

Between Backyard Swamps and the Cosmos: Place, Space, and the Intersubjective Mesh in the Poetry of Manoel de Barros

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Abstract: This essay proposes a reading of the poetry of Manoel de Barros oriented by deconstructive turns in contemporary ecocritical theory and debates on the meanings of eco-poetry as a critical designation. I consider the tension between place-based referentiality and abstract spaciousness in Barros' work as well as the resonance between its microcosmic scenes of abjection, decay and transfiguration and ecocritic Timothy Morton's notion of the intersubjective mesh as the fundamental basis of ecological thinking. While an aura of conservation politics and place-making referentiality can certainly be intuited in Barros' poetic figurations of Pantanal landscapes, flora, and fauna, I argue that the force of meaning of his ambient poetics is most substantially to be found in their sustained imagining of intersubjectivity and its unsettling ontological and ethical effects.

Keywords: Manoel de Barros, Brazilian poetry, ecocriticism, ecocritical theory, ecopoetry.

Celebrated nonagenarian poet Manoel de Barros is often presented as *o poeta pantaneiro*, the foremost poet of the Pantanal, the expansive and biologically rich marshlands of Brazil's Central-West region, at its borders with Bolivia and Paraguay. It is a designation that the poet actively eschews or qualifies, not from some sense of modesty but out of resistance to the characteristic of ambient mimesis that regionalist designation often reductively emphasizes.¹ Analogous to Guimarães Rosa's *sertão*, Barros' textual Pantanal is supra-regional, to use the term coined by Antonio Candido to describe Rosa's fictions, rupturing

from within the traditional constraints of generic regionalist identification. Barros' Pantanal shifts back and forth across various registers of signification and referentiality, including the territorial, existential, biotic, metalinguistic, and metatextual. It is both microcosmic and a synecdoche for the cosmos. It can be read under the sign of place-making, which is often seen as an imperative of environmentally engaged writing, yet it is also spacious and abstract. His poetry is almost exclusively situated in Pantanal riverways, backwater towns, and childhood backyards as liminal sites where human and non-human worlds meet, and it often features and names the richly varied plant and animal life of the region in its specificity—*arãquãs* and *gaviões-caranguejeiros*, *sambixugas* and *marandovás*, *açucenas* and *pitangas*.² Just as often, though, birds are generically identified just as birds, and trees are simply trees. His poems surpass any documentary or encyclopedic register, as their central force of meaning transcends territorial signification without simply negating it. Expanding the comparison with Guimarães Rosa, Luiz Henrique Barbosa, in his book-length study of what he calls Barros' "adamic language," suggests, "In both, nature is never described in a documentary fashion; it is nothing more than one of the referential elements over to which we are handed by their work with the word"³ (18). Barros himself writes of the intensely vibrant and abundant nature of the Pantanal as posing a certain risk to the region's poets:

we must avoid the grave danger of a contemplative degustation, free of any communion between beings and things, of this nature. There is the danger of falling back upon photographic superficiality, the pure copy, without the slightest epiphanic transfiguration. The simple enumeration of animals, plants ... transmits not the essence of nature but instead only its appearance. (315)⁴

I argue, somewhat contrary to Barbosa's statement, that Barros' signs of nature are not simply casual referential elements in a poetry that is, fundamentally, about language. I suggest that Barros' poetry involves a meditation on and figuration of the ontological destabilizations that are fundamental effects of ecological thinking, including unsettling the borders between culture and nature, subject and object, human and natural history, word and world. His

work paradoxically seeks both to return the word to an original state of nature and, simultaneously, to free the natural world from the restrictive confines of language and modern classificatory, categorical, and utilitarian rationality. Thus, though not so directly assimilable to the conservation ethics of environmentalism, Barros' poetics enacts ecological thinking, manifesting a specifically environmentally situated language and gaze, a playful yet profound reflection on the intersubjective relationship between beings of different orders, and an explicit concern with the erosion of a sense of enchantment with the world as consequence of modernity and the onset of narrowed, rationalist, compartmentalizing, "adult" thinking. Barros does not, then, precisely pose or answer the question as to what *is* the Pantanal, what composes it as a place and biome. He does not make programmatic claims for its conservation nor does he write, overall, in a particularly elegiac tone, mournful for its subjection to forces of development. His poetry is cosmogonic, situating the reader within the Pantanal in order to ask the most timeless of questions: What is what is? What is the nature of being and of beings? How do we tell whom from what in the larger reality of interdependence and intersubjectivity that is the basis of ecological thinking. How to let this ecological thinking penetrate our quotidian perception of and relationship with the world and the myriad other beings that constitute it?

