

*Writing on thresholds: Ali Cobby Eckermann's Inside My Mother*

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**Abstract:** This paper considers the aesthetic and material concepts of the *threshold* as they figure in contemporary Australian poetry, and examines how the threshold can be a productive and generative space in Australian poetics. The metaphor of the threshold as a point of entry or beginning, place of transition, place of exit, rite of passage, or liminal space, speaks to the writer's imagination as a location of potent creative power. It is here, on the threshold, that a writer gestates ideas, follows the call of the initial creative impulse, and brings her words forth to be shaped. During this (w)rite of passage something new is made. For a writer, being on the threshold is at once a place where she can thresh out ideas (receptive), and the site of creative acts (generative).

Yet the threshold is not only a metaphor for the creative process; it is a liminal space where certain kinds of knowledge can be sensed in passing. The word 'liminal' literally means "[to occupy] a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold" (OED). In an Australian postcolonial context, the threshold as a productive space in literature or art is particularly resonant because of the kinds of terrains that may be crossed and spoken across the threshold—the productive capacity of the middle ground.

This paper will discuss the poems of *Inside My Mother* (2015) by Yankunytjatjara/Kokatha South Australian poet Ali Cobby Eckermann that inhabit the threshold as both an unsettled and productive space in contemporary Australian postcolonial poetics. Writing on the threshold, Cobby Eckermann is engaged in reimagining such poetics.

**Keywords:** Ali Cobby Eckermann; poetics; threshold.

*When the first footprints of my ancestors touched the northern shoreline of this land,  
humanity itself had crossed a threshold. (Grant 2016)*

The metaphor of the threshold as a point of entry or beginning, place of transition, place of exit, rite of passage, or liminal space, speaks to the writer's imagination as a location of potent creative power. It is here, on the threshold, that a writer gestates ideas, follows the call of the initial creative impulse, and brings her words forth to be shaped. During this (w)rite of passage something new is made. Dominique Hecq explains the "poetic attentiveness" (2015, 139) a writer must inhabit in order to conceive a poem in this way:

It is an inner gesture whereby the 'I' relinquishes its usual control and takes [...] a step back, allowing an inner space to open up, so that it can simultaneously be inside and outside, both the observer and the observed.  
(139)

This gesture, an "extension of [the] bodily self into some imaginative space" (138), suggests movement towards a position not quite here and not quite there: a threshold. Seamus Heaney might call entering this space the "first alertness" (1980, 49) of creativity. In "Feeling into Words" Heaney explains this initial spark of creativity as "pre-verbal," "vatic" and involving a kind of "divining" (49). The poet is on the threshold of speech. Before words. In the same way that the seed holds all the materials of the tree, the threshold is redolent with potential. As Gaston Bachelard writes in *Poetics of Space*, "[t]he poet speaks on the threshold of being" (1964, xvi). As a site of poetics, the threshold is not only a site for listening, for gathering, "but is also a place of rigour and work" (Mukherji 2011, xxiii). In this transitional space, the creative practitioner can thresh out ideas (receptive), and it is also the site of creative acts (generative).

Yet the threshold is not only a metaphor and site for the creative process; it is a liminal space where certain kinds of knowledge can be sensed in passing. The word 'liminal' literally means "[to occupy] a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold" (OED Online); that beautiful word, liminal, sounds the threshold. And the threshold figures in the imagination in different ways. The idea of the "threshold as a productive space in literature or art" (Mukherji 2011, xvii) is a resonant one, not only because its poetic lure is so compelling for writers and artists, but also because of the kinds of terrains that may be "crossed and spoken across" (xviii) the threshold. As Jeri Kroll has discussed, the relationship between creative writing and liminality is potent: "writing finds its energy and innovativeness in just this uncertain and unsettled state, its sense of being on the edge, in being in transition" (2009, 3). For the purpose of engaging in a reimagining of Australian poetics, I am particularly interested in what may be "spoken across" the threshold, or, indeed, not spoken.

