



# Latin American Literary Review

VOLUME 51 / NUMBER 102 SPRING 2024

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## The Mesh and the Abyss: Juan L. Ortiz's Ecopoetics

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**ABSTRACT:** At some point early in his life, the Argentine poet, Juan L. Ortiz (1896-1978), chose staying to live in his native Entre Ríos province over moving to Buenos Aires, the cultural center of his country. Though he was encouraged by some friends of his to make the move so that his work would be disseminated and appreciated by sophisticated readers from the big city, the poet remained in the small town of Gualeguay and later moved to the provincial capital, Paraná. He highly valued his home landscapes, and his poetry reflects his relationship with the natural world. One Ortiz poem in particular, "Deja las letras..." from *De las raíces y del Cielo* (1958), refers to the proverbial rural/urban dualism in a way that upends the tendency to hierarchize the city over the country and the human over the nonhuman. This article analyzes "Deja las letras..." as an ecopoetic invitation to recognize the inherent interrelationships among humans and nonhumans. Part of this recognition requires a reconceptualization of "nature" as heterogenous and made up of nonlinear interconnections and the spaces in between, in a "mesh," using environmental humanist Timothy Morton's terminology. Recognizing and incorporating ourselves in this mesh, the poem suggests, can allow humans to keep our humanity while, at the same time, we learn empathy for nonhumans.

**KEYWORDS:** Juan L. Ortiz, Ecopoetry, Argentine Poetry, Mesh of Interrelations, Ecopoiesis, City, Country

**RESUMEN:** En algún momento temprano de su vida, el poeta argentino Juan L. Ortiz (1896-1978) prefirió quedarse a vivir en su provincia natal de Entre Ríos en lugar de mudarse a Buenos Aires, el centro cultural de su país. Aunque algunos amigos lo quisieron convencer trasladarse para que su obra fuera difundida y apreciada por lectores sofisticados de la gran capital, el poeta permaneció en el pueblo entrerriano de Gualeguay y luego se mudó a la capital provincial, Paraná. Valoraba mucho los paisajes de su hogar natal y su obra poética refleja una importante relación con el mundo natural. Uno de sus poemas en particular, "Deja las letras..." de *De las raíces y del Cielo* (1958), se refiere al dualismo proverbial entre lo rural y lo urbano de una manera que trastoca la tendencia a jerarquizar la ciudad sobre el campo y lo humano sobre lo no humano. Este artículo analiza "Deja las letras..." como una invitación ecopoética a reconocer las interrelaciones inherentes entre humanos y no humanos. Parte de este reconocimiento requiere una reconceptualización de la "naturaleza" como heterogénea y compuesta de interconexiones no lineales y espacios intermedios, en una "mesh" ("red"), usando la terminología del humanista ambiental Timothy Morton. Reconocernos e incorporarnos a esta red, como sugiere el poema, puede permitir a los humanos mantener nuestra humanidad y, al mismo tiempo, aprender a empatizar con los no humanos.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Juan L. Ortiz, ecopoésia, poesía argentina, red de interrelaciones, ecopoiesis, ciudad, campo

众鸟高飞尽，  
孤云独去闲。  
相看两不厌，  
只有敬亭山。

- 李白 《独坐敬亭山》<sup>1</sup>

*La vida herida grita y es inútil nuestro intento de eludir el grito  
en el adorable y reposante refugio de nuestra soledad o de nuestra  
[comuni3n con las criaturas secretas del mundo.]*

- Juan L. Ortiz, "SÍ, el nocturno en pleno día"

## Introduction

In the lowest of three rows, halfway down an out-of-the-way and poorly lit corridor, situated in the center of Cementerio Municipal in Gualaguay, Argentina, one can find a simple plaque identifying the niche that the poet, Juan L. Ortiz's remains share with those of his wife, Gerarda. Though it may seem strange that, in a country that famously venerates its notable dead, one of Argentina's beloved poets should find his final rest in virtual anonymity, Ortiz's life and work suggest that he would be quite content about his humble sepulcher. At the very least, he would be happy to know that he had returned home to Gualaguay. The town, a place Ortiz called home for half of his life, sits in southern Entre Ríos alongside the northwest bank of the Gualaguay river, which winds its way south through nearly the entire length of this eastern Argentine province. Equidistant between the cities of Paraná and Buenos Aires, Gualaguay is one of the few towns that lie on the northern edge of the Paraná River's deltaic plain. In a significant way, the city's rural isolation became a foundation for Ortiz's poetic vision. Specifically, his relationship with its natural spaces and places inspired him to write verses, even after he moved to more urban Paraná, where he lived until his death at 82 years old.

Ortiz's decision to live a rather remote life away from the literary center of the country has made it difficult for scholars to place him in the context of twentieth-century Argentine literature. Indeed, the question of where to place Ortiz and his work within the Argentine canon is rooted in a margin vs. center debate.<sup>2</sup> Since he mostly self-published his poetry, therefore limiting his work's circulation among readers, critics find themselves recontextualizing his poetry from the perspective of its influence on other poets. The motivation for recontextualization comes from the contrast of the exceptionality of his work with its exposure or lack thereof within the mass-publishing market—now as well as during his life—in Argen-

tina. During his lifetime he was mostly at the margins, both literally and literarily. The durable quality of his voice, however, has inspired poets and critics alike to praise him as one of Argentina's all-time best poets. Much of this acclaim focuses on his vision of the natural world as a community of interrelations.<sup>3</sup>