Reading Barros through an ecocritical lens⁵ and, more specifically, as an ecopoet, involves remaining attentive to this tension between place-making and what J. Scott Bryson calls "space-consciousness." Bryson, in proposing attributes of ecopoetry that might distinguish it from nature poetry, interrupts the emphasis on a connection to the particularities of place, as explored through such notions as bio-regionalism, reinhabitation, and, famously, Wendell Berry's "land ethic." He argues that one of the purposeful effects of ecopoetry is to serve as a counterpoint to the orderly signification of place. Through metalanguage and abstraction, or what he refers to as space-consciousness, ecopoetry evokes uncertainty, hesitation, and pause upon the limitations of our faculties of perception, comprehension, and representation. Barros' work, ambiguously positioned vis-à-vis the place-making mandate typically assumed of regionalism and nature writing, also resonates with David Gilcrist's idea of "skeptical environmental poetics," a poetics that acknowledges the always linguistically mediated access to the referential

object—nature, the environment, the more-than-human world, etc.—without abandoning referentiality altogether. A skeptical ecopoetics, in this conception, is oriented to nature as the referential origin of language and perception without being confined to the representational certitude and explanatory ambitions of other forms of environmental discourse. As he writes:

... an environmental poetics informed by linguistic skepticism can serve to establish a more intimate and responsive relationship toward nature. By emphasizing the essential distinction between things and our words for things, a skeptical hermeneutic acknowledges the ontological autonomy of the nonhuman. A skeptical hermeneutic thus encourages, to whatever extent possible, an *awareness* of nonhuman entities unmediated by linguistic structure. (133-134)⁶

This reading of Barros' poetry as an ecopoetics also focuses on a deep resonance with another attempt to explore the intersections of ecocritical theory and deconstruction: namely, the idea of intersubjectivity, as explored by Timothy Morton through his concept-metaphors, "the mesh" and "dark ecology." Morton, in works including *Ecology Without Nature* and *The Ecological Thought*, proposes a critical dismantling of an idea or sign of nature that is still, in his assessment, overly burdened by the legacies of dualistic thinking, whether in instrumentalizing, positivist manifestations or their romantic counterpoints. He calls for heightened attention to Derridean *différance* as a more useful foundation for ecological thinking than the idea of nature itself in the way that it has become established as an idealized abstraction, a unified category, or set of categories, always ultimately over there and apart from us. As he argues, if the typically Romantic subject of environmental discourse desires the transcendence of difference between nature and humanity, it also, through its desire for pure, pristine, organic nature, "reestablishes the very separation it seeks to abolish" (*Ecology* 125). Morton's work intends to unsettle some of the certainties of environmental ethics, aesthetics, and representation by insisting upon ontological reflection and by shifting the critical gaze from the object of environmental or nature writing to its various forms of subject formation.

With his concept, “the mesh,” Morton purposefully rejects the more stock phrase, “the web of life,” renaming what is a standard metaphor of ecological thinking in order to reactivate the immanent potential of its ontological destabilization. The mesh as metaphor newly insists upon the question of what is what is, exposing and unsettling the alterity of background and foreground, subject and object, human self and non-human other. The intersubjective mesh attempts to bring Derridean deconstruction into critical dialogue with leading edges of biological science:

The ecological thought imagines interconnectedness, which I call the mesh. Who or what is interconnected with what or with whom? The mesh of interconnected things is vast, perhaps immeasurably so. Each entity in the mesh looks strange. Nothing exists all by itself, and so nothing is fully “itself”... Our encounter with other beings becomes profound. They are strange, even intrinsically strange. Getting to know them makes them stranger. (*The Ecological Thought* 15)

Also proposing what he calls “dark ecology” as a necessary counterpoint to romantically pure, sublime portrayals of nature, Morton urges, via Adorno, greater attention to “what in us is most objectified, the ‘thousand, thousand slimy things’” (*Ecology* 196), thereby recognizing the “monstrosity” in the “mechanical” process that is nature and refusing to digest the object or other into an idealized form (*Ecology* 97). He writes:

Ecological art is duty-bound to hold the slimy in view. This involves invoking the underside of ecomimesis, the pulsing, shifting qualities of ambient poetics, rather than trying to make pretty or sublime pictures of nature. (*Ecology* 159-160)

An insistent gaze upon abject beings and qualities might compel us to recognize ourselves in and as the “natural” object or other, suspending the comfortably aestheticizing distance and the human subjectification provided by the frame called nature (*Ecology* 197).

Manoel de Barros has published to date eighteen books of poetry—the first in 1937 and the most recent in 2011—in addition to his “invented memoirs,” composed of short prose poems and published in three volumes between 2003 and 2008. The span of this body of work presents a challenge to critical synthesis, inviting a number of approaches and points of entry that only partially have been pursued in its critical reception: his poetic selves, alter egos, and recurrent *mestres*, including the splendidly destitute vagrant and “guardian of waters,” Bernardo da Mata, a sort of Beaudelarian *flâneur* wandering about the Pantanal; affinities with various strands of early modernist avant-gardism, including Primitivism, Dada, Surrealism, and *antropofagia*; his place in the larger arc of Luso-Brazilian modernisms and the distance he drew between himself and the Generation of 1945, to which he would chronologically pertain; the particularities of his syntax and language, involving, as is the case of Guimarães Rosa, a conjugation of regional, popular speech and singular individual invention; his post-colonially hybrid settler/native subject positions and the incorporation (or appropriation) of Indigenous identity and culture. Additionally, as examined by Souza, Barros’ poetry is deeply philosophical in its generation of concepts: the “unobject,” “unlimit,” and “pre-things,” among others. Our reading of Barros as eco-poet, while touching on these and other dimensions to his work certainly deserving of much more sustained attention, will concentrate on what I perceive as his parallel metaphors for and enactments of the intersubjective mesh and dark ecology: his recurrent signs of abjection, ruination, metamorphosis and transfiguration.