This paper considers the threshold as a category of experience—especially in an artistic sense, but also socio-politically, shifting emphasis out from the ritual and ritualised threshold processes of van Gennep and Turner<sup>1</sup>, to an embodied and empowered experience of the threshold during the creative process and *of* the creative process. A poetics of the threshold is one that considers the productive capacity of the middle—a site that is fluid, dynamic, essential and sustaining—as a meeting place that brings

worlds (imaginatively speaking) together. Just as a river can only exist between two bodies of land, a threshold is an active space, fertile and teeming with possibility. The threshold as a locale suggests movement or passage and porousness, and is akin to Paul Carter's (2008) concept of dark writing. The emphasis is on the spaces in-between, the pregnant spaces betwixt what is readily visible. In this region there is for the artist, not a border to cross, but a coming together that suggests transformation. The poetry of Australian Indigenous poet Ali Cobby Eckermann dwells in just this threshold sensibility. I will consider her most recent collection *Inside My Mother* (2015) as an exemplar of threshold poetics. A threshold sensibility is reminiscent of Gloria Anzaldua's liminal "borderlands" where the convergence between cultures (in Anzaldua's case, Mexican, Indian and Anglo cultures) creates a third space, a borderland, where a new consciousness—"a mestizo consciousness" (Anzaldua 1987, 79)—is born. In this borderland, there is not only a confrontation with what is lost in the substitution of culture and language, but the capacity for something new to be made across and between cultures.

Through her poetry, Cobby Eckermann engages in what Stuart Cooke (2013) might call "world-making":

The relationship between poesis, or the creative generative moment, and the act of poetry crosses cultures and territories [...] poetry is linked to the process of world-making. (128)

Her writing creates spaces for a reimagining where a polyphony of voices can be heard in Australian poetics—not only Indigenous voices, but exiled, settler and migrant voices too—revitalising what Philip Mead (2008) calls the "networked language" of contemporary Australian poetry. When the judges of the Windham-Campbell Prize for 2017—a prize administered out of Yale University in order to "call attention to literary achievement"—awarded Cobby Eckermann for her contribution to poetry, they had this to say about her work:

Through song and story, Ali Cobby Eckermann confronts the violent history of Australia's Stolen Generations and gives language to unspoken lineages of trauma and loss. (Windham-Campbell Prize n.d.)

The judges of the Windham-Campbell Prize draw attention to Cobby Eckermann's "substantial and formally innovative body of work" with the "award-winning 2015 collection *Inside My Mother*" receiving a special mention (Windham-Campbell Prize n.d.). In winning this international prize, Cobby Eckermann's work crosses cultures and territories.

## **Inside My Mother**

In the opening lines of the poem "Australantis," Ali Cobby Eckermann (2015) writes "there's a whole ocean filled with sand / between what was and what will be" (4). The ocean (that once was) figures as a threshold—the threshold between the ancient world and the world it has become or is becoming. The "stark canvas devoid of view"

(4) that Cobby Eckermann goes on to describe is not a blank space or an empty space, but a place perceived empty by those who do not know how to read it, “not a sand dune nor a tree” (4), and a place denuded (by colonisation) where the reader might contemplate what has been before, or project what will come to be.

When Europeans arrived on the continent of Australia, they were crossing the threshold into a land already spoken for. In fact, the sea and sky, as well as every animal, rock, hill, tree, mountain and river, were known and sung and looked after (Bird Rose 1996, 7). What appeared an empty and alien space to the Europeans was redolent with signification to the first peoples, and was not a wild and untamed place, but a carefully managed ecology. As Bird Rose explains, in an Aboriginal concept of country, humans make up one small aspect of a holistic and multi-dimensional system which also includes “animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water and air” (8). In this system, country is a conscious “nourishing terrain” (7) that can be spoken to and sung about, nurtured and cared for; it can get sick, as well as be worried and longed for (7). It is kin. Ngarrindjeri elder Aunty Ellen Trevorrow puts it this way: “The lands, waters and all living things are connected like family” (Trevorrow et al. 2007, n.p.).

