Beetles and Vessels

Diversity, Eroticism, and Radical Personhood in Hubert Matiúwàa's Xùkú Xùwàá

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Abstract: The article studies a poetry collection written in Mè'phàà by Hubert Matiúwàa. I propose that the collection, *Xùkú Xùwàá/Entre escarabajos* (*Among Beetles*), exemplifies radical personhood that redefines the relationship between humans and nonhumans, having beetles and their anatomies as common denominators for all earthlings. The poems become relevant to ecological thought and animal studies because the entanglement of insects, plants, and animals that intertwine people's sense of agency, eroticism, and sexuality proposes an alternative biocultural taxonomy and establishes non-Western philosophy as contributor to contemporary ecological thinking. In other words: Matiúwàa's poems allow readers to notice that there might be another system of thought, one that includes humans and nonhumans without disregarding their/our differences.

Keywords: *Indigenous poetry, insects and bugs, nonhuman personhood, ecological thought, non-Western philosophy*

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What would it mean to think of beetles not as metaphors but as persons — structural companions in the very constitution of life? I propose that Hubert Matiúwàa's poetry collection, *Xùkú Xùwàá / Entre escarabajos*, exemplifies a form of radical personhood that redefines the relationship between humans and nonhumans, taking beetles and their anatomies as common denominators for all earthlings.[1] Matiúwàa is a Mè'phàà[2] philosopher, poet, and political activist,[3] part of a constellation of contemporary poets working to revitalize Indigenous languages and cultures.[4] As an activist, he has become a prominent voice against state violence in Guerrero.[5] Several of

1 Hubert Matiúwàa's legal name is Hubert Martínez Calleja, and he is also known as Hubert Malina. His *noms de plume* are not gratuitous: they encompass the hidden history of his people, the Mè'phàà. His legal name, Martínez Calleja, refers to the adoption of Spanish surnames, often given after baptism in early colonial period. *Malina* is the Náhuatl name for his town, Malinatepec. Even though the people of Malinatepec speak Mè'phàà and not the language of the Mexica, it is the name by which Mexicans refer to the Aztecs, who ruled the region before the arrival of the Spaniards. *Matiúwàa* is the Mè'phàà version of his surname and, according to Carolyn Fornoff, refers to the squash river or "río de calabaza". See Fornoff, "La carne que habla", 126.

2 The Mè'phàà live in La Montaña, a region in Guerrero. Because of decades-long opposition to industrial mining, the area is considered among the wealthiest in terms of minerals and soil while also being home to some of the country's poorest communities. According to Fornoff, sixty-two percent of the population of La Montaña population identify as Indigenous ("La carne que habla", 122). The national census estimates that seventy-eight percent of the Indigenous population live in Malinatepec alone.

3 Matiúwàa's former column in *Ojarasca*, a supplement of *La Jornada,* one of Mexico's major national newspapers, highlighted the central role of politics efforts to preserve minority languages and cultures. Wendy Call and Luz María Lepe Lira observe the same dynamic in their article, "Poetics and Politics of Indigenous-Language Literature in Mexico and Colombia: Forms of Protest and Resistance."

4 Further readings on this topic include Hermann Bellinghausen's foreword to *Insurrección de la palabra*.

5 Violence in La Montaña dates back to the days of the PRI (Party of Institutionalized Revolution, Mexico's ruling party from the 1920s to 2000) and to encounters with the military between 1968 to 1974 (see Oikión,"El Estado mexicano", 74). These actions were legitimized by the emergence of poppy cultivation in the region and by the government's fear of the spectre of communism, given that the Communist Party received five percent of the vote in the area (See Gaussens, "La otra montaña roja"). In 2014, the force disappearance of the forty-three students of Ayotzinapa (*Desaparecidos de Ayotzinapa)* once again drew attention to the region. Today, according to Matiúwàa, cartel violence intensifies residents' sense of oppression and raises questions about who truly holds authority in the region ("La violencia en Guerrero"). The murder of Malinatepec mayor Acasio Flores in June 2024, following land disputes with a neighbouring town, was only the most recent tragedy in the region. See Benítez, "Pobladores dan último adiós".