With a consistent repertoire of beings “abandoned to insignificance,” lesser things “pissed upon by the dew,” and images of ruins, decay, and de-individuation of entities into the common materiality of the cosmos as his existential and ambient refrains, Barros’ poetry disregards grand, sublimely beautiful vistas. This, as he himself states, is a tempting enough approach given the striking visual splendor of Pantanal landscapes and ecosystems that include a richly diverse display of flora and fauna, including a stunning variety of colorful bird species and “charismatic megafauna” including caimans, capybaras, jaguars, tapirs, marsh deer, and giant anteaters. Instead, looking downward, at the ground, Barros’ poems call forth in accumulative detail and variations microcosmic meshes of abject beings—flies, ants, worms, frogs, moss, rust, bugs, slugs, broken machinery,

empty cans, abandoned and mouldering houses, roads slowly disappearing among an overgrowth of weeds, etc.—beings outside of the symbolic order that transcendently pure and organic notions of nature and the environment tend to invoke. These are gazed upon in a spirit of solidarity, from co-equally abject subject positions—the vagrant, the pre-literate child, the idiot, the poet—those excluded or self-excluding from the realms of reason, knowledge, and usefulness, and, as Julia Kristeva proposed, those that draw us to the place where meaning begins to erode.⁷ The abject, these beings abandoned to worthlessness, uselessness, and meaninglessness, are cohabitants of the featured landscapes of his poetry, and they include on equal terms signs of nature mingling with the detritus of human civilization, all at the edges of their respective realms, where they meet and reveal themselves to each other in a mutual state of decay. Barros' poetry alchemically transforms their shared insignificance into something ethereal and sublime, into allegorical images that sustain an aura of metaphysics even as they simply assert the fundamental physical materiality of being and beings.

Though this poetics of abjection and nothingness, of the *ínfimo*, as Barros terms it, is a feature of his work going back at least to his 1960 collection, *Compêndio para uso dos pássaros* [Textbook for Use of Birds], it appears in full force in his 1970 book, *Matéria de poesia* [The Stuff of Poetry]. In the eponymous *ars poetica* from this collection, he writes:

Todas as coisas cujos valores podem ser
disputados no cuspe à distância
servem para poesia

...

Terreno de 10 x 20, sujo de mato—os que
nele gorjeiam: detritos semoventes, latas
servem para poesia

...

Tudo aquilo que nos leva a coisa nenhuma
e que você não pode vender no mercado
como, por exemplo, o coração verde
dos pássaros,

serve para poesia
As coisas que os líquenes comem
—sapatos, adjetivos—
têm muita importância para os pulmões
da poesia

Tudo aquilo que a nossa
civilização rejeita, pisa e mijá em cima,
serve para poesia (145-146)⁸

[Anything whose value could be
determined by a spitting contest
is the stuff of poetry

...

Vacant lot, 10 x 20, full of weeds—those that
warble within it: shifting detritus, tin cans
are the stuff of poetry

...

All that gets us absolutely nowhere
and that you can't sell in the marketplace
like, for example, the green hearts
of birds,
is the stuff of poetry

The things that lichens eat away at
—shoes, adjectives—
are very important for the lungs
of poetry

Everything that our
civilization rejects, steps and pisses upon
is the stuff of poetry]

In “Poema V” from his 1989 collection, *O guardador de águas* [The Guardian of Waters], Barros coins the term *nadifúndio* to name his distinctly unmajestic landscapes of decay and abjection:

São donos de nadifúndios
(Nadifúndio é lugar em que nada
Lugar em que osso de ovo
E em que latas com vermes emprenhados na boca.
Porém.
O nada destes nadifúndios não alude ao infinito menor
de *ninguém*.
Nem ao *Néant* de Sartre.
E nem mesmo ao que dizem os dicionários: *coisa que
não existe*.
O nada destes nadifúndios existe e se escreve com letra
minúscula.)
Se trata de um tratal.
Aqui pardais descascam larvas.
Vê-se um relógio com o tempo enferrujado dentro.
E uma concha com olho de osso que chora.
Aqui o luar desova...
Insetos umedecem couros
E sapos batem palmas compridas...
Aqui, as palavras se esgarçam de lodo. (278)

[They are the owners of nadifúndios.
(*Nadifúndio* is the place in which nothings
The place in which the bones of eggs
And in which tin-cans, mouths stuffed with worms.
Although.
The nothing of these *nadifúndios* alludes not to the minor infinity
of nobody.
Nor to Sartre’s *Néant*.

And not even to what's found in dictionaries: *something that does not exist.*

The nothing of these *nadifúndios* exists and is written in lower-case.)

We're talking good-for-nothing things.

Here, sparrows peel apart larvae.

There's a watch with time rusted inside of it.

And a shell with an eye of bone that weeps.

Here the moonlight lays eggs...

Insects moisten hides

And frogs clap their elongated hands...

Here, words are pulled apart in the mud.]