Bird Rose makes a useful distinction between the Aboriginal understanding of country and the European-derived notion of ‘landscape.’ While Aboriginal country is “lived in and lived with” (Bird Rose 1996, 7), the term landscape denotes a “distance between the place ... and the person or society which considers its existence” (10). This egocentric view sees landscape as empty if “one cannot see traces or signs of one’s own culture in the land” (17), and at the time of colonisation, this world-view neatly justified the legal concept of *terra nullius* (land that belongs to no-one). Furthermore, Aboriginal societies valued a knowledge-based system over a property-based/ownership system, and so even though there were complex land-management practices in place,<sup>2</sup> the colonisers were blind to the signifiers of a rich and diverse cultural life flourishing on so-called *terra nullius*. As Noongar author and scholar Kim Scott points out, despite the initial hospitality of the Aboriginal people to ‘white’ visitors, in the settlers’ failure to understand an Aboriginal world-view, an opportunity was lost where a “grafting of newcomers’ culture and being onto Indigenous roots” (2007, 122) might have occurred.

In the final stanza of “Australantis,” Cobby Eckermann writes the following: “only a shell hangs beyond the skyline / spilling the noise of the in-between” (4). Shells are fragile houses, containers, empty of life—they are ancient—but the “noise of the in-between” cannot be contained. Cobby Eckermann invites her reader to listen to this noise. What might the “noise” have to say about the shared histories between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians? Cobby Eckermann writes *of* the threshold, that in-between place where a so-called lost civilisation, Australantis, may be contemplated. And she writes *on* the threshold between two or more locations, be they geographical, or figurative (the ancient world and the contemporary world), and two or more identities—her Aboriginal identity and her identity as a woman raised by a white family in rural South Australia (Cobby Eckermann *Wasafiri* 2016). Following the legacy of Aboriginal writers and poets before her—Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Jack Davis, Kevin Gilbert, Archie Weller, Lionel Fogarty, to name just a handful—Cobby Eckermann’s poetic voice is shaped by the inheritance of loss and trauma that first nations people have experienced and do experience under colonisation. In a recent

interview, Cobby Eckermann explains that it is through writing that she makes sense of history: “[writing] was the only way to keep myself safe and healthy,” she says of the period in her life when she was coming to terms with her “role” as both “relinquished child” and “relinquishing mother” (Cobby Eckermann “Books and Arts” 2017). In Cobby Eckermann’s family, the severances between mother and child continued down the line—an intergenerational inheritance of loss and shame. Cobby Eckermann says in interview with Mike Ladd: “[my mother’s] generation were really shamed to give their children up” (*Earshot* 2016). When Cobby Eckermann fell pregnant as a teenager, she was encouraged to give up her son for adoption because she did not feel mentally and emotionally equipped to care for him. And on a personal level, the ramifications for that are everlasting: “if you can’t trust the womb / how can you trust the universe?,” she writes in the poem “Severance” (63). At a recent poetry reading in Adelaide (November 14, 2017)—the first public reading since her return from collecting the Windham-Campbell Prize at Yale—Cobby Eckermann explained that there will never be enough poems inside her to tell of the pain and ongoing ramifications experienced by the Stolen Generations and their families. “We [Stolen Generations] live it daily,” she says (Little Windows Press Poetry Reading 2017).

Cobby Eckermann has two mothers—her birth mother, Yankunytjatjara woman Audrey Cobby, and her adoptive mother, Frieda Eckermann. Cobby Eckermann was taken away from her biological mother (who was herself a member of the Stolen Generations) not long after her birth. When Cobby Eckermann finally did meet up with Audrey, three decades later, they had just fifteen years together before Audrey died. Cobby Eckermann’s difficulty in grieving for a mother who had been absent for most of her life resulted in the poetry collection *Inside My Mother*. This book pays homage to Cobby Eckermann’s Aboriginal heritage and her birth mother, Audrey, but is dedicated to her mothers—plural. Throughout the collection, Cobby Eckermann explores the body as the threshold between the natural world and her identity; in particular, the tangible (bodily felt) grief of separation between mother and child, and the liminal space she occupies from being cut off from her Aboriginal heritage. In *Inside My Mother* Cobby Eckermann uses the central metaphors of sand, clay, birds and trees, to highlight either severance or connection to family, spirit and identity.