By the titles of his poetry books, it comes as little surprise to anyone that Ortiz's close relation to nature directly correlates to his abiding poetic interests. Out of his 13 books, only two, *El ángel inclinado* (1937) and *La mano infinita* (1951), lack titles alluding to the natural world.<sup>4</sup> His poetry's interest in fauna and flora does not automatically make him an example of an ecological thinker in and of itself, of course, nor does a love of native landscape radically differentiate him from the Argentine poetic mainstream. In fact, as the Argentine scholar José Isaacson makes clear in his introduction to the anthology *Geografía lírica: Cuatro siglos de poesía XVII-XVIII-XIX-XX*, there are very few of Argentina's natural features that Argentine poets have not praised (13). Even within the larger context of Latin America's literary traditions and trajectories, poetic ruminations about the landscape and the natural world are staples. From pre-contact Mesoamerican poetry to neoclassic and romantic sublime venerations of place, to *Gauchesca's* nativism and *Modernismo's mundonovismo*, to the impressive voices and visions of such contemporary Latin American authors as Pablo Neruda, Gabriela Mistral, Octavio Paz, Julia de Burgos, and Ernesto Cardenal, to name only a few, the region's poetry has closely contemplated how humans live in the natural world. Indeed, ecocritics like Nial Binns have identified the work of several of these poets as deeply ecological. Notwithstanding Ortiz's connections to a national or regional poetic tradition or his choice of nonhumans as poetic subject matter, his poetry's ecopoetic quality goes beyond any picturesque naturalism or "blood and soil" geopolitics.<sup>5</sup> More specifically, the strong ecopoetic characterization of his poetry manifests itself in representing the complex and beautiful interrelationships among humans and nonhumans. His poetry surpasses a superficial treatment or representation of elements in the natural world by seeking to express the experience of living as *part* of a landscape. Jorge Perednik argues something similar when he bristles at the idea that Ortiz is a "poeta paisajista" because it implies that the poet writes about nature as an abstraction or as a static backdrop. He points out that Ortiz views landscapes as interrelational places defined by a "complicado intercambio entre elementos" in the natural world (61-2). This integrated approach makes Ortiz's poetry a multi-dimensional representation. The poet's focus on these human-nonhuman interrelationships goes toward making his *poiesis* an *ecopoiesis*.

As a term, *ecopoiesis* has mostly been used by scientists when referring to a form of terraforming, which use was coined by environmental scientist Richard H. Haynes and planetary scientist Christopher P. McKay in their 1992 paper on the possibility of implanting life on Mars.<sup>6</sup> In literary criticism, the celebrated British ecocritic Jonathan Bate bases his use of *ecopoiesis*<sup>7</sup> on the Heideggerian concept of dwelling and its role in ecopoetics. That is, the

*poiesis* that qualifies poetry as ecopoetry is that which *presents* the experience of human beings in relation with their surroundings and fellow beings, as opposed to describing or *representing* it (42). It is behind what he sees in the English Romantic poetry tradition as that which "may effect an imaginative reunification of mind and nature" as we commune with the natural world through poetry (245). Similarly, in this current study, by *ecopoiesis* I mean the "making" or "creation"—*poiesis*—of a "home"—as a fabric of reciprocal interrelations. *Ecopoiesis* in this sense becomes the impetus behind any poetic work that attempts to understand, uncover, and underline the interconnectedness among humans and non-humans. Ortiz's *ecopoiesis*, then, makes his poetics, ecopoetics. In his poem "Deja las letras..." from *De las raíces y del Cielo* (1958), Ortiz's ecopoetics deconstructs the archetypal dichotomous spaces and epistemologies represented by the dualisms of city/country and letters/experience without falling into pastoral escapism, to confront human resistance to interconnect with nonhumans. Guiding the interlocutor, and therefore the reader, through these places and ways of knowing, the poem's speaker represents this possible interconnectedness as a dynamic fabric of actors and interrelations that, when appreciated, welcomed, and perpetuated by humans can erase false binary perspectives and establish ecological empathy, effectively shifting anthropocentrism toward ecocentrism.

### The Mesh of Interobjectivity

Ortiz most often creates imagery that immediately brings the reader out of doors. His poetic vision moves around and above the landscape in his poems and by doing so he distinguishes his system of revealing interconnections among humans and nonhumans from a perspective that has definite, known, or fixed limitations. Ecopoetically, Ortiz utilizes the concepts of *red*, *trama*, *laberinto*, *tejido*, and other weaving-like imagery when he presents physical and metaphysical interrelationships as open-ended and lacking a center, as it were. This no-limits, multidirectional distinction serves to underline the connections among all the actors of the world, both human and nonhuman, both immediate and remote, and to highlight their participation, even in their quality as objects. Robert Forns-Broggi refers to this community of actors in Ortiz's poetry as the "tejido colectivo" made up of a "fusión del sujeto del enunciado [...] con el de la enunciación" (36). It is akin to the phenomenological principle known as "intersubjectivity" theorized by the philosopher Edmund Husserl, modified by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and interpreted by early ecophilosopher David Abram. Intersubjectivity, a sort of consensus objectivity where subjectivities overlap each other and create what we think of as objectivity where they coincide, suggests the equal participation of all actors of a place (Abram 38-39, 44-45). Better yet, Ortiz's web represents something more like what ecocritic Timothy Morton in *Ecology without Nature* prefers to call "interobjectivity" because in a woven structure of associations each subject is better thought of as an object (129). Here intersubjectiv-

ity claims to erase the subject/object binary yet it still privileges the subject, whereas interobjectivity considers so-called subjects as nodes in a field of interrelationships, making them objects. In a later text Morton describes interobjectivity as "the way in which nothing is ever experienced directly, but only as mediated through other entities in some shared sensual place" (*Hyperobjects* 86). This sensual space is the woven interobjective space in Ortiz's ecopoetry.

