogous to the shaman's own spirit: in new animist parlance, the shaman recognises the "personhood" of "other-than-human beings" (Harvey 3). However, unlike some enthusiasts of the contemporary return to animism, Horkheimer and Adorno also recognise shamanism as a "bloody untruth" (6), a primitive form of control that prefigures later rational and scientific attempts to control nature. Indeed, Odysseus and his crew themselves rely on mimesis when tying themselves to the bellies of sheep to escape the Cyclops. But this is an exercise in cunning, a cynical pretence at becoming nature precisely in order to escape it, an instrumentalised, dissembling form of mimesis. By contrast, what Horkheimer and Adorno advocate is a more genuine form of mimesis in which our own nature, our natural affinity towards other beings in nature, is not disavowed. Crucially, however, they are not advocating a regression to a pre-rational, pre-historical state. Odysseus, they note, is ultimately right to abjure the mindless bliss of the lotus eaters, even if "this right is inevitably drawn into the

realm of wrong” (49) as Odysseus violently asserts his will over his crew and drags them, like Plato’s cave dwellers, away from their mimetic pleasures.

Homo ecologicus thus emerges not as a character within the drama of *The Odyssey* but rather as a *critical spirit*, produced through Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading practice, through their own mimetic identification not with the epic hero but with that which Odysseus seeks to dominate: his crew, the mythic world, (human) nature. Historical materialism is thus an act of “counter-focalisation” in which one identifies not with the sovereign subject but with the “living entity” which the subject sacrifices to preserve him/herself.¹⁰ In the final instance, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that the epic is in fact capable of counter-focalising itself, of distancing itself from the sacrificial logic of its hero. The excessive violence with which Odysseus recovers his patriarchal homestead causes the poem to flinch, to pause in its naturalisation of heroic might as right:

It is not in the content of the deeds reported that civilization transcends [barbarity]. It is in the self-reflection which causes violence to pause at the moment of narrating such deeds. The cold detachment of narrative . . . describes even the horrible as if for entertainment . . . But when speech pauses, the caesura allows the events to flash up a semblance of freedom that civilisation has been wholly unable to extinguish ever since. Book XXII of *The Odyssey* describes the punishment meted out by the son of the island’s king to the faithless maidservants who have sunk into harlotry. With an unmoved composure . . . the fate of the hanged victims is expressionlessly compared to the death of birds in a trap and, as of the numb pause surrounding the narration at this point, it can truly be said that the rest of all speech is silence. This is followed by a statement reporting that ‘For a little while their feet kicked out, but not for very long.’ (61)

The comparison with birds caught in a trap inadvertently triggers a mimetic identification with the handmaidens as fellow creatures, as beings subject to the violence of history, or what Adorno terms “damaged life.” Even in a work of art designed to celebrate civilisation, there is a moment in which the work silently counts the cost. And once the simile between the handmaidens and the birds is activated, there is no stopping its mimetic power: the hanging of the handmaidens flashes up for Horkheimer and Adorno at the very moment that Jewish lives

¹⁰ On counter-focalisation see Bal; Spivak 323

are being extinguished all across Europe, a flash that calls the twin ecocidal and genocidal trajectories of Enlightenment into question.

Homo Ecologicus

Contra the Girardian account, mimesis here produces not rivalry but solidarity, not sacrifice but a refusal of all sacrificial logics, a refusal to substitute one life for another. In thinking (and feeling) against *homo economicus*, Horkhemier and Adorno's reading of *The Odyssey* holds out the reflective possibility of a *homo ecologicus*. Crucially, unlike *homo economicus*, *homo ecologicus* is not hell-bent on self-preservation. Where *homo economicus* acts in accordance with a self-preserving logic that is ultimately self-sacrificial in so far as it alienates him from life itself, *homo ecologicus* abjures the logic of selfhood in the interests of preserving the planet, understood as a co-dependent, mutually animating network of relations. Admittedly, to deploy a vocabulary more associated with new animism or indeed new materialism than historical materialism is to blast both *The Odyssey* and the *Dialectical of Enlightenment* out of the continuum of history, but this is precisely the point of Benjamin's famous "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in which different eras suddenly reveal mimetic correspondences. The mimetic turn is in this sense not a contemporary phenomenon, but a latent possibility activated whenever we read history against the grain, whenever we read in the interests of life itself.