the poems in his first collection, *Xtambáa / Piel de tierra*, address state-orchestrated violence and forced disappearances.[6]

Xùkú xùwàá / Entre escarabajos ("Amongst Beetles", 2021) is one of Matiúwàa's most recent collections.[7] Unlike his earlier work, it turns toward the affirmative aspects of life. The poems are relevant to ecological thought and, to some extent, to animal studies, as they explore the entanglements of insects, plants, and animals that shape daily life while infusing these relationships with eroticism and sexuality. Matiúwàa proposes that all earthlings have personhood. In *Xùkú xùwàá*, beetles serve as messengers delivering omens and as allegories for the basic structural building blocks of all forms of life, offering a nonhuman perspective for the cosmological and anatomical explanation of earthlings and their shapes.

Beetles and Vessels: Another Biocultural Taxonomy

In the introduction to the collection, Matiúwàa explains that Mè'phàà cosmology divides creatures into those made of flesh and those who contain flesh.[8] While animals such as jaguars or cows consist entirely of flesh (covered by skin), beetles are understood as flesh held within containers, known in Mé'phàà as *xùwáà*, which translates to *jícara* in Mexican Spanish. Beetles are thus known in Mé'phàà culture as *animales jícara* — vessel-animals or gourd-animals. Their carapace or exoskeleton is considered a vessel, and thus the insect becomes a structural unit of life. In the poems, anything that contains or gathers is part of the semantic field of vessels. Consequently, as Matiúwàa explains, a public plaza is referred to as *xùwáà* because it gathers people together.[9] The allegorical use of

6 I discuss *Xtambáa* in my article "Lenguas, intimidad y rebeldía".

7 Readers interested in Matiúwàa's poetry may consult his other publications, including *Xtambáa / Piel de tierra* (2016), *Tsína rí nàyaxà' / Cicatriz que te mira* (2017), *Las sombrereras de Tsítsídiín* (2018), *Mañuwìín / Cordel torcido* (2018), *Mbo Xtá rídà / Gente piel / Skin People* (2020), *Túngaa Indìí / Comisario Jaguar / Jaguar Commissioner* (2021), and *Xó nùnè xàbò mè'phàà / El cómo del filosofar de la gente piel* (2022), a compilation of Mè'phàà philosophical-philological thought. Thanks to translators Paul Worley and Juana Adcock, Matiúwàa's work is becoming more accessible to English-speaking readers. For further reading, see "The Boy" / "Adà".

8 Matiúwàa, *Xùkú xùwàá*, 10.

9 Matiúwàa, *Xùkú xùwàá*,11.

the vessel or gourd and its contents allows for references to mouths and other bodily cavities as receptacles and spouts. As vessels of flesh and fluids, beetles and *jícaras* appear as basic units of life animated by a primal erotic pulse.

The allegorical presence of beetles in these poems, and in Mè'phàà culture more broadly, contrasts with the often-deliberate absence of insects in Western cultural production. Turning to a classic of the early modern Western canon, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace highlights the absence of insects in the novel.[10] Their visibility, she argues, "would challenge Crusoe's sense of supremacy over the lush materiality of the island. They would undermine his sense of control over his own body and the bodies of the animals around him."[11] Insects — particularly those that participate in the life–death cycle by decomposing animal remains — were Crusoe's invisible and unmentioned companions. In their absence, as Kowaleski Wallace notes, Crusoe might have struggled to dispose of bones, carcasses and other remains, since nonhuman agency could not be present in the form of pests or scavengers.[12] In sharp contrast, Matiúwàa makes beetles visible and integral to his poetic imagery. This is especially noteworthy given that Guerrero — Mexico's fifth most biodiverse state — is currently threatened by declining insect populations.[13]

The collection consists of four poems. The third, "Xuajiun xùkú xùwàá" / "Pueblo escarabajo" ("Beetle(d) People"), comprises seventeen sections, each centred on erotic encounters among members of the community. These encounters feature multiple allegories for flesh, vessels, and bodily fluids, with beetles being just one among

10 Kowaleski Wallace, "Crusoe's Insect Companions". Her article follows Amitav Ghosh's observations regarding the representation (or absence) of certain earthlings in Western culture and literature.