One could understand the concept of equal and reciprocal relationships made through the interconnections among the actors of a place as paradoxical because any representation of such a woven structure would have to be produced or perceived by one of its actors or nodes. The concept would negate itself on account of the single perspective giving it a center. Ortiz shows that he understands this paradox by juxtaposing concepts of union and connectivity with those of infinity and the unknown in his poetry. He uses such terms as "abismo," "misterio," "más allá," and "eternidad" to constantly question any claim on an authoritative representative power. He acknowledges the limit of his *poiesis* by conceding subjective authority to the "other." By recognizing the impossibility to completely erase the space between humans and nonhumans—the various "nodes" in the fabric—Ortiz's ecopoetry maintains a poetic vibrancy that seeks to interconnect the actors of the world without expecting a holistic union, as many who use the terms "Nature" (with an uppercase "N", suggesting homogeneity), ecology, and, particularly, ecosystem may imply. For several critics like Morton this dynamism is the definition of an ecologic aesthetic because it produces something less than an enclosed system and more of what he calls a "mesh" (*The Ecological Thought* 28). In *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Morton makes a direct connection between the *mesh* and *interobjectivity*:

A mesh consists of relationships between crisscrossing strands of metal and gaps between the strands. Meshes are potent metaphors for the strange interconnectedness of things, an interconnectedness that does not allow for perfect, lossless transmission of information, but is instead full of gaps and absences. (83)

Ortiz includes the space, literal and figurative, between objects as part of the mesh that he weaves with his poetry. This mesh, then, does not exactly equal the intersubjective "tejido communal" Forns-Broggi sees in Ortiz's poetry (36). Because of its combination of thread and space or "gaps," as Morton points out, Ortiz's work is mesh-like by both making and recognizing connections among objects, creating threads, and revealing gaps or *abismos*. These gaps, however, do not serve to justify making distinctions between humans and nonhumans, nor would such distinctions be relevant in the mesh.

If one reads Ortiz to analyze his poetry for its "mesh" aspects while paying particular attention to its incorporating "abismo" motifs, one can confirm that if he makes a case for cosmic union

among all things it is in the sense of an ecological heterogeneity rather than unified homogeneity. Ortiz's concept of an ecological mesh goes beyond even the tangible world. In the poet's words, as he expresses in one interview, nature, or *paisaje* in this case, is multidimensional, which includes the unknowable:

(N)o veo en el paisaje [...] solamente paisaje. Veo, o lo trato de ver, o lo siento así, todas las dimensiones de lo que trasciende o de lo que diríamos así, lo abisma. Es decir, la vida secreta por un lado y la vida no solo con las criaturas que lo habitan o lo componen sino con las otras cosas con lo que está relacionado no solamente en el sentido de las sensaciones, diríamos. ("La poesía" 49)

By understanding this mesh-like conception of the natural world full of "dimensiones" and "vida secreta" even beyond "las sensaciones" the reader can see how Ortiz's poetry upends the homogeneous concept of "Nature." Hence, his poetry delves into the very question of "Nature" as an idea. As several philosophers and scholars such as Morton, Bruno Latour, Kate Soper, and Dana Phillips have explained, "Nature" is a chronically misconceived and misinterpreted term.<sup>8</sup> Soper unpacks contemporary conceptualizations of "Nature" and identifies three areas marking anthropocentric ideas about the natural world: metaphysics, physics, and aesthetics. Following her analysis one can see how Ortiz challenges the concept of "Nature" that isolates all that "is opposed to the "human" or "cultural," all that corresponds to the "structures, processes and causal powers that are constantly operative within the physical world," and all the aesthetically appreciable and observable natural world of "immediate experience" (Soper 155-56). Latour for his part indicates that as far as terms go, whereas "Nature" suggests a natural world that is homogeneous and monolithic, "natures" suggests a heterogenous, multifaceted, and plural natural world (*Politics* 29). Similarly, Ortiz explains in another interview how he approaches "cosas naturales" and not "la naturaleza" through his poetry:

Pero no hablo de la naturaleza tomada en grande, sino de una hojita o de una brizna. Siento a través de la brizna toda la vida que está bullendo alrededor de ella. El tema serían las cosas naturales y no la naturaleza. [...] Cualquier planta me sugiere la vida de relación que mantiene con su alrededor. Por ejemplo, la relación que hay entre la circulación de la savia y el canto de las aves o la hoja que se mueve al ritmo del canto musical del pájaro. Esto es por un lado comprobación y por otro —o como lo mismo— imaginación. Y la poesía sería frente a todo esto la voz del nivel humano entretejida a todas estas relaciones. ("Las arrugas" 130-31)

Through his contemplation the poet privileges interrelations over individual aspect of what he observes in the natural world. And

while Ortiz does not substantiate a fixed definition of "Nature," neither does he shy away from seeking to understand the natural world through poetic inquiry as a human to nonhuman interrelationship. The well-known Argentinian writer Juan José Saer, one of Ortiz's close friends, refers to this particular relationship that Ortiz's poetry has with the *paisaje* as one that incites the human to nonhuman interconnection: "Para la poesía de Juan el paisaje es enigma y belleza, pretexto para preguntas y no para exclamaciones, fragmento del cosmos por el que la palabra avanza sutil y delicada, adivinando en cada rastro o vestigio, aun en los más diminutos, la gracia misteriosa de la materia" (13).

The ambiguous or mysterious character of the interconnections in the natural world as Ortiz sees it draws out the philosophically curious impulse of his poetry.

Approaching the world this way often makes his poetry come off as hermetical and complex—though he has expressed that he hoped it would not (Gola, *Las vueltas*, 15). By extension, one could even characterize his poetry as mystical, yet Ortiz's *ecopoiesis* often grounds itself by recognizing the physical and social inequalities that occur alongside the mystical and spiritual in the world around the poet. He reveals the power disparities among humans, and between the human and the nonhuman worlds as means to our ecological alienation, as Forns-Broggi and others have underlined.<sup>9</sup> By juxtaposing the beauty of place and the ravages of social circumstance, Ortiz underscores the irony of modern-day abject poverty that is embedded in, and thereby cruelly enhanced by, the aesthetically pleasing and ontologically rich natural world. And though many of Ortiz's poems demonstrate his particularly sensitive ecologic thought, his poem "Deja las letras..." is a clear example of how his poetry tries to erase any sense of a dichotomy between "civilization" and everything else, thereby opening up interrelational aspects among those in the two artificially separated sides of the human and the nonhuman (*Obra* 543). Part of forming interrelationships with nonhumans, as we will discuss regarding this poem, involves finding a way to get beyond any fabricated boundary of humanness by accepting a participatory role within a larger framework.