Composed during WW2, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* is above all concerned with how the European Enlightenment led to fascism, how the fiction of a transcendent human subject subtends the fiction of a master race. While white supremacism is often maintained by a mimetic attraction to a leader, as Freud demonstrates in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, it is also maintained by a taboo *against* mimesis, a taboo, that is, against identification with the natural world which ends up disavowing *human* nature. This is seen most clearly in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, where Schoolteacher invites his slave-owning pupils to distinguish between the slave's human and animal characteristics, leaving aside the question of the slave-owner's own animal characteristics and inscribing whiteness as transcendence, as that which has overcome its own origins in nature. The taboo against mimesis leads to what Horkheimer and Adorno refer to as "bad mimesis," the "pathic projection" of our own animality onto others. Good mimesis, by contrast, involves the rejection of the myth of human transcendence:

By conquering the sickness of the mind which flourishes on the rich soil of self-assertion unhampered by reflection, humanity would cease to be the universal antirace and become the species which, as nature, is more than mere nature, in that it is aware of its own image. (165)

Mimesis is here allied to reflective understanding, rather than the abandonment of reason. The mimetic turn thus becomes part and parcel of a planetary turn in which human beings recognise that that we too are part of nature, one species among others rather than the ‘universal anti-race.’ What distinguishes us from ‘mere nature’ is our capacity for self-reflection, our capacity to think mimetically. Adorno and Horkheimer are, in this respect, still humanists: unlike contemporary environmental thinkers such as Eduardo Kohn in *How Forests Think*, they do not attribute reflective understanding to nature. But at the same time, their emphasis on mimesis is a reaction against an idealist tradition in which thinking confirms human transcendence. Mimetic thought connects us to the world rather than severing us from it. Contra Plato (and, of course, Descartes), thinking mimetically means thinking with our bodies. Rather than forcibly dragging men away from the earth to contemplate the metaphysical light of reason, it means learning, like the blinded Gloucester, to see how the world goes ‘feelingly’, guided by an embodied, cross-species sense of what Judith Butler refers to as our “common corporeal vulnerability” (Butler *Precarious Life*). Mimesis thus generates a sense of creaturely solidarity, a recognition of the historical subjection of both the human and the non-human. In place of traditional class solidarities, mimesis promotes a planetary consciousness of “damaged life.”

As Paul Gilroy has argued, planetary consciousness is simultaneously ecological, Marxist, and anti-racist:

[Planetary consciousness] supports an appreciation of nature as a common condition of our imperilled existence, resistant to commodification, and on some level deeply incompatible with the institution of private property that made land into a commodity and legitimized chattel slavery. (74)

The challenge for planetary thought, as in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is how to think beyond the history of enclosure and commodification. If, as Horkheimer and Adorno famously wrote the “disenchantment of the world means the extirpation of animism” (2) then planetary thinking seeks ways of reanimating the world, often by turning to the example of Indigenous peoples whose animistic modes of relation have not quite been extirpated. In some fields, this

example is unwittingly or silently followed. Jolly and Fyfe argue that new materialism is guilty of appropriating ideas commonly associated with Indigenous cultures. But in fields such as anthropology there has been a much more explicit engagement with Indigenous praxis, a “new animism” (Harvey) that, unlike the colonial anthropology of figures such as E.B. Tylor, genuinely seeks to learn alternatives to the objectifying, deanimating model of global capitalism. As Rane Willerslev puts it, new animists “each in their own way seek to take animism seriously by upending the primacy of Western metaphysics over indigenous understandings and following the lead of the animists themselves in what they say about spirits, souls, and the like” (n.p). This process of following involves a fundamentally mimetic chain of identifications, whereby ‘we moderns’ follow the lead of indigenous peoples who themselves are guided by the example of other-than-human persons: mimesis is both the means of identification and that which is being identified with (Durrant “Critical Spirits” 50).