11 Kowaleski Wallace, "Crusoe's Insect Companions", 483. Although Defoe's time saw an increase in publications and lectures on insects and their relationship to human life, insects did not find their way into his text.

12 Kowaleski Wallace, "Crusoe's Insect Companions", 485.

13 For more on declining insect populations, see Sánchez-Bayo and Wyckhuys, "Worldwide Decline of the Entomofauna"; García Hilario et al., "Crisis del sistema milpero"; and Piña Domínguez et al., "Environmental Effects".

them. Matiúwàa uses allegory to depict diverse forms of eroticism without judgement or prejudice. In so doing, the collection marks a significant contribution to Indigenous poetry written by male authors, demonstrating that eroticism, as part of daily communal life, can be joyful, respectful, diverse, and consensual in equal measure.

My analysis focuses on three poems that deal with consensual relationships and display a diversity of sexual desires, encounters, and identities. These poems were selected because of the sexual diversity represented in each of them. Notably, beetles and other nonhumans appear both allegorically and materially.[14] I argue that the delicate balance between these modes in Matiúwàa's work reshapes the ground on which human–nonhuman relations are established. The poetic images of beetles represent human eroticism while also inviting us to consider a new biocultural taxonomy — one that takes beetles and vessels as the shared units of both human and nonhuman life. To support this argument, I draw on concepts from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and John Ó Maoilearca. Finally, I consider why the conjunction of Western and non-Western thought matters for ecological thought. While I reference Queer Indigenous Studies and literary studies terminology when appropriate, the primary emphasis of the article lies in ecological thought and non-Western philosophy.

Beetles and Insects: Diversity and Eroticism

The following poems defy heteronormativity and advocate for consensual sex by asserting the subjects' agency over their own bodies. "A'mà ixè" / "Abejorro" ("Carpenter Bee") describes a young woman's discovery of sex desire as she observes her mother's affair with a stranger. The witty imagery of the first poem is coupled with the radical nature of its content, given the context of violence against women and LGBTQ+ people in some communities:

14 Animal allegory is often used in poetry to anthropomorphize animals, thereby distancing their representations from actual behavior. Still, some poetic treatments allow readers to perceive the complexity of the relationship between human culture and nonhuman animals. See, for example, Onno Oerlemans's research on early English poetry in "Animal Allegory from Chaucer to Gray".

Nìsngájmáà
à'mà tsí nàruwàn' ixè,
driin driin driin,
asndo nàgà'à ngawo iya tsáà nakhuú xkwe,
driin driin driin,
máján nìndxa'wé ñawùún xàbò,
driin driin driin,
nìniñuu xkwe iduu yáá
ná idxuù àdó tsí nàgiwán iñá.

Mostró
su abejorro agujereador de troncos,
driin, driin, driin,
burbujeó el polen de sus patas,
driin, driin, driin,
zumbó en las manos de aquel hombre,
driin, driin, driin,
dejó un ojo de miel
en la cabeza del gusano medidor.

He displayed
his carpenter bee that drilled holes in the trunks of trees,
driin, driin, driin,
the pollen bubbled off his legs,
driin, driin, driin,
buzzed in that man's hands,
driin, driin, driin,
and left a drop of honey
on the head of an inch worm.[15]

The carpenter bee acts as the central image in the poem. There is, however, no direct correlation between a specific character and the insect. Rather, the image is braided together with the bodies and fluids of the stranger and the young woman. The former is likened to a carpenter bee that drills its way to nectar and shakes pollen from its legs, while the latter is the one who "buzzes" in the man's hands until she traces the honey.