### **Sand and shorelines**

Sand as symbolic of mother and country, and specifically Cobby Eckermann’s mother’s country, is a dominant metaphor throughout the collection. But in the early section, Cobby Eckermann treads lightly, excavating her origins to find a way ‘home,’ working through grief and personal and generational trauma both, leaving soft footprints in the sand—transient—like the footprints of her ancestors that wash away with the tides or become something else. Not because cultural knowledge is disappearing but because sand is a living thing, and will move and shift as all living things do. In “Tjukurrpa” (5), she writes, “tribes gather on the sand / at the ancient birthing place.” Country is family—mother and father—and when it hurts it keens like all living things: “my father is the sand dune / that rock is my mother” (5).

Later in the collection, when Cobby Eckermann explores the sadness and desecration that has come with colonisation, the nourishing terrain of sand is transformed into something fixed (“Footprints”; 39):

the moment you jumped from your boat  
and landed on the shore  
your footprint stood next to mine

in the morning my footprint had disappeared  
and yours remained  
it would not leave

Shorelines are in-between places, thresholds—places of crossing over between one kind of environment and another; they are places of exit and entry. Shorelines embody a place of transition—perhaps violently, perhaps in the spirit of hospitality. In several of Cobby Eckermann’s poems, shorelines are not only the entry point for colonisation—“the incoming tide betrayed me” (39)—but are locations where all the parts of oneself can come together: “she remains beyond her imagination / no imprints mar her mind [...] one foot in water, one foot on sand / the tidal gravity keeps her grounded” (“Abstract”; 12). Or shorelines are porous borderlands where a third space between languages or between cultural identities can open up: “a boy sits on the shore of languages, water babbles / there are no rocks, no constants, the tide laps gently [...] the language names are twining like invisible string [...] waiting for the approach of new” (“Kaleidoscope”; 38). As Carter illumines, the coastline is “the place where Western and non-Western people [were] suddenly exposed to one another” (2008, 9). It is a dynamic place of interaction, but it is also a generative place, artistically speaking. In “Abstract,” the speaker inhabits the threshold: “one foot in water, one foot on sand [...] rough-and-ready art erupts from her / she breathes air into a dead gull [...] she scribes patterns in her mind / and naked she executes her future” (12).

This “approach of new” might be a potential third perspective—or a potential synthesis. While Cobby Eckermann highlights the necessity to write her poems in English—“if you’re serious about having a career as a writer you’re simply forced to” (Cobby Eckermann *Wasafiri* 2016)—she also hopes the “ancient rhythm of this ancient land” (*Wasafiri*) is discernible in her writing. Cobby Eckermann explains that she tries to keep her writing sparse like the “sparse environment” (*Wasafiri*) of the desert. In the region of the in-between (betwixt identity, language or location), the poet stands between those things that are parted and interacts. As Cooke (2013) suggests in his study of Aboriginal and Chilean nomadic poetics of the “open-field,” “the syntax [...] does not articulate discrete states of being [...] but it seeks to draw connections between accumulations” (17). This “ability of both the poem and the poet to move” (278) between not only the open space of the page, but to *articulate* an in-betweenness, emphasises the “productive capacity of the middle” (36) as a site for becoming, reimagining, and fracturing the fixed point of view of a colonial sensibility and dominant/dominating language.