However, there are dangers in romanticising particular Indigenous practices or indeed conflating disparate Indigenous practices in order to construct an exemplary *homo ecologicus*. Gayatri Spivak has argued we can learn much from Adivasi groups in India but retrospectively confesses that “my convictions had been fed by an artificially preserved “authentic” tribal group in the interests of feudal benevolence” (316). Despite this caveat, in a chapter entitled “Imperative to re-imagine the planet” Spivak speaks of the possibility of “reconstellating the responsibility-thinking of precapitalist societies into the abstractions of the democratic structures of civil society, to use the planetary . . . to control globalization *interruptively*” (348). Spivak speaks of “responsibility-thinking” rather than the colonially-freighted term animism, but she shares with Benjamin, Horkheimer and Adorno a sense that such a praxis might be used to interrupt the abstracting or de-animating forces of global capitalism. Her use of the term reconstellation silently references Benjamin and historical materialism as a reconstellation of history that interrupts the “empty homogenous time” of linear history by producing mimetic correspondences between seemingly disparate historical moments. Above all, Spivak shares with the Frankfurt School a sense of the importance of aesthetic education as a form of doubling that leads to self-reflection or auto-critique. We inherit from the Romantics the injunction “at all costs to enter another’s text” (6) but what we might call the mimetic imperative is held in check by a recognition that we can never fully exit our own ideological perspective. Planetary thinking is, for Spivak, both an imperative and an impossibility.

That Deadman Dance

I want now to turn to Kim Scott's extraordinary 2010 novel *That Deadman Dance* not in order to equate *homo ecologicus* with the Aboriginal Noongar as an "authentic tribal group", but in order to suggest how the novel offers itself as a complex mimesis of Noongar storytelling in order to flash up an *image of homo ecologicus* as a potentiality that has not yet been entirely extinguished by the history of colonisation. At the level of plot (*fabula*) the novel is bound to literalise Adorno and Horkheimer's pronouncement that "the disenchantment of the world is the extirpation of animism" (2), showing how First Contact led to the extirpation not only of animism but also of the peoples that hold animistic beliefs and the other-than-human persons who co-animate their world (the right whale, emus). But at the level of narrative (*sjuzet*) the novel emphatically resists this pronouncement through its performance of a Noongar world view, a world view that folds the history of modernity within its own much longer act of narration.¹¹ The novel thereby opens up the possibility of another history of First Contact in which animism is not extirpated but re-inherited, not only by the Noongar themselves, but also by the novel's global readership. In reading the novel, the mimetic imperative becomes a demand to inherit or even *ancestralise* each other's spirits.

Such a reading runs counter to our identitarian moment, in which literary and cultural traditions are usually understood as something to be recuperated in the service of bolstering one's own identity. However, such a reading is very much in the spirit of Scott's novel, whose title takes its cue from a nineteenth century Noongar dance that was a mimetic imitation of the stiff marching of British soldiers, a dance that then became part of the Noongar repertoire of *ancestral* dances. The marching dance thereby takes its place alongside dances in which the Noongar become emu or kangaroo, as a way of actively *ancestralising* those with whom the Noongar already understand themselves to be in relation. Noongar dances thus have a distant affinity with the kind of anti-autobiographical project that Walter Benjamin attempts in *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, a history not of the self's emergence but of its *semblancing*. Both are radically embodied forms of historical materialism—material histories that refuse the separation of spirit from matter, the I from the not-I, the human from the not-human—but from what appear to be opposite ends of modernity. While Benjamin loses himself in the objects of his childhood as an antidote to his emergence as bourgeois subject, the Noongar dance is a way of celebrating their trans-racial and trans-species sense

¹¹ On the narratological distinction between *sjuzet* and *fabula*, see Brooks.

of selfhood, their embeddedness within what Scott refers to as “the spirit of place” (Brewster 230).