15 Matiúwàa, *Xùkú xùwàá*, 48–49. This passage informs the theoretical claims of this article. This and all English translations of Matiúwàa's poems are by Paul Worley.

Unlike John Donne's "The Flea", which justifies intercourse through the mingling of blood, Matiúwàa's "Carpenter Bee" requires no such defence. Desire simply appears as part of life. The bee takes on a material dimension when the notion of vessels as the structural unit of life comes to mind: insects are intertwined with the drive that brings earthlings to life, whether that be human sexual desire or the reproductive cycles of plants. Whether one bears a vessel or is flesh to be contained, the poem allegorizes being alive and manifesting life through libido and bodily agency. The text suspends reproductive motives, marital duties, and social judgement regarding sex outside long-term partnerships. Instead, the readers learn that the daughter—a young Indigenous woman—is susceptible to having a sex drive of her own.

Knowledge of agricultural, floral, and animal reproductive cycles often makes people aware of how the life drive is inexorably linked to insects and reproduction. Yet, in Matiúwàa's poem, drives and desires are presented as an unapologetically joyful part of communal life, on the condition that they are consensual and voiced by the character who exercises agency over that drive. In his poetics, the "beetled people" of the community share a capacity for agency in the expression and use of their bodies as well as the drive that brings forth new life and pleasure for themselves and others.

In that regard, Matiúwàa is in tune with Raja Halwani, a contemporary Arab American philosopher whose main research focus is sex. Halwani argues that "the physical intimacy found in sexual activity can be a very powerful and affirming bond: it can bring people together, it can help them fall in love or cement the love they already have by affirming it or expressing it through sex."[16] Halwani emphasizes that while reproduction is one function of sex, sexual activity is also a crucial source of recreation and release. To some extent, the agency and sex drive in the poem foreground people's control over their own bodies and desires in a consensual context, regardless of traditional values within a community.[17]

16 Halwani, *Philosophy of Love,* 3.

17 Beyond poetry, Matiúwàa also argues that women's bodily autonomy and political voices must be taken into account in La Montaña in order to counteract the high rates of violence against women, often committed under the rubric of *usos y costumbres*, as

Alongside its insistence on erotic freedom, release, and sexual drive, the collection offers examples of consensual sex beyond heteronormativity, such as "Tsí naña'wiin" / "Comezón" ("Itch") and "Xùkú be'xa" / "Babosas" ("Slugs"). The first describes a man who longs for sexual encounters with other men, while the second presents two women's desire for one another. Both are consensual, but they differ markedly. "Itch" winks at consensual yet casual sex with the spouse's knowledge and permission:

> Tsísnámijuùn xí maguì tsúwan,
> nà'thùún xàbò tsí ngrígùún jambaà
> rí mùni'ñaá amuu rùbú ná tsuduù xíliì,
> mùchijmbìí gájmàá iya ndawa ñuwìin guma rí mi'ñuu
> kamí muwààn
> awun xùwàá ixè iyoo dii gàjmàá àjmbéè.
>
> Y aunque se espine,
> invita a los viajeros
> a descansar
> el morral de chayotes en su silla,
> aplastar con saliva la tortilla morada,
> y a beber en jícara
> el jugo de caña con su esposo.
>
> And even though it hurts,
> He invites the travellers
> to rest
> the sack of chayotes on the chair,
> to flatten purple tortillas with their saliva
> and share cane juice with him
> from a gourd cup.[18]

Halwani, both as a philosopher and as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, notes that "because practices, including sexual practices, are enmeshed in the social context in which they exist, we cannot accuse them of being wrong in themselves because they

in cases of men selling their daughters or the limited political representation of women in the community. See Matiúwàa, *Xó nùnè jùmâ xàbò mè'phàà*, 295.