Cobby Eckermann writes in “Lyre Birds” (89):

meet me at the river  
where lyre birds hide

maybe  
we will catch a glimpse of them  
maybe

hold me in that place where  
shyness and lyre birds meet  
maybe  
the tangle of thorns will retreat  
maybe

touch me softly oh so softly  
stroke feathers on my cheek  
maybe  
my softness will return  
maybe

There is tentativeness here. But the tentative step is towards a potential meeting place: a threshold where something new can be reimagined, or can emerge. This poem can be read with “overlapping cultural, emotional and personal possibilities” (Wood n.d.), allowing a space to open up for the reader to contemplate the fragile middle ground between being born black and growing up white that Cobby Eckermann inhabits. In her memoir, *Too Afraid to Cry*, Cobby Eckermann writes about reconnecting with her Aboriginal family: “I learn that I can’t fully live their traditional lifestyle, and that they can’t live mine. So we compromise ... [w]e grow smarter and stronger as one” (2014, 190). This place of compromise is a source of strength. It is a third place where bush way and whitefella way can coalesce. A threshold.

The contemporary Australian postcolonial poet is necessarily a ‘reconciler.’ The term postcolonial is used here with some trepidation because, as Scott argues, contemporary Australia cannot really be classified as such because Australia is not a republic (the coloniser has not withdrawn); the power relationship characteristic of colonial societies still exists in Australia and the benefits of colonisation have not been equally shared with the prior societies (2007, 120). To reconcile means “to bring together again” (OED Online)—to stand between those things that are parted and negotiate. Writing on the threshold, the postcolonial poet is a conduit who inhabits the *intermezzo* or the middle ground (Cooke 2013, 36), and it is in this locale that a reimagining may take place. In any consideration of what spatial theorist and artist Paul Carter (2009) calls “a distinctively Australian poetics” (148), the “prior acts of clearance, both human and environmental” (135) must be acknowledged. So that when we talk about ‘productive’ spaces and ‘generative’ spaces of art—including poetry—in an Australian context, the political and the poetic are entwined.

I take my cues from poet-critics Philip Mead and Michael Farrell, who both argue “for a future of post-settlement Australian poetry” (Farrell 2015, 6), where contextual readings (time and place) create a space for a fresh engagement with Australian poetics—one that “comes to terms with the unsettling difference of Indigenous narratives of place and history and the plural knowledges of the multicultural present” (Mead 2008, 400-401). This kind of understanding sees poetic language “networked” to the culture and history in which it is formed, and is influenced by Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the

rhizome: a subjectivity that is not hierarchical but extends in all directions, and with multiple entryways and exits (12). Poetic texts have “an after-life in subsequent and changing cultural contexts” (Mead 2008, 1). A poem’s after-life, then, is significant in that it leaves a map, a poetic textual history, of what has been before and, just as importantly, what is coming into being.

The reclaiming of Aboriginal perspectives and alternative vantage points to those dominating the archives and poetry anthologies is about reconnection with and regeneration of an Aboriginal heritage (Scott 2010). The editors of the recent publication *Contemporary Australian Poetry* emphasise:

Indigenous poetry in English has become a world of different voices in a way that can only have been dreamt of by pioneers such as Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Kevin Gilbert. One can well imagine future cultural historians regarding the present as the period in which Indigenous poetry in English achieved take-off. (Langford et al. 2016, viii)

Aboriginal artists, writers, poets, public intellectuals and activists—those engaged with “liberat[ing] our stories from the leaden pages of academia” (Grant 2016, 63)—have tended to express the viscerally felt inheritance of subjugation and repression in their creative works. For contemporary Aboriginal artists, this expression is less about victimhood and more about reclaiming voices that “suggest other possibilities latent in our history, and another relationship with the past” (Scott 2010, 58). But for the poets who forged their work in the early part of the twentieth century and right up to the 1970s, this reclamation was hard won and grew directly out of protest and struggle. Cobby Eckermann says of her own work as a poet:

I’m a little bit more passive [in my protest] compared to the freedom fighters and the premier poets who were helping to establish a louder voice for Aboriginal Australian writers back in the 70s and those earlier years. (Cobby Eckermann *Wasafiri* 2016, n.p.)

Yet Cobby Eckermann’s poetic voice is subtly penetrating. In reviewing *Inside My Mother*, Wood (n.d.) writes:

It is not that Eckermann forces non-indigenous people [...] to acknowledge their occupation, perhaps bringing with it an idea of guilt or illegitimacy or un-sovereignty. It is that Eckermann creates a world in which these questions may surface for the reader. As such *Inside My Mother* is less a work of harassment or protest than a piece of piercing subtlety [...] that approaches difference and voice.