However, to see Benjamin’s writing and Noongar dancing as taking place at opposing ends of the history of modernity is to think from within that history and its Eurocentric *telos*. Kim Scott leads a double life as a member of the Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project that works to recover ancient Noongar stories which the collective publishes in bilingual editions and as an international acclaimed novelist. In Benjamin’s terms, he is both the premodern storyteller and modern novelist. Accordingly, the novel opens with a scene of writing which straddles the divide between the modern and the premodern, the written and the oral, that was supposed to constitute a decisive break in the history of mimesis:

KAYA.

Writing such a word, Bobby Wabalanginy couldn’t help but smile. Nobody ever wrote that before, he thought. Nobody ever writ *hello* or *yes* that way!

Roze a wail.

Bobby Wabalanginy wrote with damp chalk, brittle as weak bone. Bobby wrote on a thin piece of slate. Moving between languages, Bobby wrote on stone. (1)

As he writes, Bobby marks the entrance of the Noongar onto what we Europeans fondly imagine to be the world-historical stage: “Nobody ever wrote that before, he thought.” We later learn that Bobby Wabalanginy has grown up moving between his semi-nomadic Noongar community and a nineteenth century colonial settlement in South Western Australia, one of whose members has taught Bobby how to write. However, Bobby’s learning to write is presented not as a story of indigenous assimilation into modernity but rather as an assimilation of the *techne* of modernity into a Noongar world view, a disruption of the very terms by which we have come to understand modernity. For writing here does not spell the end of oral cultures, but instead suggests, as in Levi Strauss’ *Tristes Tropiques*, that writing itself is a form of magic, that it retains precisely the magical mimetic powers that Plato sought to dispel.¹² In Bobby’s hands, the act of writing never was that abstract, distancing, objectifying activity that we moderns mistook it for. His hands recover writing as a sensuous activity, something that doesn’t remove Bobby from the world but allows him to partake in it, extending himself into the world’s own semblancing, the world’s continual rewriting of itself.

¹² See also Librandi-Rocha.

Indeed the chalk he writes with and the stone slate he writes on are already actively engaged in mimesis, in *correspondence*, even before he starts writing. The simile ‘brittle as weak bone’ draws attention to this correspondence: chalk is brittle as bone not least because it is made from bone, from the accumulation of the calcite shells of coccolithophores. The stone he writes with, the stone he writes on and the hand that writes are all engaged in a long and intimate act of becoming-similar. They hover between inanimacy and animacy, objecthood and subjecthood, even before we consider the animating power of the actual words he writes.

Kaya, the Noongar word of welcome, carries a performative function, welcoming us into the Noongar world and their conception of “country” as a mutually animating ecology of beings. Scott writes his ancestor into being as his own narratorial double, a process that then licenses both of them to welcome the reader into the Noongar world. To be welcomed is to be drawn into the “history of this place,” the spirit of Bobby’s narration, a spirit that insists on its own indefatigable powers of animation despite the violently de-animating history of European settlement. Bobby’s orthography bears witness to this history, simultaneously expressing his delight at the breaching of a whale while also sounding out the ‘rite wail’ that silently accompanies the near extinction of the right whale and the genocide of Aboriginal peoples. The novel’s extraordinary achievement is to retell this eco/genocidal history of settlement, in which the settler will abuse and ultimately reject the welcome that Bobby himself has offered, without withdrawing that initial offer of welcome.