18 Matiúwàa, *Xùkú xùwàá*, 36–39.

help perpetuate certain cultural beliefs. We need to try to extract them (conceptually) from their social enmeshment to morally evaluate them in a fair way."[19] The allegories — chayote as male organs, purple tortilla and brown sugar as anus and secretion — present anal sex as one practice among many, without moral judgment. Instead of reinforcing traditional views of anal sex as sinful because it does not take place within marriage and lacks reproductive purpose, the poem invites us to read these allegories as a playful part of everyday life.

"Slugs" portrays two female lovers that share a household:

> Pla' pla' pla',
> nuniì guma,
> nuniì jndi nè, nuniì gigaà nè,
> nàgìxì inuu nè
> kamí xùù nè nàdriyaà xkhuun
> awùún xúkù xùwàá
> tsí trámíin nàgúùn inuu ifìí.
>
> Pla' pla' pla',
> enlazadas, hacen tortillas,
> las redondean,
> se calientan,
> se hinchan y sus aromas,
> llenan de semillas
> a los escarabajos
> muertos en el comal.
>
> Pla' pla' pla',
> interlaced, they make tortillas,
> pat them round,
> and as the tortillas heat up
> they swell and their aroma fills
> the dead beetles on the griddle
> with seeds.[20]

19 Halwani, *Philosophy of Love*, 215.

20 Matiúwàa, *Xùkú xùwàá*, 46–47.

"Tortillas" is a derogatory term for lesbians in Mexico; however, the twist of the poem lies in the pleasure expressed in preparing this food and in its strong erotic overtones. The poem carefully traces each step of the process: the tortillas are shaped, heated, swell, and release their aroma, absorbing the flavour of the dead beetles (omens of pregnancy for the Mè'phàà) on a traditional cooking griddle. The extended allegory of the sexual encounter is built on the careful mirroring of the five senses (touch, sight, smell, hearing, taste) in both acts: having sex and making tortillas. Because the description is both positive and sustained, there seems to be no room for negative judgement. The title itself is another allegory for the female anatomy, since the shape of slugs resembles a vulva. Both tortillas and slugs thus become images that freely engage with same-sex relationships in a rural environment.

Although allegorical, these images are not just symbols in the traditional sense; they do not merely stand in for abstract concepts. In contrast to traditional uses of animal and insect allegory (think of Classical literature such as Aesop's fables), these poems are driven by the materiality and physicality implied by sexual desire. Their relevance lies less in nonhumans as symbols than in their resemblance to the fluids, body parts, and bodily changes that result from intercourse: female organs swell like tortillas on a griddle, and the anus exudes a secretion that resembles brown sugar. It is as if the text takes pride in the fact that some of its terms and images once served as insults. In this sense, the depictions are not only joyful—expressing pleasure and life drive—but also subversive. The collection embraces it all: the derogatory expressions, the mockery, the different sexual orientations, and, most importantly, agency for all genders and bodies equally.

Because eroticism and sexual desire dominate the collection, the material and physical realms guide the imagery. The subject of libido reinforces the proposed biocultural taxonomy of vessels and other elements (flesh or fluids) as a structure shared by all forms of life. As a result, the poems depict desires and drives freely—beyond traditional heteronormativity and existing biocultural taxonomies.

Matiúwàa mobilizes poetics and eroticism in a decidedly affirmative way. He also exemplifies Manuela Picq and Josi Tikuna's claims about sexuality, namely that "sexual diversity has historically been the norm, not the exception, among Indigenous peoples" and that "language shows that Indigenous queerness, in its own contextual realities, predates the global LGBT framework."[21] According to Picq, many references to non-heteronormative Indigenous sexuality were lost during Colonization. That was the case with the Náhuatl term *xochihua* (*suchioa* in the original) or "flower bearer", rendered as "sodomite" or "pervert" in the *Florentine Codex*.[22] Matiúwàa's turn to beetles and vessels suggests that diversity can be accounted for if the point of departure is a non-Western taxonomy — in his case, one grounded in Mè'phàà cosmology. His poems enable readers to reimagine sexual agency and diversity even amid the intense socio-political violence that characterizes Guerrero. In so doing, Matiúwàa's poetry counteracts some of the legacies of Colonization.