The poet excavates these ruinous sites, where human artifacts, including language itself, are found disintegrating in an allegorical tableau overstuffed with signs of an inexorable cycle of birth, death and decay. As Idra Novey suggests in the introduction to her volume of translations of Barros' poetry, human history, more specifically the recent history of rural to urban migration in Brazil, is an underlying theme for Barros, evident among the ruins of what is left behind. The sense of reference to human history is somewhat heightened, though only ambiguously so, with this naming of abject place. *Nadifúndio*, as a play on *latifundia* and *minifundia*, certainly evokes notions of property and agrarian history, and, if only obliquely, the struggles between land-poor and landless rural laborers and the owners of large estates that grew increasingly heated over the course of the 1980s in Brazil. However, the subject of ownership—the “they” of that first verse—is left fully unclear, and, the rusted watch, as a pronounced sign of the suspension of time at a human scale, seems to pull the scene beyond any socio-historical context for its reading. As with Benjamin's conception of baroque allegory, in these ruins, human and natural history appear to merge.⁹

The image of words themselves decaying, as abandoned artifacts disintegrating into the mud, highlights the fundamental reflexivity of Barros' ambient poetics. Pulling the word from this muck and mire, Barros seeks out a ground zero of language in the materiality of its ambience. He commits to the impossibility of

a poetry fundamentally stuck to the thing and its place, to words freed from their own immateriality and abstraction, and to language and thought that might transcend or at least momentarily suspend the subject/object and self/environment splits that are, seemingly, their very conditions of possibility. Barbosa proposes:

... [H]e desires more than a simple fusion between subject and object, since with this fusion the subject remains present. He desires a total expulsion of the subject, or its transformation into object, he desires a language in which no subjectivity or reflection is present. (117)

Barros, in this sense, echoes Fernando Pessoa's Zen-master heteronym, Alberto Caeiro, in his expressed desire for transcendence of the distance between signifier and signified and for suspension of metaphor and the gazing subject's imposition of meaning upon the things of the world.¹⁰ The expression of this desire serves to focus our concentration on its impossibility, reminding us again of Gilcrest's idea of skeptical environmental poetics as acknowledging "the limitations that human perception and language place on mimetic ambitions" and serving "an ecocentric ethic by acknowledging that our perception of the (human and) nonhuman world is conditioned by language and culture." (125)

Barros goes further in placing not just the word but also the poetic self in the mesh of intersubjectivity in which things are in a constant state of simultaneously being, becoming and unbecoming themselves and their others. Again, in *O guardador de águas*, he revisits Ovid's transformations of people into plants, animals, and stones, and proposes:

Um novo estágio seria que os entes já transformados
falassem um dialeto coisal, larval, pedral, etc.
Nasceria uma linguagem madruguenta, adâmica,
edênica, inaugural –
Que os poetas aprenderiam—desde que voltassem às
crianças que foram
Às rãs que foram
Às pedras que foram. (266)

[A new stage would be those already transformed beings
speaking a dialect that was thingish, larval, mineral, etc.
A dawn-like language, adamic, edenic, inaugural,
would be born—
That poets would learn—as long as they returned to
the children that they were
The frogs that they were
The stones that they were.]

Here, the dissolved edges between beings and the transfiguration of one thing into another are proposed as an affirmative act of will, as an othering of the self to be undertaken by the poet in seeking a renovated gaze, language, and state of being in the world. Elsewhere, this metamorphosis is written as the fundamental condition of the natural world, as the very nature of being. Gradual or even instantaneous transcendence of the boundaries separating one thing from another is portrayed under a more fatalistic sign, as moments of the inexorable, natural processes of decay and death by which beings of any order unbecome, consumed back into the basic materiality of existence that they share with their immediate environment and with the cosmos at large. Among a multitude of like images of ruination, another example, again striking in its vision of the blurred edges where human and non-human worlds meet, is the prose poem “Desobjeto” [Unobject], from the first volume of Barros’ *Memórias inventadas* (2003). Here, Barros describes his poet-child’s discovery of a carelessly lost or discarded comb in the undergrowth of a backyard:

O pente estava próximo de não ser mais um pente. Estaria mais perto de ser uma folha dentada. Dentada um tanto que já se havia incluído no chão que nem uma pedra um caramujo um sapo. Era alguma coisa nova o pente. . . .

Não se poderia mais se dizer se aquela coisa fora um pente ou um leque. As cores a chifre de que fora feito o pente deram lugar a um esverdeado a musgo. Acho que os bichos do lugar mijavam muito naquele desobjeto. . . .

O menino que era esquerdo e tinha cacoete pra poeta, justamente ele enxergara o pente naquele estado terminal. E o menino deu para imaginar que o pente, naquele estado, já estaria incorporado à natureza como um rio, um osso, um lagarto. (n. pag.)

[The comb was close to no longer being a comb. It was closer to being a chewed-up leaf. So chewed-up, it was part of the ground just like a rock a slug a frog. It was something new, the comb. ...]

You couldn't tell any more if that thing was a comb or a hand-held fan. The longhorn colors of which the comb had been made had given way to a mossy greenishness. I think the local animals pissed a lot on that un-object. Fact is, the comb had lost its personality... . The boy, who was a bit off and had a habit of poetry, happened to notice the comb in that terminal state. And the boy could just barely imagine that the comb, in that state, was already incorporated into nature like a river, a bone, a lizard.]