In reconnecting with her Aboriginal heritage, by finding her birth mother, and through taking part in healing ceremonies with the ngangkari—healers from her Yankunytjatjara country in the far north of South Australia—Cobby Eckermann unearthed her poetic voice. This voice has not come without struggle. It grows out of a relationship with land/country/origin—both as place of solace and healing, and as place of disconnection, severance and exile.

## Clay

In the poem “Clay” (19) sand and dirt mix together to become both an “epidermal covering” (Wood n.d.) as the narrator smears her body in clay—a metaphor for being overwhelmed, the threat of submergence, of not being able to cope:

the world is turning to clay  
its muddy weight dry on my skin  
drags me down below river banks  
reducing the sky to a sliver [...]

shrinking me back into the earth  
only the whites of my eyes suggest clouds

the clay on my skin has dried and cracks  
its earth voice hoarse, now drowned in mud (19)

This poem is located in the body, where the body becomes a threshold between cultural knowledge and practice (smearing the body with ochre) and the overwhelming weight of (colonisation) history on the body. As Wiradjuri journalist and author Stan Grant explains, “our history is a living thing. It is physical. It is noses and mouths and faces. It is written on our bodies” (2016, 69). In “Clay” the body is grounded, but not in the positive sense of the word, it is swallowed up—silenced.

In the introduction to *Inside Black Australia*, the first anthology of Aboriginal poetry to ever be published in Australia, activist and author Kevin Gilbert writes: “Aboriginal poets share a universality with all other poets, yet differ somewhat in the traumatic and material experience of other poets” (1988, xviii). Nearly three decades later, this definition still applies, as the effects of interventionist government policies since Federation continue to ripple through the lives of Aboriginal people. Grant highlights that the “weight of history in Australia” (2016, 117) is suffocating, and explains that Aboriginal people “could do nothing to stop government officials invading [their] privacy [...] homes and bodies could be invaded at will” (101). Official policies that sought to ‘protect,’ and then assimilate Australia’s first nations, dispossessed Aboriginal people from their land and traditional ways of being irrevocably, and then severed children from their families.

When Cobby Eckermann writes that “clay” “drags me down below river banks / reducing the sky to a sliver” (19), the feeling of drowning is tangible; the narrator’s ability to see, her autonomy, is reduced: “all peripheral vision is blocked by earth [...] only my eyes reveal the myopia secret / my desire to live in the sky” (19). This notion of the sky being a free place, a place of birds and Spirit, is juxtaposed by the embodied metaphors of clay, sand, earth, dirt and soil across the collection. This juxtaposition draws attention to both the earthy weight of loss and trauma on the body and landscape (the two are entwined), and the inseparable connection between body/landscape and a sense of belonging and heritage.

Cobby Eckermann says of discovering her birth mother's country: "that land loved me so much that it guided me there—I love the feeling of that and I love the truth of that—I ran to my mother's birthplace" (*Earshot* 2016). The closing stanza of the poem named after her mother's birth place, "Ooldea Soakage" (15) tells of "old coals" gathered at "tribal camp," the "history trapped inside / rubbing charcoal on skin" (15). Cobby Eckermann points towards the traditional practice of marking the body with charcoal, but in this poem "history" comes to bear too. She may be referring to both her ancestral history and the history of the Maralinga atomic testing that occurred near Ooldea when her mother was just a child. The layers of (a complex) history are felt viscerally. In "Hindmarsh Island" (41) the land protests against the violation that has been done to it. The mouth of the Murray River, silted up from the building of a bridge through sacred women's country, is "filled with screaming sand" (41). Like a body, it is injured. It screams. The natural world and the body are synonymous in these poems: "Aunty hold my mulloway hand" (41). The river is not only a threshold between what was (a culturally and environmentally intact and healthy place of sacred women's business) and what is becoming (a culturally and environmentally violated place), but is filled with "our tears" (41). The birds and sky offer some hope to this bodily felt grief: "sing the pelican song / sing the blue sky refrain" (41).