Defying heteronormativity and advocating for consensual sex at the same time is also radical within the culture of La Montaña, where sexual desire is often associated with negative consequences for women and girls, such as abuse, violence, child marriage, and the silencing of women's voices. In the last section of *Xó Nùnè Jùmâ Xàbò Mè'phàà / El cómo del filosofar de la gente piel* (The Philosophy of Skin People), Matiúwàa explains that sexual, political, and financial agency are often attributed only to men in the community. The poems, by contrast, unfold a conversation in which all persons — be they men or not, human or not — have agency over their bodies and desires.

Because this article addresses a utopian vision women's and men's bodily agency, beyond heteronormativity and machismo, it is necessary to clarify why agency is so central. Sexual violence and abuse in some Indigenous communities in Mexico are matters of ongoing

21 Picq and Tikuna, "Indigenous Sexualities", n.p.

22 Picq, "Decolonizing Indigenous Sexualities", 169. See also *Diccionario Náhuatl en línea*, s.v. "Xochihua", https://gdn.iib.unam.mx/diccionario/xochihua/76602, and the *Digital Florentine Codex* (Book 10, folio 25r), s.v. "suchoia", https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/book/10/folio/25r.

historical and political debate. Examples of political struggles to challenge these conditions include the efforts of politicians such as Xóchitl Gálvez Ruiz, former presidential candidate; Ceyla Cruz Gutiérrez, mayor of San Miguel Chimalapa; and Eufrosina Cruz Mendoza, a federal congresswoman — all Indigenous representatives in different arenas of current Mexican politics. Cruz Mendoza gained national prominence when her initiative to criminalize child marriage was approved in April 2023.[23] Prior to this, child marriage was illegal but carried no penalty. Gálvez Ruiz and Cruz Mendoza are only two among many women politicians who have confronted the exclusion of women from political decision-making and have denounced physical abuse (in Gálvez Ruiz's case) and sexual abuse (in Cruz Mendoza's) against Indigenous women within their communities.

In Matiúwàa's collection, by contrast, there is room for desire outside abusive dynamics; consensual relationships are brought to the fore. The author challenges the notion that sexual desire is exclusively heterosexual and acceptable only under certain conditions. The poems celebrate desire and sex in all their diversity and seek to free the libido from traditional beliefs and potential abuse by using beetles and vessels as structural units of all life forms in this specific culture, rather than relying on a Western female–male dichotomy. Regardless of their gender or sexual orientation, everyone has beetle-like body parts and drives. Nonhuman allegories, rooted in the materiality and physicality of the bodies they evoke, exemplify the enjoyment of sexual intercourse — queer, straight, and otherwise. The images draw on a range of nonhuman elements, as well as humour and wit, making it clear that the characters are fully aware of their agency. For instance, the young woman who mimics her mother in the carpenter bee poem experiences desire and curiosity as she watches a couple and later decides to have sex with a stranger. Likewise, in "Itch", the couple are aware of the husband's "itchiness" and its remedy. They pretend not to notice, but both enjoy the outcomes of intercourse with strangers.

23 Hernández Zamora, "El matrimonio infantil."

The poems' nonhuman imagery and humour also temporarily suspend the fact that they depict people who have historically been trapped in a violent environment, as noted earlier. Agency and wit become vital for the poems: agency, embodied in humour and the verbal ingenuity with which actions and feelings are described, opens up a realm where violence appears absent and where everyone has control over their own body and desires.