It is this cultivated awareness of a fundamentally shared condition of constant material transfiguration that suffuses Barros' Pantanal, as simultaneously a territorial referent and a utopian space for a universally minded renovation of the poetic gaze and language that echoes fundamental precepts of ecological thinking. Berta Waldman, in her introduction to the collected volume of Barros' first nine books of poetry, synthesizes this latter, deterritorialized or spacious dimension of his work:

More than a geographical referent, in its constant state of decomposition and renewal, the Pantanal is configured as a fluid, circular world where life and death abound in their animal and vegetable traces. ...In this way, the materiality of things incorporates both their becoming and unbecoming, situating them in a "in-between" space, eliminating the existence of singular beings since each one was and will be something else. (15-16)

This notion of intersubjectivity within the shared mesh of existence is explored through the images of decay and ruination, as, in effect, allegories of

time, mortality, and transfiguration as the fundamental nature to which all being is subjected. Yet, it is additionally evoked as the willful act of imagination and seeing, and thus an ethics in addition to an ontology. That is, Barros imagines an intersubjective gaze upon the world and upon the other by which one might actively, if only momentarily, fully be with the other, which involves the willful suspension of self and alterity altogether. These moments of self-transformation and suspended alterity are a refrain throughout much of his work. In *O guardador de águas*, the vagrant hero, Bernardo da Mata “olhando para o chão convê os vermes sendo-o” [looking at the ground sees the worms being him] (247). We find a variation on this capacity to see oneself in and as the lowliest other in the second volume of *Memórias inventadas*, now attributed to his invented child self: “aquele que olhando para o chão enxerga um verme sendo-o” [That kid who, looking at the ground, sees the worm being him] (n. pag.). In *Livro sobre nada* [Book about Nothing] (1996), in one of a series of aphorisms, he advises: “Sabedoria pode ser que seja estar uma árvore” [Wisdom might be to be momentarily a tree] (346). In “Árvore” [Tree], from *Ensaios fotográficos* [Photographic Essays] (2000), Barros writes of his brother as having willfully achieved a state of treeness, by which he learned, among other things, of sun, sky, sanctity, vanity, and how to better see the color blue.

Sometimes this intersubjective gaze and willful state of being is given territorial and biographical conditionality. In the self-portrait that serves as the repeated preface in the three volumes of his *Memórias inventadas*, he writes:

Eu tenho que essa visão oblique vem de eu ter sido criança em algum lugar perdido onde havia transfusão da natureza e comunhão com ela. Era o menino e os bichinhos. Era o menino e o sol. O menino e o rio. Era o menino e as árvores. (n. pag.)

[I take it that this oblique vision comes from my having been a child in the middle of nowhere, where there was a transfusion of nature and a communion with it. I was the kid and the animals. I was the kid and the sun. The kid and the river. I was the kid and the trees.]

Further describing the self—in both first-person singular and plural—as entangled in the entanglement of the language and the materiality of its environment, Barros writes in the third volume of his memoirs:

Fomos formados no mato—as palavras e eu. O que de terra a palavra se acrescentasse, a gente se acrescentava de terra. O que de água a gente se encharcasse, a palavra se encharcava de água. . . . Conforme a gente recebesse formatos da natureza, as palavras incorporavam as formas da natureza. Em algumas palavras encontramos subterrâncias de caramujos e de pedras. (n. pag.)

[We were made in the backwoods—words and me. Whatever dirt the word piled onto itself, we would pile that dirt onto ourselves. Whatever water with which we soaked ourselves, the word would soak itself with that water. . . . Just as we took shapes from nature, words incorporated natural forms. In some words we discover sub-terrains of snails and rocks.]

This emphasis on a shared condition of being, blurring the distinctions between subject, object, and surroundings, and between culture—as symbolized by the word—and nature, in its fundamental materiality, positions Barros' ecopoetics as largely engaged with ontological and cosmogonic questions that destabilize modern categorical distinctions between human and non-human or between natural and cultural realms of being. Though edging toward its deconstruction, Barros does not, however, outright abandon notions of nature or naturalness as categorical bases for an ethical dimension to his work. His work at large is punctuated by reassessments of the value and importance of one thing over the other, beyond the simple inversion of hierarchies involved in his attention to abjection: "Insofar as the importance of a thing or of a being is not to be found in its size or volume, but in the permanence of its being in its place. In its primacy." "We discover that the size of things must be measured by the intimacy that we have with those things." "That the importance of a thing must be measured by the enchantment that that thing produces in us."¹¹ This reassignment of value often clearly reasserts an alterity between human and non-human worlds, without symbolizing abjection through his signs of the

latter: “I prefer machines that work by not working: when full of sand, of ants and moss—one day they may miracle flowers” (342); “Because it is not contaminated by contradictions, the language of birds produces only warblings” (373).¹² In another example from the first volume of his *Memórias inventadas*, Barros rather frankly evaluates against each other city and countryside and signs of nature and human industry and technology:

Não vi nenhuma coisa mais bonita na cidade do que um passarinho. Vi que tudo o que o homem fabrica vira sucata: bicicleta, avião, automóvel. Só o que não vira sucata é ave, árvore, pedra. Até nave espacial vira sucata. Agora eu penso uma garça branca do brejo ser mais linda que uma nave espacial. Peço desculpas por cometer essa verdade. (n. pag.)