In the final poem of the collection, "Evacuate" (91), it is the body that must be relinquished in order for the subject of the poem to heal—to "process" her "dreams of tragedy" (91):

today I will relinquish  
my body [...]

only then can I  
return to myself

The use of the word "relinquish" in this poem is significant, denoting a giving up, a giving over, as Cobby Eckermann has experienced from both perspectives—first when she was 'relinquished' by her birth mother, thus her connection to her Aboriginal identity also 'relinquished', and then in 'relinquishing' her own child for adoption. Her body is the site of these traumatising giving ups. But there is the sense in this poem that the relinquishing to be done now will not be traumatic, but will be an act of healing. The body a locale now for transformation—for inhabiting the threshold between what was and what will be. But it is from the eagle that the narrator takes her prompts: "I wait for eagle / only then can I / return to myself" (91). *Inside My Mother*, taking a circular flight path, both ends and begins with reference to birds as liminal messengers navigating the in-between.

### **Trees and Birds**

Throughout the collection, birds are Spirit guides, "the song lives in the eagle flying overhead [...] do not flinch away from angels" ("Clapsticks"; 31), while trees are like ladders to the birds, rooted in the earth (body), but stretching skywards: "the song of owls pulsates / as trees guard the sky" ("Heartbeat"; 17). The metaphor of the 'tree' for

Cobby Eckermann is not Oodgeroo Noonuccal's "Municipal Gum": "castrated, broken, a thing wronged / Strapped and buckled, its hell prolonged" (Noonuccal 1988, 100), but is restored to its original cultural position as a living thing imbued with sacred significance, rebuking the recurrent trope in much Australian literature of the fallen tree, or dead wood as symbolic of the death of Aboriginal culture:

in her trance she observes  
the hard and the soft of the trees  
branches uplift his bark-bound body  
there is no request more sacred ("Trance"; 11)

This is not to say that the tree in Cobby Eckermann's poems does not suffer or is not wronged—"we watch canoe trees / turn to ghosts" (34) because the river is dying, and in "Warriors at Salt Creek" the "modern day warriors" hang from trees (33)—but that for her the tree represents a gateway, a threshold, between body and spirit, ancient culture and contemporary concerns.

Audrey Cobby was born under a tree in Kokatha country near Maralinga, at a place called Ooldea, but her people are the Yankunytjatjara of sand hill country in the remote north west of South Australia. In the poem Cobby Eckermann wrote for her mother "Today" (88), the tree figures as an entry and exit point, for Audrey's life, but is also the location for a kind of transmutation where all the parts of oneself can coalesce:

today I found the tree under  
which my mother was born  
her placenta was buried here  
as her ashes are now [...]

today I became a weeping tree  
a vision of memory deep inside  
a face embedded in its bark  
the mirror of my mum

The tree of Audrey's birthplace is a gateway between life and death, between grief and memory. While in "Canoe" (13), the material of the tree—the wood—becomes a vessel in which a rite of passage is enacted. A young woman looks on as her soon-to-be lover cuts and shapes a canoe out of bark stripped from a tree:

the soft flesh of the tree expires  
the scar bleeds on the trunk [...]

the structure forms to natures [sic] laws  
a new dais of voyage prepared

at midnight they sail the river  
she turns without causing a ripple  
looking back along the darkness  
to the neon of the scar tree

it shines like a bended doorway  
a light within beckons as if a  
sacred star has fallen and a  
yearning will soon be done

The tree is transformed into something new. It is scarred now in the same way that the lovers will be marked by their first sexual encounter. And it is a threshold: “it shines like a bended doorway” (13).