### A Place in the Mesh

"Deja las letras..." together with 11 other poems have the distinction of forming *De las raíces y del cielo*, Ortiz's last stand-alone poetry book before his complete works, including three new collections, *En el aura del sauce* was published in 1970.<sup>10</sup> Until *En el aura* came out, Ortiz edited his own books and circulated the relatively few copies he published among a small number of readers, including his friends (Freidemberg 83). Perhaps it comes as no surprise, then, that "Deja las letras..." the longest poem in the book, reads like the continuation of an intimate conversation, a common motif of Ortiz, as Hugo Gola observed ("El reino" 106-07). With this intimacy the poem helps the reader see the interconnections among



human and nonhuman actors and demonstrates Ortiz's own yearning to present and interconnect with his surroundings by letting the nonhuman actors "speak" for themselves through a poetry that integrates the speaker, the interlocutor, the reader, and the subject into a community of perspectives. Characteristic of many of Ortiz's poems, this poem's speaker is identified through adjectives as male and as the familiar tone in the title and in the second line of the poem confirms, the poetic voice intimately addresses someone identified solely as "amigo." Though this friend is identified as male as well, the fact that the speaker uses the second person to speak to this friend makes for a reading where the reader can sympathize with this interlocutor, regardless of gender identity. The reader may effectively, though not necessarily, become the listener via the reading. Ortiz allows the reader to consider the speaker's ideas more personally by providing this vicarious reading, making his invitations less hypothetical and more real. And the fact that the speaker addresses the listener in such intimate terms as "amigo," a well-worn trope in Ortiz's *oeuvre*, colors the poem's invitations in fraternal rather than paternal shades.

Inviting his friend to leave both "las letras" and "la ciudad" behind, the speaker lovingly invites him to venture into the hinterlands of both in order to change his anthropocentric perspective. Furthermore, we read in the first stanza that the speaker articulates his place in relationship to his surroundings as a desire to be a part of them:

Deja las letras y deja la ciudad...  
 Vamos a buscar, amigo, a la virgen del aire...  
 Yo sé que nos espera tras de aquellas colinas  
 en la azucena del azul...  
 Yo quiero ser, amigo,  
 uno, el más mínimo, de sus sentimientos de cristal...  
 o mejor, uno, el más ligero, de sus latidos de perfume...  
 (lines 1-7)

What immediately stands out from the form of these opening lines is Ortiz's generous use of ellipses. Of the one hundred and thirty-one lines in this poem, thirty-nine or slightly less than a third of them end with an ellipsis. Regarding the use of the ellipsis, "Deja las letras..." is quite representative of many of Ortiz's poems, especially those he published after 1950. Fellow Argentine poet and critic D.G. Helder sees Ortiz's use of punctuation marks as part of his poetry's musicality. Similar to the ebb and flow effect that the wandering length and alignment of Ortiz's post-1970 lines of poetry have on their reading, the ellipses, comments Helder, "indican que la intensidad disminuye o aumenta de a poco, al principio de un poema como un crescendo a partir de lo inaudible, al final como un disminuyendo" (129). In the lines quoted above, the ellipses also serve to separate four versions of the speaker's voice. Before the first ellipsis, the speaker directly yet informally addresses the listener; before the second ellipsis he speaks inclusively of himself and the

listener; before the third ellipsis the speaker begins by separating himself from the previous inclusion and then reenters it: "Yo sé que nos espera..."; before the fourth and final ellipsis of the stanza, the speaker once again separates himself from the listener and then directs their attention to a third party: the distant "colinas." He is unfolding the mesh of perspectives always present as part of non-human and human interactions. By changing the grammatical subject and object of his voice in such a way, and by syncopating the enjambment between the verses with the ellipses and those without, the speaker introduces the *vaivén* sensation to the reader. In this way the poem's form and style invites the listener and the reader to participate in the mesh, which sets up an embodied reading of the poem's geographic and metaphoric movement—a metaphorical movement that goes toward a mystical union with the essence of the immediate natural world.

Though the symbolist images from lines six and seven of wanting to be a "sentimiento" or a "latido de perfume" for the "virgen del aire" from line two conjure up visions of transcendence, the speaker rounds off the opening stanza by indicating his very practical reasons for wanting to leave the city behind for the "colinas": "No estás tú también / un poco sucio de letras y un poco sucio de ciudad?" (8-9). Though he repeats the connection between "letras" and "ciudad," which connection Angel Rama would make over a decade later in his *La ciudad letrada*, from the poem's title and beginning line it is not yet immediately clear what the speaker means by "letras." Nevertheless, to suggest that they can be left behind like the city implies that they, like the city, are in some way built or created. Indeed, the first verse of the poem sets up the *letras = ciudad* conceptual framework for the reader. It would seem here that leaving the city and "las letras" behind is a unified process of physical, mental, emotional, and even intellectual cleansing.