In her work, Latin American studies scholar Sophie Esch argues that in violent contexts "recognition through another human is often out of reach. It is in the animal—through its gaze or company—that people can recognize themselves and recuperate a sense of humaneness."[24] Although Esch explores the role of animals and suffering in the Central American post-war context, and Matiúwàa's poetry is anchored to the state of Guerrero, both turn to a broad spectrum of nonhumans to think through eroticism and sexual desire. Esch's analysis and Matiúwàa's poetry share a commitment to using nonhumans to bring the positive dimensions of human communities into view. In both cases, a sense of humaneness and belonging to a community depend on nonhumans imagery. As Esch notes, in a social and political environment of dehumanization, relationships with nonhumans make it possible to reorganize drives and earthlings—humans included.

Additionally, the allusions to corncobs, tortillas, chayote squash, hand-woven bags, carpenter bees, beetles, and so on are likely more readily meaningful to readers from non-urban Mexican contexts, since the references are closer to their everyday lives. Non-urban communities may therefore feel represented as well, which is another positive aspect of this collection: it makes diverse contexts, agencies, and sexualities visible. In this regard, the comparatively joyful aspects of the poems are in tune with Eve Tuck's 2009 open letter, in which she urged scholars to stop focusing on (and perhaps profiting from) the negative aspects of marginalized communities and to attend their value and vitality as well.[25]

24 Esch, "The Company of Animals", 584.

25 Eve Tuck, "Suspending Damage".

Radical Personhood

There is no doubt about the relevance of the poetic proposal in terms of its eroticism, nor about the fact that the biocultural taxonomy of vessels and flesh encompasses humans and nonhumans equally. Furthermore, the poems are also a game-changer in terms of philosophy, in the broadest sense. In the introduction to *Xùkú xùwàá*, Matiúwàa explains that the texts arise from a cosmological framework that classifies bodies and body parts as either vessels or flesh to be contained. Beyond the suggested (and allegorical) shift in how we perceive our own anatomies, the underlying thought is radical: the poems propose that both self-perception and the perception of others can begin from a nonhuman perspective. That is to say, if vessel and flesh are the units of life as we know it, we may, at least momentarily, stop thinking of our bodies as a single whole and instead divide them into pieces of flesh to be contained and vessels that contain. In other words, viewing humans as being made of beetles and vessels proposes a different way of being oneself, of relating to others, and of exercising agency in a given community of humans and nonhumans.

This difference in perception also has another, less obvious value. In an essay accompanied by a photographic series, Alexandra Halkias argues that "making our sightings of […] unorthodox forms of relationality more acute, bringing them out of the shadows and into the light of public and scientific discourse, produces new forms of subjects, humans and non-humans alike. This vision has the potential to generate politics that are new."[26]

The radical nature of Matiúwàa's poetics resonates with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's reflections on Indigenous understandings of what it means to be human. In *Cannibal Metaphysics*, Viveiros de Castro writes:

> This interspecific resemblance includes, to put it performatively, the same mode of apperception: animals and other nonhumans having a soul "see themselves as persons" and therefore "are

26 Halkias, "Tracking Love", 154.

> persons": intentional, double-sided (visible and invisible) objects constituted by social relations and existing under a double, at once reflexive and reciprocal—which is to say collective—pronominal mode. What these persons see and thus are as persons, however, constitutes the very philosophical problem posed by and for Indigenous thought.[27]

In other words, the allegory of vessel and flesh unifies humans and nonhumans and constitutes the common denominator of personhood, or, as John Ó Maoilearca puts it, the shared fact of first-person perspective.[28] Mè'phàà poetry not only thematizes vessels, flesh, and skin; it also seeks alternative ways of explaining the similarities and familial ties between humans and nonhumans.

Following Viveiros de Castro, the designation of what counts as "human" shifts when we consider who is doing the perceiving: "In seeing us as nonhumans, animals and spirits regard themselves (their own species) as human: they perceive themselves as (or become) anthropomorphic beings when they are in their houses or villages, and apprehend their behavior and characteristics through a cultural form."[29] According to these passages, traits such as personhood, self-awareness, awareness of belonging to a collective, a first-person perspective, and the tendency to mirror ourselves in nonhumans are common to all sentient beings. From a beetle's perspective, then, human mouths and stomachs may well be (beetle-like) vessels that contain food or water. Matiúwàa's reference to beetles and vessels thus reinterprets human anatomy from a nonhuman point of view.