The novel achieves this extraordinary feat by means of a highly complex double act. In this opening scene Scott, himself of mixed heritage, writes Bobby into existence as his nineteenth century ancestor, but he writes him into existence as the one who is himself doing the writing, the one who through his transgressive act of writing will always already have written Scott into being.¹³ There are references scattered throughout the novel to a journal bound in oil skin that suggest that it is in fact Bobby who has written the novel. And there are also continual references to the idea that what we are reading is in fact an oral history, performed by Bobby both to the original settlers and to later tourists who know nothing of the original history of settlement and of Bobby’s own part in this history. Uncomfortable with national, property-based forms of sovereignty, Scott instead stresses the act of storytelling as itself a form of sovereignty that establishes “continuity in place: from that you get the importance of relationships of all sorts” (Brewster 241)]. Bobby is a kind of animating

¹³ As in Lawtoo’s discussion of Escher’s *Drawing Hands*, Bobby’s hands are both writing and being written (*Homo Mimeticus* 9-10).

narrative spirit, “a spirit of place” (Brewster 230) that through an ongoing act of narration ensures a continuity that is simultaneously both temporal and spatial. In temporal terms it reaches back to a time before colonial settlement and forwards to a time in which Aboriginal culture would finally be acknowledged as foundational to Australian dwelling. But there is also an important spatial dimension to this act of continuity, for Bobby’s narration is incorrigibly multi-perspectival, plunging us into the viewpoint of all the other beings, human and non-human, who are part of this continuous experience of place.

His first written words announce the right whale as an integral part of the spirit of this place, even after they have left the bay for good:

Boby Wablngny wrote roze a wail.

But there was no whale. Bobby was imagining, remembering. (1)

His writing could be read as an act of nostalgia, even itself as a “wail”, a lament for a vanished world, but the suspended temporality of the prologue distances itself from the deadening time of colonial history and immerses us in a radically continuous time of writing that never ceases to affirm the reanimating power of mimesis. The prologue ends:

‘Thar she bloze!

Bobby wrote and made it happen again and again in seasons to come, starting just here, now.

Kaya. (5)

At the level of plot, the novel must tell the colonial story of the extirpation of animism, the negation of life itself: “there was no whale”. But Bobby’s act of narration negates this negation, reclaiming writing itself as a mode of animation, as a way of making things “happen again and again in seasons to come”: “Thar she bloze!”

What kind of magic is involved in Bobby’s writing? As Austin and Derrida have shown us, language is not merely representational but also performative: it can make things happen. Bobby’s “Thar she bloze” is not dissimilar to Jehovah’s “Let there be light!” except that Bobby’s authority comes from an entanglement in, rather than a lordly transcendence of, the natural world. The Judaeo-Christian creation story is a story of dominion that immediately instantiates a distinction between Man (made in the image of God) and beast, whereas Bobby is drawing upon a creation story that announces a reciprocal relation between

humans and other beings. His writing leads him to imagine-remember his first sight of whales and his mimetic attraction to them:

Bobby wanted to enter the water and swim out to them, but swaddled against his mother's body, his spirit could only call out. Unlike that Bible man, Jonah, Bobby wasn't frightened because he carried a story deep inside himself, a story Menak gave him wrapped around the memory of a fiery, pulsing whale heart. (2)

Unlike the monotheistic Jonah story, in which the whale's "belly of hell" is a mechanism of punishment and torture, a place of spiritual exile designed to return Jonah to the one true vision of the Lord (Jonah 2: 2-10), for the Noongar the whale is a mode of imaginative and creative transport, a way of seeing through other's eyes and travelling to places you have never been.

The story deep inside Bobby is the sacred story of how his own ancestor dived into a whale and squeezed the whale's heart, producing a trans-species music, a co-produced song of origins that announces narrativity itself as dependent on the mimetic imperative to enter another's text:

Grab the whale's heart, squeeze it, use its eyes and power to take you where you wanna be. [...] He steps on its back and into the spout; he slides down into the cave which must be inside each and every whale. And in that echoing cavern of flesh he sings and hurts its heart, he dances around, driving it to that place further along the coast he heard in story and song [...]