Because *las letras* take precedence in the poem by way of the title and by way of coming first in the two sides of the *letras = ciudad* parallel, we can safely assume that leaving them behind constitutes the first step in this cleansing. Interpreting *letras* as "the humanities" we see that the speaker suggests that we must cleanse ourselves of navel gazing and "look around" at the world instead. To leave behind our self-absorption is also to leave behind manifestations of such self-absorption. Of course, *letras* may refer to several things. However, if leaving them behind parallels leaving the city, then the *letras* that Ortiz's speaker implores his listener to cleanse himself of are the artifices of language that repress communication, as a city with its anthropocentric design can repress the natural world. Language can be imposing and artificial in the way we organize it, even in a linguistically groundbreaking genre such as poetry. Referring to Ortiz's *oeuvre* and to "Deja las letras..." specifically, Alfredo Veiravé, a devotee of Ortiz and his work, makes a similar deduction:

Las dificultades que ofrece su poesía a medida que va creciendo en el tiempo, radica en el acuerdo que el poeta sustenta tácitamente al organizar el poema entre lo

comunicado y las palabras de esa comunicación. Poesía se transforma a veces en una inabarcable explicitación de sus temas y al mismo tiempo, poesía que quiere trasvasar estados de alma, cuya persecución o logros se han ido alejando de las cosas concretas que se veían con nitidez en sus primeros libros. Esta depuración de los temas anteriores, esta desnudez, es un anhelo en quien ha atravesado una experiencia de identificación o identidad total con el mundo de las representaciones. (*La experiencia* 177)

Ortiz's poetry has evolved from describing a completely concrete world to *presenting* "una experiencia de identificación" with the world of representation. In other words, his poetry has gone from seeing the world as full of objects to seeing the world as full of interrelationships, as we read earlier in his quote about "las cosas naturales" ("La poesía" 45). A "representación," as Veiravé puts it, can be read here as an interrelationship in the sense of what transpires between "lo comunicado y las palabras de esa comunicación." He underscores the paradox within which Ortiz is working as a poet: Ortiz wants to use language to get beyond language. In much of Ortiz's poetry, language becomes the very thing that separates humans from nonhumans, but it also becomes a way of reconnection. This paradox supplies the dynamic movement of his ecopoetics: he moves in and out of language, which results in a "lightness" that critics such as D. G. Helder see as the "motivo formal que domina" his poetry (127). This tendency recalls Ortiz's affinity for Eastern sensibilities, as reflected in the poetry of Li Bai or Ortiz's own book of poetry dedicated to China, *El junco y la corriente* (1970). Ortiz employs leitmotifs of images of light dancing in the air and other iterations of the ethereality of breathing, breath, and floating to support this dynamic levity. This is the "perfume" and the "aire" that we have already highlighted from lines six and seven of "Deja las letras..." His lightness calls attention to that which one cannot see, just as that which one cannot say, as an integral part of his ecological thought. Herein we find how he shows that poetry offers a doorway to humans to reintegrate, if only metaphysically, into a nonhuman world via the mesh.

Regarding the physical portion of this cleansing, the speaker of "Deja las letras..." implores the listener to escape from the city: "Sigue, sigue, por entre la bencina, sobre la lisa pesadilla / de las calles extremas, hacia la gracia de las huellas..." (lines 10-11). Gasoline or "bencina" here works as a metonym for both automobiles and pollution, essentially unifying modernity, and its direct effects on the health of those who live in the city. City life is certainly nightmarish where it meets the polluted chaos of the streets. Returning to speak of *nosotros* while juxtaposing the image of the polluted streets, the speaker hurries the listener to join him and enter the "caminos de rocío, / invisibles," to finally leave the city (13). Here these opening stanzas of the poem appear to be promoting what Terry Gifford calls the "discourse of retreat" found in pastoral es-

capism, which would seem to emphasize the separation between "Nature" and "Society" (46). As the poem progresses, nevertheless, the speaker takes the listener through the complex network of interrelations among the various actors of his immediate natural world that makes up the mesh. This complexity would never exist in the idealized "Nature" of original pastoral poetry (Gifford 15). "Deja las letras..." does, however, propose the possibility for physical and spiritual restitution by leaving the city life behind. The renewal depicted here is not egocentric. It stems from making interconnections with the human and nonhuman actors of place. If the listener would only join in it and become, as it were, a participating actor of the place being poeticized, they would see how the natural world comprises both spiritual and sensuous connections among its actors. Again, the speaker invites the listener to look around, effectively creating a multidimensional landscape:

Y ahora, ahora, torna la vista alrededor...  
Saluda como un aura a estas humildes gracias de miel,  
capaces, sin embargo, de atraer hacia sí  
a las abejas todas del día  
y de volver de margaritas a la melancolía más flotante...  
(lines 28-32)

"Saluda" initiates the listener into an interactive landscape. He is to look at and to speak to the actors of this place. Later in the poem, the speaker asks his "amigo" to listen, to feel, to sit, to run, to comprehend, to lose, to find, and to embrace different actors that make up the immediate surroundings of the city. As the example here shows, not only does the speaker interact and ask his listener to interact with the actors of this place, but he also indicates how the other actors interact—how the bees interact with the flowers, for example.

Toward the end of "Deja las letras..." after weaving the multiple actors of place together—i.e., the bees and flowers, the trees and birds, the stones and sky, the butterflies and seeds, the speaker, the reader, and the listener—Ortiz turns the poetic voice back to "la ciudad" and to "las letras" to consider a way to return to them without returning to their "filth." First, the speaker recognizes human fears of the world outside of the city by underscoring with quotes how we often put our perception of the unknown in the natural world in terms of "horror" and "amenaza" (line 94). He couples this observation with that of how we deify the "innombrable" in our natural surroundings, making "nuestras debilidades [...] dioses" (lines 98, 93). Both conceptualizations reflect relationships among humans and nonhumans that are obstructed by fear and that obscure the mesh of interrelations. Second, the speaker suggests that we are creatures of the city and of the country, thus our fears, or our "agonía" is divided between the two "worlds":

Mas es en nosotros, mi amigo, que la agonía es dividida,  
terriblemente dividida, y expedida a la ventura...