[I saw nothing in the city prettier than a bird. I saw that everything that man produced turned into scrap metal: bicycles, airplanes, automobiles. The only things that don't turn into scrap are birds, trees, rocks. Even spaceships turn into scrap. Now I think that a white bog heron is more beautiful than a spaceship. I apologize for committing this truth.]

Barros largely avoids directly connecting this value-laden conception of nature to a practically minded conservation ethics. His poetics include no dramatic images of environmental destruction, nor warnings of ecological collapse. There are no testimonial accounts of landscapes subjected to the ruinous forces of human intervention. The typical signs of human presence in his Pantanal landscapes and waterways include, apart from language and his poetic selves, what would most normally be regarded as trash or abandoned items. The discarded remnants of human habitation are not, however, presented in his poetry as something extraneous to the landscape, despoiling it. Instead, they are viewed as in a quickly progressing state of decay, subjected to the more powerfully transformative force of insects, rust, fungus, weeds, weather, and time. Trash and human detritus are naturalized as just something else among the multitude of agents of ecological entropy in the Pantanal, as mortal entities acting as energy transfer mechanisms within their immediate environment.

Though underemphasized in relation to the abstract, spaciousness of his ecopoetics, which minimize the sense of referentiality both in terms of place and historical time, there is still a recurrent, if carefully understated undertone of pastoral elegy in his work, in which history is felt as loss. This loss is less of the natural environment than of our capacity or willingness to place ourselves in communion with it, whether a result of dislocation and urbanization or, more fundamentally, human subjectivity as determined by a language and worldview overpowered by science, reason, and utility. Barros, self-declared primitive—“they called me primitive / I was ecstatic” (371)—intends a re-enchantment with the world. His cultivated memory of an environmentally situated self and language romantically proposes a transcendence of barriers between ourselves and the non-human other that modern notions of knowledge and knowability, in his vision, enact and impose upon us. Barros thus repeatedly sets his mode of looking upon and being with the non-human environment and other against that of science and instrumental reason. In his childhood backyards, things had a “desutilidade poética” [poetic uselessness] and “era muito riquíssimo o nosso dessaber” [our unknowing was incredibly rich] (329). His *pantaneiro* poet-selves know much about nothing, of things of “soberba desimportância científica” [supreme scientific unimportance] (258). And Barros repeatedly laments the erosion of enchantment and creatively individual signification of things that comes with excessive exposure to the language of reason. From the second series of poems, “Desejar ser,” in *Livro sobre nada*, he proposes:

A ciência pode classificar e nomear os órgãos de um
 sabiá
 mas não pode medir seus encantos.
 A ciência não pode calcular quantos cavalos de força
 existem
 nos encantos de um sabiá.

Quem acumula muita informação perde o condão de
 adivinar: divinare.

Os sabiás divinam. (340-341)

[Science is able to classify and name the organs of a
sabiá thrush
but it cannot measure its charms.
Science cannot calculate how much horsepower
exists
in the charms of a sabiá thrush.

Those that accumulate too much information lose the gift of
divination: *divinare*.

Sabiá thrushes divine.]

And from poem XIX of the first part of his *O livro das ignorâncias* (1993)
“Uma didática da invenção,” Barros laments subjection of things to the impoverishment of specialized terminology:

O rio que fazia uma volta atrás de nossa casa era a
imagem de um vidro mole que fazia uma volta atrás
de casa.

Passou um homem depois e disse: Essa volta que o
rio faz por trás de sua casa se chama enseada.

Não era mais a imagem de uma cobra de vidro que
fazia uma volta atrás de casa.

Era uma enseada.

Acho que o nome empobreceu a imagem. (303)

[The river that bent back behind our house was the
image of a piece of soft glass that bent back behind
our house.

Later a man passed through and said: That bend in the
river back behind your house is called a slough.

It was no longer the image of a glass snake that
bent back behind the house.

It was a slough.

I think the name impoverished the image.]

In his poem, “Línguas” [Languages], from *Ensaaios fotográficos* (2000), Barros writes of his vocation for unknowing “línguas cultas,” [erudite languages] which he contrasts with the language of bees, rocks, and birds, as well as a series of Indigenous languages that are thus romantically naturalized in their association and description:

A língua dos índios Guatós é múrmura: é como se ao
dentro das palavras corresse um rio entre pedras.

A línguas dos Guaranis é gárrula: para eles é muito
mais importante o rumor das palavras do que o sentido
que elas tenham.

...

Na língua dos Guanás há sempre uma sombra do
charco em que vivem.
Mas é língua matinal.
Há nos seus termos réstias de um sol infantil. (381)

[The language of the Guató Indians is a murmur: it is as if
within the words ran a river through rocks.

The language of the Guarani is garrulous: for them it's much
more important the sound of the words than the meaning
that they have.

...

In the language of the Guanás there is always a shadow of the
swamp in which they live.
But it is a matinal language.
There are in its terms the remains of a childish sun.]