But if trees represent guardians, gateways, thresholds—sites of generative and transformative acts—then the birds of *Inside My Mother* soar beyond the trees in the realm of the Spirit and are liminal ancestral figures of hope, redemption and power:

our birds fly  
on elongated wings  
they fly forever  
they are our Spirit (3)

In the lines “fill my ears with / bird song / I will survive” (“Tjulpu”; 49), there is the sense that the narrator survives because there is bird song—bird song is synonymous with life. This, of course, means that the inverse is true, so that in “Mamu” (28), a poem about ecological and human desecration resulting from introduced substances and species—“sugar,” “catfish,” “toad”—it makes sense that the narrator claims, “the first metaphor is a dead bird / I have murdered it” (28). Bird song in the poems of this collection both stands in for ancestral language, and is that language. When the warriors hang from trees (“Warriors at Salt Creek”) “hatchlings shriek from grassy knolls” (33), like ancestors screaming *murder murder murder*. And in the poems, birds are timeless beings: “they fly forever” (3); they are messengers: “boobook owls permeate / their call transmutes me” (17); they are witnesses (to massacre): “Crows gather and walk the sand / This vision can never leave their eyes” (33); and they are teachers/healers, showing the subject of the poems where to turn: “sing your love toward the sky” (31), and “in feather country / dancing is endless to / the music of wood” (36). The birds of this collection—owls, crows, eagles, lyrebirds, gulls—hover above the weighty concerns of the mundane—the scars of history on the land and body, the wounding severances of mother from child, the disconnection from heritage and belonging—and inhabit the sky “free from blemish” (19). They hover between the realms of earth and spirit like wishes, promising reconnection, regeneration and return. Threshold creatures. And as such, they wing through the collection like points of light where certain kinds of knowledge can be sensed in passing. For Cobby Eckermann, they represent a positive working through of grief, and of not being comfortable in her own skin: “most of my life had been a misinterpretation of the life and the person that I believe I was born to be” (*Wasafiri* 2016), but writing poetry has been a way of resolving that schism.

Cobby Eckermann’s development as a poet was born directly out of this tension of unravelling and reweaving the threads of her identity: “I think because my life was so fragmented, poetry was my only option to get a phrase or line out” (*Wasafiri*). She uses brevity of form: two or three line stanzas, short lines, and lack of capitalisation. Cobby Eckermann creates spaces between lines for the reader to absorb and interpret: “now I want to write with my instincts totally in agreement with what I am putting on the page”

(*Wasafiri*). Through the craft of poetry, Cobby Eckermann hopes for “small shifts” in the consciousness of her readers “so that we [Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people] can become better friends” (*Wasafiri*). Cobby Eckermann’s creative work opens up spaces for contemplation. She says:

acknowledgement and understanding [...] is the main thing I write for. I think that when the readership can reflect their conversation back to you it also grants healing by understanding beyond the words on the page.  
(*Wasafiri*)

Cobby Eckermann’s poetry inhabits the threshold through the central metaphors of sand, clay, trees and birds, and Cobby Eckermann herself writes on the threshold, that in-between place where a transformation—bodily, linguistically, culturally—can occur. Writing on the threshold, the productive middle between cultures or identities, might be one way to consider a reimagining of Australian poetics.

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<sup>1</sup>The notion of the threshold as a mode of inquiry was first articulated by Arnold van Gennep in his 1909 cross-cultural study of ritual processes, *Les Rites de Passage*. In

that seminal study the threshold, the liminal (*limen*), marked the transitional stage between rites of separation, and rites of incorporation found in the initiation processes of many cultures. Threshold rites include “direct and physical rites of entrance, of waiting, and of departure” (Vizedon and Kaffee 1960, 25) such as pregnancy, betrothal, initiation, and death. Victor Turner in *Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage* (1987) saw threshold rites “deserv[ing] special attention as constructive ‘building blocks’ for change or possibly transformation and initiation to another level of consciousness” (ix). Turner’s ritual liminality is characterised by “anti-structure,” a transition between states, where the liminal being is located outside the conventional social structures (temporarily) as they undergo “processes of growth, transformation, and the reformation of old elements in new patterns” (9). The phase betwixt and between is marked by a state of productive reflection.

<sup>2</sup> See Bruce Pascoe’s *Dark Emu: Black Seeds Agriculture or Accident?* (2014).