Y aquella música blanca con unos silencios de  
[jacarandaes?  
Allí y aquí, a la vez, la condena "de la rueda",  
desde las madres del río y desde las madres de las  
[zanjas... (lines 100-04)

Reminding the reader of their perspective, Ortiz divides this stanza by having the poetic voice propose a question that guides the reader's gaze to the city - the "música blanca" here referring to the description of the city as seen from afar in lines 26 and 27. Beyond any hope a pastoral imagination might offer, whether we are rural or urban-born we share fears that will not allow us to let go of our anthropocentrism, condemning us to an inward torture like that of the medieval wheel. "We" need to remove ourselves from a place of being condemned by our supposed rational exceptionality in order to regain and retain our threaded, integral part of the infinite net:

Hay que perder a veces "la ciudad" y hay que perder a  
[veces "las letras"  
para reencontrarlas sobre el vértigo, más puras  
en las relaciones de los orígenes...  
O más ligeras, si prefieres, como en ese domingo  
y en esa fantasía que serán...  
Hay que perder los vestidos y hay que perder la misma  
[identidad  
para que el poema, deseablemente anónimo,  
siga a la florecilla que no firma, no, su perfección  
a la armonía que la excede... (lines 107-115)

Deja las letras..." links the "filth" of *las letras* to the fact that the poet is the one that has been "dressing" the poem. Ortiz's speaker accepts partial responsibility for the filth and in doing so suggests a path to ameliorate the problem by yielding his authorial monopoly, which ironically makes his role more participatory in poetic creation. By linking poetry ontologically to the natural world, "Deja las letras..." reveals its poetic center to be an exploration into the interrelationships among humans and nonhumans. Hence, the poem links the physical and metaphysical worlds because poetry is a being of its own among other beings.

To relink ourselves with these two sides of our ontology and through poetry, the speaker of "Deja las letras..." suggests that the purification process of leaving and then returning to *la ciudad* and *las letras* is necessary for humans if they wish to take a participatory role interconnecting in the mesh. This return reflects something akin to what Terry Gifford points out as the "essential paradox of the pastoral: that a retreat to a place apparently without the anxieties of the town, or the court, or the present, actually delivers insights into the culture from which it originates," (82). However, it is not that we humans must *lose* our humanness or civilization; rather, we must reassociate ourselves into the net of interrelations that makes

up the natural world. We need to *use* our humanity, including our language, to benefit all life. Throughout the poem beginning with its title, "las letras" being left behind in order to be found again certainly includes poetry. Regarding poetry, the speaker admits that only after one interconnects within the mesh can the poem be realized fully. It can become "deseablemente anónimo" because the poet and the poeticizing are part, and not at the center, of the ontological landscape and ecosystem or mesh. The poet's resolve to give up ownership of the poem appears clearer in the last 15 lines of "Deja las letras..." through his allusion to the Taoist legend of the "Taming of the Harp."

Used by Okakura Kakuzo in his most famous work, *The Book of Tea*, as a parable to explain the mystery of art appreciation, "Taming of the Harp" tells of a mighty Kiri tree from the Ravine of Lungmen, China, that a wizard makes into a harp for the Emperor of China. The harp is "wondrous," but each musician who attempts to play its music fails. It is only when "Peiwoh, the prince of the harpists" arrives and attempts to play it that the harp releases its music, allowing Peiwoh to sing the most vivid and entrancing songs that reflect profound secrets of the rivers, insects, grass, flowers, and other actors of the natural world. Revealing his secret, Peiwoh tells the curious emperor that he was successful because he "left the harp to choose its theme, and knew not truly whether the harp had been Peiwoh or Peiwoh were the harp" (75-77). Ortiz's speaker in "Deja las letras..." refers to this positive collapse of subject and object in the creation of art directly after he suggests that the poem must follow and not lead the ideas that emerge from it. Linked grammatically to the "hay que perder la misma identidad" phrase in an earlier line, the allusion reads:

[...] para ser el arpa de Lungmen  
eligiendo ella sola los temas de su música,  
lejos de los tañedores que se cantan a sí mismos  
o que no oyen con los suyos a los recuerdos de las ramas  
ni lo que dice el viento...  
ni menos ven lo que el viento, por ahí, pone de pie...  
Y aquí, además, las rimas entre los escalofríos de las  
[briznas,  
con los hilos temblando, siempre, más allá de nuestra  
[luz... (lines 116-23)

The key to Ortiz's allusion here is the role of the harp in producing the music. Though it may bring to mind the Aeolian harp that "nature" plays because the wind stands in for the musician, the harp from this legend has a direct relation to the human world. Being made from a mighty tree that connected the earth to the sky, the harp is imbued with the same connection. For the speaker in "Deja las letras..." the harp symbolizes the poetic potential of human-nonhuman communication. It produces *for* Peiwoh, the harpist. Peiwoh allows the harp to choose the themes and the harpist sings accordingly. In essence, Ortiz puts the poem in the place of the harp.



The poem here has a direct connection to the natural world and, if allowed, will guide the poet to sing. Roxana Páez, in her analysis of the same allusion in the poem, calls the deference of the poet for the poem evidence of a paradoxical "lirismo despersonalizado". The speaker's suggestion for anonymity, and its links to Lungmen's harp becomes a "progresiva dilución de la nominatividad" that "implica el despojamiento calificativo del nombre y una especie de desintegración de lo nombrado en las posibilidades de explayar los límites el signo (194-95). Letting the harp (poem) sing allows for multiple nodes of meaning in the mesh. The ellipses in lines 120, 121, and 123 function to break up the rhythm of the poem and to suggest that there are things that cannot be expressed through language. What the wind says is left out and what the wind brings to our attention is missing: what the "hilos temblando" produce lies just beyond "nuestra luz..." For Ortiz, this pause between words and between lines of verse is where poetry, or in other words, "la poesía anterior a su expresión," abides ("La poesía que circula" 17), like the spaces in the mesh.

Ortiz shows that another way for humans to incorporate ourselves into the natural-world-as-mesh is through a lacework woven with poetic, if not mystic, threads made possible by creative and destructive movements. Again, the speaker in "Deja las letras..." suggests that humans leave *la ciudad* and *las letras* to have the opportunity return to them with a renewed perspective. Disconnecting with "filthy" conditions of modernity requires a destructive movement. Reincorporating oneself into modernity with a renewed perspective requires a creative movement. This action echoes what Morton calls "critical choice." That is, even though we may see ourselves as apart from the so-called fabric of nature, we must choose to permit ourselves to "enter" the net of interrelations and to renounce the dominance of our anthropocentrism (*Ecology* 183). For Ortiz, it is important that we recognize our place in the mesh as participatory, and not organizational, nor completely determinative. Humans have a role to play, though not the role we heretofore have been playing.