Barros' ecopoetics, rather than striving to preserve or free nature from human presence and intervention, seeks to restore us, and our language, to the garden. In the ethical thrust of his poems, Barros proposes a reconciliation of humanity and nature through the cultivated capacities for enchantment and humility. His poetry conjures and exalts an ability and will to see the self among an order of things, a condition of existence valid for all things. As Berta Waldman writes, Barros' poetry presents a vision of humanity "leveled to the condition of thing among things, small..." (16). The allegorical images of ruination in his work involve not the subjection of natural worlds to destructive forces of human intervention. Instead, they invoke the merging or entangling of human and natural realms, with the former subsumed into the latter, in a shared subjection to that fundamentally shared condition of being. Thus, the idea of historical change momentarily evoked in his work, a sense of human progress as a history of loss and destruction, is overwhelmed by the emphasis on natural history or cosmic forces. In the eighth poem from the series, "Biografia do orvalho" [Biography of the Dew], included in *Retrato do artista quando coisa* [Portrait of the Artist as a Thing] (1998), a figuration of the progressive ruination of the abandoned family home is ambiguously charged in its emotional register, conveying nostalgia, alarm, resignation, and, finally, solace in the signs of the continued cycle of death and birth, destruction and creation:

Ao ver o abandono da velha casa: o mato a
crescer das paredes
Ao ver os desenhos de mofo espalhados nos
rebocos carcomidos
Ao ver o mato a subir no fogão, nos retratos,
nos armários
...
Ao ver o musgo e os limos a tomar conta do
batente
Ao ver o abandono de tão perto de mim que dava
até para lamber
Pensei em puxar o alarme

Mas o alarme não funcionou.
A nossa velha casa ficou para os morcegos e
os gafanhotos.
E os melões-de-são-caetano que subiram pelas
paredes já estão dando seus frutos vermelhos (372)

[Seeing the abandonment of the old house: the weeds
growing up the walls
Seeing the shapes of mold scattered across the
crumbling plaster
Seeing the weeds climbing the stove, the portraits,
the cabinets
...
Seeing the moss and the algae take over the
door frame
Seeing the abandonment so close to me that I could
touch it with my tongue
I considered pulling the alarm
But the alarm didn't work.
Our old house was left to the bats and
the grasshoppers.
And the São Caetano melon vines climbing the
walls already are producing their red fruit]

Though just scratching the surface of his decades of work, we find in these examples nature and the environment as denaturalized and unsettled concepts, unmoored from discursive formations overly invested with ideas of purity and majestic beauty or else constrained by instrumental reason, both tendencies of a human subjectification that run counter to ecological thinking. Barros' eco-poetics evoke what the philosopher Levi Bryant, from whom Morton has drawn some of the conceptual foundations of his eco-critique, has defined as "flat ontology,"

[one that] rejects the nature/culture distinction, treating both cultural entities and natural entities as *real* entities, ... that places entities of all types on equal ontological footing (natural entities, signs, language, humans, animals, etc.) [and that r]equires us to think in terms of entanglements of entities... . (n. pag.)

Much more evidently ambiguous are the implications of Barros' work from the perspective of more overtly politically engaged "nature realist" ecocritics as well as from the perspective of post-colonial ecocriticism and its focus on environmental epistemologies and justice claims of historically marginalized communities. Barros' poetic ruins and merging of history into nature bring to mind one of the primary objects of Walter Benjamin's critique of the ruin in baroque allegory, the denial, in his view, to address the problem of human agency in the world. That is, the effect of Barros' repeated images of ruination and decay is perhaps less a dialectical awareness of the relationship between human and natural history than a collapse of the former into the latter. In this sense, his poetry might be read as an example of what Rob Nixon notes in much nature writing as the "repression of history or its subordination to the pursuit of timeless, solitary moments of communion with nature," among the major schisms that he cites as having long separated environmental and post-colonial writing (236). Despite the sporadic references in Barros' work to family history, colonial texts, and the region's Indigenous cultural and linguistic heritage, Barros' textual Pantanal appears as more a metaphysical staging than a place significantly formed by the historical forces of local, regional, and global territorial integration. Barros' Pantanal backyards, farms, waterscapes, and backwater towns might be read, in this sense, as manifestations of what Huggan and Tiffin consider as the sort of pastoral idyll most evident in former settler colonies, as a "closed system" of timelessly self-perpetuating social and ecological dynamics, one that ultimately disguises or sublimates tensions around questions of ownership and belonging, dispossession and loss. As they argue, "Pastoral, in this last sense, is a spectral form, always aware of the suppressed violence that helped make its peaceful visions possible, and always engaged with the very histories from which it appears to want to escape" (85). Those seeking a clearer engagement with historical transformations

of the Pantanal biome, including the quite real threats it faces from continued industrial, agricultural, and tourism-related development, may also be left somewhat wanting by Barros' work. His textual Pantanal, with its destabilizations of a notion of nature infused with ideas of purity and the alterity of human and non-human beings, involves slippages between a mythical or cosmogonic setting and a realist, referential territoriality that largely defy attempts to place it in easy service of the immediacy of environmental politics.

Though the argument further subjects Barros' poetry to the notions of utility and expediency against which it militates, I propose that it be read as a significant contribution to ecopoetics as an expression of more abstractly philosophical implications of ecological thinking. Its visions of radical intimacy with other orders of being, its evocation of the shared strangeness of beings, and its privileging of non-human, animal, vegetal and mineral others among what Feliz Guattari would term his "existential refrains" and "catalytic focal points of subjectification," (46) all position Barros' work as a sustained and timely exploration of representational, ontological, and ethical questions invoked by the ecological imagination. While an aura of conservation politics and specific place-making referentiality can certainly be intuited in his poetic figurations of Pantanal landscapes, flora, and fauna, the force of meaning of his ambient poetics is most substantially to be found in their more spacious appeals for enchantment, profound solidarity, and imaginatively attentive, intersubjective coexistence with what else inhabits our more-than-human worlds.