Jonah would have been alright if he was a Noongar man. (303)

So too Odysseus. In the Noongar story, the whale takes the ancestor far from home but his travels are not lamented as exilic detour. Rather, they are celebrated as part of the very process of creating a home. The man makes the whale dive again and again, taking him "deep and far", "until the whale takes him onto a beach, and the women on the beach love him and bring all their people there, and they feast and altogether party" (30). Noongar journeying is a procreative encounter with difference that augments and *makes possible* the triumphant homecoming: without the whale voyage, without the mimetic process of entering into other lives and *making kin*, there would be no family to inherit, no home, no ancestor. Odysseus renounces his kinship with the mythic world in which the human is not yet separated from nature in order to affirm a much narrower, identitarian conception of kinship and homeland,

whereas the Noongar ancestor conceives of kinship as a trans-cultural, trans-species *orbiting* of home and self, a movement that involves “not only circulation but also return and transformation” (Kennedy 128).¹⁴

Bobby inherits this story of transformation and making-kin as his own story, as the story of what it means to be Noongar, but also as the story that we too are invited to inherit as readers as an alternative to the destructive colonial story in which difference is annihilated and kinship disavowed. The novel plays itself out around whether Bobby’s creative engagement with settler culture, and more broadly the Noongar recognition of the colonists as *djanaks*, as spirits from over the seas to be inherited as ancestors, constitutes a mistake. To recognise that such an approach was a fatal historical mistake is absolutely understandable, given the way in which this approach goes unreciprocated and settler culture, aided by the tuberculosis virus, all but extirpates the Noongar. And yet to condemn the recognition of settlers as ancestors as a mistake is to refuse the spirit of Bobby’s narration, to refuse the mimetic imperative that animates his narration. As one chapter title puts it, “Bobby never learned” (63)—and this not-learning is tied to his expansive sense of his own being in the world.

The mimetic imperative is inscribed into both of Bobby’s names. He is named Bobby because he wears a policeman’s hat traded for a boomerang. In this sense Bobby becomes a figure of fun, a childlike figure who steadfastly refuses to learn and thus, in his old age, becomes a figure of ridicule reduced to entertaining tourists with outlandish tales of his own importance in the history of the settlement. But his Noongar name, which translates as “all of us playing together” (Brewster 234) suggests that Bobby’s refusal to learn fear and caution is precisely what we need to learn from as readers, that Bobby’s generosity of spirit must be reciprocated precisely because it was not reciprocated by the settlers.

At the end of the novel, Bobby is arrested for stock theft, and then released after he threatens to reveal the bloody secrets of one of the settlers. Bobby agrees not to reveal this secret on condition that he is allowed to perform his own vision of how people should live in this place:

Bobby saw a scene spread out before him like a sandplain, and he on lookout: guns and horses and flour and boats and people shimmering plants animals birds insects

¹⁴ A less hostile reading might note that orbiting is also a central principle of *The Odyssey*, caught as it is between the foundational *telos* of epic and the wandering, exilic nature of romance. See, for instance, *Quint*.

fish, all our songs and dances mixing together because here in this place we are like family. [. . .]. This is my land, given me by Kongk Menak. We will share it with you, and share what you bring. (407)

Bobby's performance mixes dance, song and speech in an attempt to convey his alternative vision of First Contact as a "mixing together" underwritten by a sense of Noongar priority and sovereignty: none of this is possible without the recognition of Noongar presence.

Boodawan, nyoondokat nyinang moort, moortapinyang yongar, wetj, wilo...Nitja boodja ngalak boodja Noonga boodja, kwop nyondook yoowarl koorl yey, yang ngaalang. Because you need to be inside the sound and spirit of it to live here properly. And how can that be, without we people who have been here for all time? (402)

The novel has taken us inside the sound and spirit of this place, allowing us to follow Bobby as he himself follows the spirit of others, broadening out the empathic potential of the novel form until it is capable of entering the mind of an animal or even a rock face. Bobby himself is transported by his own performance, enraptured by his own "shimmering" vision of the future. And for a moment, the novel allows us to imagine that his nineteenth century audience share his vision of sharing, that he has "won them over." Indeed Bobby's performance has conjured his ancestors, and he can see them "nodding and grinning with pride and pleasure." But he finally "surfaces in another world," the colonial world of the authorities that imprisoned him, an audience that is not yet ready to share in his vision. The novel appears to end with the sounds of rejection:

Chairs creaked as people stirred, coughing. Chaine led them to their feet. Figures at the periphery of Bobby's vision fell away. He heard gunshots. And another sound: a little dog yelping (403).