One way that humanity's role revaluation manifests itself in Ortiz's work is in his particular way of poeticizing doubt as a virtue of openness. As a poet he does not present himself as the traditional all-wise bard who has broken "Nature's" code - just as "Deja las letras..." concludes—or as someone who believes in the Bacon's notion of the human quest to battle and overcome "Nature" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1-6). This quest, as described from the very beginning pages of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's influential book, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, has been promoted by Enlightenment thinkers like Francis Bacon. For Bacon, they explain:

The "happy match" between human understanding and the nature of things that he envisaged is a patriarchal one: the mind conquering superstition, is to rule over disenchanting nature. Knowledge, which is power, knows no limits, either in its enslavement of creation or in its

deference to worldly masters. [...] What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings. Nothing else counts. (2)

In this sense of knowledge, Ortiz freely submits to not knowing the answers to the mysteries of the natural world. These answers are not as important to him as the questions themselves. Ortiz's speakers' questions reflect both curiosity and doubt. An example of Ortiz's poetic doubting finds expression in his innovative use of question marks in Spanish. Turning an expected declaration into an apparent doubt by excluding the inverted question mark at the beginning of an interrogative phrase, he can surprise the reader: "El río, / y esas lilas que en él quedan... / quedan... / No se morirán esas lilas, no?" ("El río," *La orilla que se abisma*, lines 1-4). Although critics like Helder correctly sustain that these deliberate omissions form a part of Ortiz's poetry's melodic intonations or lack thereof (130), the doubts that Ortiz's speakers express are not purely rhythmic in nature. They also function as a way to leave open the images created in the poems, giving the reader the sense that they stand "at the edge of a figure (in the sense of a completed perception)" as the British critic William Rowe indicates in his book on contemporary Latin American poetry (225-26). That is, the images that Ortiz creates are open because they lack complete definition and they come at the expense of the speaker's authority. Furthermore, Ortiz's deliberate use of several other punctuation marks affects the textual spaces within his poems, while it reinforces the indeterminacy of doubt. As we saw at the beginning of "Deja las letras...", his use of ellipsis offers a good example of this manipulation of textual space because it provides a hesitating silence, marking the rhythm of the necessary space between the poetic voice and others in the mesh as he creates an "incomplete horizon of perception" (Rowe 226).<sup>11</sup> Openness as incompleteness in poetry, then, provides a forum for indeterminacy or mystery for the ineffable between the speaker and the other actors of a place and their participation.

Referring to the multiple subjectivities in Ortiz's poems, Veiravé points out Ortiz's singular use of animism regarding his abiding interest in the natural world in his article, "La obra total de Juan L. Ortiz":

Lo que habíamos llamado "animización" del paisaje, se advierte ahora, no es sino la inclusión en un mundo mayor o central de la actividad creadora de *todos* los seres que se "expresan" para poner en evidencia su existencia ignorando el concepto de "reinos separados" según la escala científica. (33)

To include all actors of place in the mesh Ortiz allows them their subjectivity. Veiravé furthers this idea in his book about Ortiz's poetry, wherein he proposes that this sort of animism is on par with humanism in Ortiz's poetry as they both intersect to construct the poet's ethical worldview (*La experiencia* 219). Indeed, as María del

Carmen Marengo points out, Ortiz's contemplation of the natural world is informed by his humanism because the way that "Juanele logra la unificación poética del mundo natural con la experiencia humana se da a través del recurso de la personificación de los elementos naturales, muchas veces inanimados" (58). The humanist or ethical filter through which Ortiz contemplates the natural world translates into his "love" of the nonhuman other. And he frequently expresses this love in his poetry by recognizing and strengthening interrelationships among humans and nonhumans alike.

Tied closely to Ortiz's ethical worldview is his poetic aesthetic, or his "complejo estético-moral," as Helder puts it (139). For Ortiz, humans cannot ignore our human condition of being a moral subject by looking away from the suffering of the "other." Ultimately, the dynamism of his poetry is the result of a perpetual and infinite attempt to weave a fabric made up of ethical interrelationships among all subjects, effectively making them agents of place. And such a weaving extends itself to those ethereal, even invisible, subjects who connect with other subjects successively. Ortiz's ethical poetics of seeking to understand and integrate humanity into the mesh is reflective of a distinct ecopoiesis. This ecopoiesis produces an ecopoetics that contextualizes human-nonhuman interrelationships with an interactive and dynamic sense of place.

## Conclusion

Responding to a question about what he, a "poeta que canta la naturaleza," thinks about poetic technique, Juan L. Ortiz comments that poetic technique is important but that "es necesario ver cómo el hombre, al obrar sobre la realidad, dominándola, cree que su lenguaje es superior al de las otras especies." We are falsely led, says the poet, to believe that our reality is more real than that of animals, for example. Poetry, however, can act as a way to "acceder a la calidad" of the nonhuman reality because: "La poesía es el amor que encuentra su propio ritmo. Cuando tenemos una efusión amorosa hacia la cosa, estamos en mejores condiciones de percibir el alma de esa cosa que si empleáramos otros instrumentos" ("Las arrugas" 45-46). Essentially, Ortiz refers here to this same "ética-moral" or "ética-aestética" mentioned earlier. There is a sense in his poetry that in order to make connections with the "other" one must set aside or step away from one's own humanness in order to reveal and then to participate in one's surroundings with the other actors of place, as the speaker in "Deja las letras..." demonstrates. These connections, in turn, look to recognize and then contribute to the mesh of relationships to bridge both the ontological and ecological space that exists between both worlds. The readers are invited to participate in the mesh as we recognize our part in it.