Notes

¹ As Adalberto Müller states in his annotated collection of written interviews conducted with Barros: "One of Manoel de Barros' recurrent affirmations is that he is not 'the poet of the Pantanal,' as the media tends to portray him. 'My interest is in language,' he tends to respond." (20) This translation and those to follow are my own.

² Aracuan birds and crab-falcons, leaches and poisonous caterpillars, amaryllis flowers and Surinam cherries.

³ This translation and those to follow are my own.

⁴ From Martha Barros' written interview with the poet, "Com o poeta Manoel de Barros," published originally in the *Correio Brasiliense* and included in Barros' *Gramática expositiva do chão* (1990).

⁵ With its general interest in the ways in which language and literary or artistic representation mediate our relationship with the environment, ecocriticism has quickly evolved since its consolidation in the early 1990s, proliferating into a very wide-ranging (and still expanding) set of theoretical and thematic orientations. First-wave scholarship, grounded in the Anglo-American canon, focused on literary renditions of the natural world as means of cultivating an attachment to place and affirming ecocentric, conservationist values. Since then, as outlined in an overview of the field by three of its leading scholars, Lawrence Buell, Ursula Heise, and Karen Thorber (2011), a number of other arenas of interest have developed. Some of these build on the ecocentric conservationist imperative of the first wave while expanding its canon of “ecological” texts. Others challenge the equation of environment with nature and the philosophical and culturally determined underpinnings of both these notions, or assert sociocentric environmental justice claims over or alongside ecocentrist values. Additional developments include the examination of gender in environmental representation, animal studies, engagement with geosciences and biology as well as with deconstructive critiques of science, and, in the field’s internationalization, intersections with postcolonialism and Indigenous studies.

⁶ This postmodernist versus materialist tension implicit in reconfiguring the relationship between the word and the (natural) world it means to engage us with also figures in James Engelhardt’s “The Language Habitat: An Ecopoetry Manifesto.” Engelhardt proposes ecopoetry as desiring the word that connects us to the world even as it sustains linguistic skepticism and reflexivity. He writes:

This poetry might be wary of language, but at its core believes that language is an evolved ability that comes from our bodies, that is close to the core of who we are in the world. Ecopoetry might borrow strategies and approaches from postmodernism and its off-shoots, ... but the ecopoetic space is not a postmodern space. An ecopoem might play with slippages, but the play will lead to further connections. (n. pag.)

In a sense, we might generally consider ecopoetry to be nature poetry written in the converging wakes of postmodernism and the emergence of the modern environmental movement. In a lucidly historicized consideration of the meaning of ecopoetry as a critical designation, Laura-Gray Street and Ann Fisher-Wirth (2013) propose it not as differentiated from nature poetry but as including this along with “environmental poetry” and “ecological poetry.” Within this typology, nature poetry is described as any taking its subject and inspiration from nature whereas environmental poetry, which emerges from nature poetry, is “propelled by and directly engaged with active and politicized environmentalism.” Finally, ecological poetry “is the most willing to engage with, even play with, postmodern and poststructuralist theories The poet Forest Gander argues that it thematically and formally investigates ‘the relationship between nature and culture, language and perception.’” (xxix)

In another recent proposal, Scott Knickerbocker (2012) introduces the term “sensuous poesis” as a means of distinguishing ecopoetry from the mimetic assumptions behind much of nature writing. Ecopoetry, in this sense, is a response to nonhuman nature in which, rather than attempting “to erase the artifice of their own poems (to make them seem more natural and supposedly, then, closer to nature), the poets ... unapologetically embrace artifice—not for its own sake, but as a way to relate meaningfully to the natural world” (2).

⁷ As examined in her 1982 book, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.

⁸ Citations of Barros’ poems are drawn from his *Poesia completa*, published by Leya in 2010, with the exception of excerpts from the three volumes of his *Memórias inventadas*, which were not included in the Leya anthology.

⁹ For more on this notion the merging of natural and human history in the allegorical ruin, see Buck-Morss's study, in particular, the section titled: "Natural History: Fossil." This collapse or disappearance of history into nature is among the central objects of critique of baroque allegory, which, for Benjamin, was its denial to address the problem of human agency in the world, relegating the question of evil to the realm of divinity and spirituality. Benjamin called for a dialectical understanding of human and natural history: "No historical category without natural substance; no natural substance without its historical filter." (qtd. in Buck-Morss 59)

¹⁰ See Castelo Branco for a comparatively minded collection of readings of Barros and Caetano/Pessoa.

¹¹ From, respectively, "A rã" and "Achadouros," included in the first volume (2003) of his *Memórias inventadas*, and "Sobre importâncias," part of the second volume (2006).

¹² From the eleventh poem of the second part of *Livro sobre nada* (1996) and the eighth poem of the series, "Biografia do orvalho," in *Retrato do artista quando coisa* (1998).

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