The novel ends in a seeming rejection of Bobby's vision, in accordance with the history of colonialism and its rejection of the possibility of transcultural sharing. But it also hints at another time or mode of reception in the sound of the 'little dog yelping'. This response from the more than human world reaffirms the possibility of *another time* of reception and inheritance, and another history of cultural contact. The yelp returns to us as a reminder of a forgotten time of sharing: the dog was given to the leader of Bobby's people, Menak, by the suggestively named Dr Cross, as the sign of a cross-cultural friendship upon which the original settlement was founded.

Like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Scott's novel both stands and falls as a rite of (dis)inheritance. At the level of plot, at the level of mimesis as historical representation, both novels are bound to recite the story of colonialism as a story of disinheritance. In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo has a proleptic vision of his own disinheritance after his son has been seduced by the missionaries. Okonkwo sees himself and his father crowding round the ancestral shrine, "waiting in vain for worship and sacrifice" (108). What Okonkwo cannot know is that Nwoye's desertion will pave the way for Achebe (himself the son of an Anglican minister) to reinherit Okonkwo through his own act of narration (*szujet*), an act of narration based on mimesis not as representation but as *identification*. As I have argued elsewhere, Achebe, and Achebe's readers, reinherit Okonkwo paradoxically through identifying with his disinheritance ("Surviving Time"). A similar paradox is at work in Scott's novel, although Bobby's vision is much less exclusive nationalistic than Okonkwo's. At the level of *fabula*, the settler refusal to enter into his vision of "all our songs and dances mixing together" means that Bobby is destined to grow old as a marginal figure:

Once upon a time he danced and sang for people, but that was no good, and talk is less. He sits in camp and talks in his head (since no one understands him anyway).

Women no longer see an old man like him.

He has a language for the real story inside him, but it is as if a strong wind whips those words away as soon as they leave his mouth. (165)

This is a familiar story of indigenous loss and estrangement, in which, as Bobby himself admits, "we are now strangers to our special places" (400). But at the level of the narrative *szujet*, Scott ensures that we inherit Bobby in and through our act of reading, our own cross-generational, cross-cultural identification with Bobby's act of narration. Crucially, Bobby, unlike Okonkwo, is a storyteller, and his narrative agency means that he is never the abject figure of *pathos* that Okonkwo becomes, that he ancestralises us as much as we him.

In a lecture given after receiving the prestigious Miles Franklin Award, Scott speaks of Western Australian literature regrounding itself in Noongar language: "Could Noongar language be a foundation for literature, for stories and narrative of place, and inform a regional literary tradition? If so, who would that serve?" Scott raises the possibility that literature might become indigenous in the sense that Miles Franklin only half-meant when she famously wrote that 'Without an indigenous literature, people can remain alien in their

own soil' (qtd in Scott, lecture, 4, 55). I want to suggest that this retrospective becoming-indigenous of Australian literature is enacted in and by Scott's multiperspectival narration. Indeed, Scott inherits the novel form as a technology of modernity only to reconceive it as a quintessentially Noongar form, as an exercise in perspectivism. Russell Pavlov-West has convincingly linked the novel to Viveiros de Castro's notion of Amazonian perspectivism, but my point here is not to establish affinities between different Indigenous modes of perception but rather to track the becoming-indigenous of the novel form itself. *That Deadman Dance* moves from perspective to perspective precisely as if this was what the novel was born to do, as if the novel originated not, as Ian Watt famously argued, as a vehicle for individualist, class-bound aspiration but as a tool to transport oneself into other, even other-than-human, perspectives, as if the novel form itself was an Aboriginal invention. As Scott puts it, "instead of saying Indigenous or Noongar literature is the niche within some other sort of literature, you start to think *it's all Noongar* and then literature has been accommodated within the Noongar heritage and tradition" (Brewster 242).