Ortiz's ecopoetic conceptualization of the living landscape as an interconnected place full of creatures, souls, and ineffable mystery demonstrates an ecological thought sustained by an incredible dedication to contemplation and sense of place, which guided his poetry as a "servicio" toward humans and nonhumans, as he tells

Francisco Urendo in a 1971 interview:

Yo creo [...] que cada poeta que nace en el mundo crea, si es fiel a sí mismo, una forma nueva de poesía, o una visión, aunque sean matices. Yo quería servir, tenía un sentimiento de servicio. Pero servir a qué; a algo que siempre ha sido a través de toda mi vida muy operante: la piedad, en el mejor sentido de la palabra.

Piedad hacia el hombre, hacia los animales. En este sentido, mi vida me llevó a buscar todo lo que podía encontrar que me iluminara. Así, el servicio era la necesidad de denunciar la injusticia, y denunciarla como yo lo podía hacer; y eso también es piedad. (126)

The landscape as Ortiz sees it contains all actors of place, both human and nonhuman. Poetry for Ortiz is a way to love the "other." Partly for this purpose he stayed out of Argentina's cultural center, Buenos Aires. He chose to follow Antonio Machado's experience and pass the "prueba de la soledad en el paisaje" in order to continually search for answers where they are hard to come by because there is no human to answer ("Conversación" 145).

Beyond his poetry, Ortiz demonstrates a remarkable ecological thought. In an unpublished article, "Algunas expresiones de la poesía entrerriana última," written most likely around 1948, he finds himself, once again, defending the provincial landscape: "El que se cree más monótono o más desapacible puede así tocarnos cuando aparecen determinadas relaciones entre él y nosotros, cuando nuestra alma precisamente ha perdido sus límites. El paisaje es una relación" (*Obra* 1069). If one adds up the many poems concerned with the interrelationships among humans, nonhumans, and the unknowable "misterio" from his vast *oeuvre* one can see a more complete ecological thought. In the moderately long poem, "Ah, miras al presente..." from *La orilla que se abisma* (1970), for example, Ortiz unfolds the hidden layers of the damaging relationship between a society with anthropocentric economic demands on the natural world and an ecosystem-landscape by elegizing the interconnections that are lost as a result of unsustainable agriculture. At the same time, his speaker reflects hopefully on possible political systems that can reconnect people with place. Eventually, however, the poem acknowledges and laments that the reality of an ever-expanding gap between the two brings about a sense of loss—an argument not uncommon in contemporary discussions on the climate crisis (Vanderheiden 108-09). Indeed, one of Ortiz's overarching leitmotifs is to uncover the connections—among humans and nonhumans alike—that are already always there, thereby making these connections visible before they are lost.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All the birds have flown away, so high,  
A lonely cloud drifts on, so free.  
We are not tired, the Peak and I,  
Nor I of him, nor he of me.

Li Bai "Sitting Alone in Face of Peak Jingting" (177)

<sup>2</sup> See Hugo Gola ("Reino" 105), Juan José Saer ("Juan" 11-12), Martín Prieto (111-12), María del Carmen Marengo (47-50), Eduardo Milán (151-52), and Jorge Santiago Perednik (58-59).

<sup>3</sup> For example, the respected Argentine author Juan José Saer calls Ortiz "el más grande poeta argentino del siglo XX" ("Una poesía en expansión"), and Beatriz Sarlo, a renowned literary and cultural critic from Argentina speculates that Ortiz's vision of the country as a "paisaje fluvial y fluyente" would have had much more influence if it had not been for Jorge Luis Borges's heavy shadow over the country's literature. She even went as far as to include Ortiz's *Obra completa* as one of her top 12 Argentine works of all time (Rey).

<sup>4</sup> Ortiz did, however, fill these two books with poems whose themes revolve around the speaker's relationship with elements of the natural world (eg. "Fui al río," "El pueblo bajo las nubes," and "Luciérnagas" from *El ángel inclinado* and "El aguaribay florecido," "Las flores de las márgenes del camino...," and "Venía de las colinas..." from *La mano infinita*).

<sup>5</sup> I am referring here, of course, to the *Blut und Boden* philosophy, or the ideology based on the peasantry's working of the land on which the Nazis based their own particular sense of place.

<sup>6</sup> In their article they speculate on the feasibility and ethics of implanting life elsewhere, beyond our planet. At one point they contextualize their study by referring to works of literature, including *Genesis*, Frederick Turner's 1988 epic poem, as contributions to "general interest" in life propagation beyond Earth.

<sup>7</sup> Bate's spelling (149).

<sup>8</sup> Morton bases much of his book, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* on the problems presented by "nature" as a concept; Bruno Latour discusses the reductionism related to the term "nature" as a way to serve politics and to classify beings by their "belonging to a certain domain of reality, and [...] in a unified hierarchy extending from the largest being to the smallest" (*Politics* 28-29); Soper explains in the first page of *What is Nature* that "Nature" is a "problematic" term because it "is at once both very familiar and extremely elusive" as reflected in our casual confidence in its "intelligibility" while we simultaneously understand it to be a term that defies "our powers of definition" (1); and Dana Phillips identifies "nature" as "one of philosophy's least precise and most contested terms" in *The Truth about Ecology* (32).

<sup>9</sup> Forns-Broggi conceptualizes Ortiz's combination of ecological and political preoccupations as read in his poetry as an "eco-poema," explained as "un llamado a la materia viva de nuestras conexiones, una propuesta estética que ve lo humano reconociendo su continuidad e hibridez con lo natural" (35).

<sup>10</sup> *El Gualaguay*, *El junco y la corriente*, and *La orilla que se abisma* are the three previously unpublished books that were included in *El aura del sauce*.

<sup>11</sup> See Helder's discussion on Ortiz's use of ellipses to delve more into this hesitation aesthetic.

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received 29 July 2023

reviewed 28 Aug 2023

accepted 24 Oct 2023