Conclusion: Planetary mimesis

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *homo ecologicus* emerges through the negation of the negation of *homo mimeticus*. Modernity enforces a taboo against mimesis which is itself overturned in Adorno and Horkheimer's vision of a reflective humanity that recognises itself as part of nature, rather than pathologically disavowing its "natural characteristics." In colonial history, the racist doctrine of *terra nullius* negates Noongar presence and sovereignty, and with it the possibility of *homo mimeticus*, of co-inhabiting the world alongside other beings in nature. *That Deadman Dance* sets out to negate that colonial negation of life not by recovering an "artificially preserved 'authentic' tribal group" but by inventing a Noongar ancestor capable of appropriating writing as a technology of animation and mimesis, and in so doing dis-enclosing the story of modernity and undoing the modern split between nature and culture, the human and the nonhuman.

In *The Critique of Black Reason*. Achille Mbembe theorises the planetary project of imagining the in-common as a process of unkinning:

The question of universal community is therefore posed in terms of how we inherit the Open, how we care for the Open—which is completely different from an approach

that would aim first to enclose, to stay within the enclosure of what we call our own kin. This form of unkinning is the opposite of difference. (183)

To unkin ourselves is to think beyond *ethnos*, to divest ourselves of what Freud called the “narcissism of minor differences” (identitarian mimesis) in order to reinsert *homo mimeticus* within much wider, transspecies networks of kinship (planetary mimesis).

Scott/Bobby’s expansive process of making-kin is another way of inheriting the Open, another way of understanding the world in terms of similarity rather than difference, another way of rejecting *ethnos*. Moving between the world of his Noongar relations and colonial settlement, Bobby refuses to be enclosed, affirming his imaginative right to enter another’s text and thereby refusing the strategic essentialism in which discussions of Indigeneity are so often mired. Scott acknowledges that the “reactive resistance paradigm” has its “attractions” but that it’s “the wrong narrative for us as Noongar” (Brewster 240), who historically have always positioned themselves as generous hosts, open to the transformative potential of cross-cultural exchange. Indeed, “If there is a plot [to *That Deadman Dance*], it’s strategic thinking versus something like creativity” (Brewster 234). His refusal to recognise that the settlers are not, in fact, ancestors from over the seas is a strategic mistake with genocidal consequences. But this is not the only “plot” the novel recounts. There is a larger, planetary plot in which everything depends on our creative ability to inherit each other across the racialised, anthropocentric lines of global capital.

The other-directed mimesis at work in *That Deadman Dance* is the antidote to the narcissistic mimesis of our current moment. If identitarian mimesis signals the defensive, all-too-human circuits of identification produced in response to globalization (‘bad’ mimesis, mimesis as dystopian disease), planetary mimesis describes the more-than-human circuits of identification necessary to form a much broader sense of community (‘good’ mimesis, mimesis as utopian cure). In the wake of Trump, Modi, Bolsanaro, Brexit and now Giorgia Meloni, identitarian mimesis is driven by a *will-to-identity* that shores up its own image only by denying its own internal inconsistency, by disavowing the “diverse borrowings from foreign subjects” (Mbembe “Necropolitics” 30) that go into the making of an Indian, an American or an Italian—or indeed a human. Against this pathological form of mimesis, we must strive to follow Bobby’s exemplary example, and practice mimesis as a *will-to-similarity* that opens *homo* out into the world, as one mimetic being amongst others,

distinguished from other forms of life only by its reflective consciousness of that similarity, its philosophical embrace of our common creaturely fate.

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