Certainly, scholars familiar with twentieth-century philosophy might argue that the allegory of beetles and vessels can also be read through the lens of concepts such as "becoming-animal" or "bodies without organs".[30] Such concepts, however, tend to imply a deconstruction of the subject and a moment in which individuals boundaries collapse. This is not the case in Matiúwàa's poetry.

27 Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 56.

28 Ó Maoilearca, "Non-Human Philosophy", 373.

29 Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 57.

30 For those interested, see Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*.

Rather, as Viveiros de Castro states, relating and mirroring emphasize the differences and boundaries between humans and nonhumans while acknowledging that personhood and the qualities of being-human-under-these-conditions (a first-person perspective, relationality, mirroring, and so on) are shared by other sentient beings. Ó Maoilearca writes:

> From our perspective—you and me—we are human persons: indeed, having or being allowed a first-person perspective at all is the same as having or allowing a human perspective, "human" being here another name for "first person". This "having" is not reflective, however: it is not an intellectual thesis or position. It is, rather, a body.[31]

The body, in its materiality, becomes the common ground for reconciling differences between humans and nonhumans. It follows that shared acts—such as living, thinking from a first-person perspective, as well as the performance of "having" a body—bring us closer to what Ó Maoilearca calls nonhuman philosophy.

For Ó Maoilearca, philosophy would be radically different if it expanded what we understand (and perform) as (hu)man beyond the traditional limits of Western philosophical history. Drawing on François Laruelle's concept of non-standard philosophy, Ó Maoilearca coins the term (and system of thinking) of non-human philosophy:

> *Anthropos* is expanded, morphed in and through the nonhuman (in Laruelle's positive sense of non- as broadened, mutated) […] A radical anthropomorphism also reshapes both the subject (*anthropos*) and the project (*animal*). […] The expansion is the charitable act, the benefit of the doubt, a gift and benefit that comes before all forms of representation [...] And in doing so it must reshape what the human can be, what the "we" can be—a radical consistency of saying and doing.[32]

In conceiving the subject, Ó Maoilearca uses the term *anthropos* instead of the now-outdated concept of "Man". Such an expanded

31 Ó Maoilearca, "Non-Human Philosophy", 373.

32 Ó Maoilearca, *All Thoughts Are Equal*, 209.

notion of subjecthood opens the way for a "radical anthropomorphism" that transforms the categories of human and nonhuman and revitalizes the notion of the collective — the "we" — so that it encompasses both humans and nonhumans, even in their obvious differences. Readers will notice the affinity with Halkias's ideas: despite their differences, humans and nonhumans can form part of the same collective. Ó Maoilearca argues that "it is not that everything is equal on account of any specific criterion (say, the relativity of language, culture, technology or even nature) but because everything is equally Real precisely in virtue of the fact that equality and Real are not defined."[33] In other words, humans and nonhumans can act as subjects in philosophical propositions and can be included in a different kind of systematic understanding of life because the intersection of how we live, name, and imagine that life is always, to some extent, arbitrary — even if the notion of belonging to a collective appears as common ground.

For both Ó Maoilearca and Matiúwàa, the fundamentals of philosophy are no longer fixed or immovable. There is, however, a major difference between them: the former seeks to expand the notion of *anthropos*, hence the idea of radical anthropomorphism — a term which presents some problems for animal studies, given anthropomorphism's history of preserving human supremacy over animals by projecting human traits onto their behaviour and using them as symbols and allegories of human ways of life. Even with the qualifier *radical*, the term risks undermining efforts to decentre the human.

Another troubling aspect of radical anthropomorphism is its potential lack of reciprocity. As Donna Haraway states, "we are in a knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down. Response and respect are possible only in those knots, with actual animals and people looking back at each other, sticky with all their muddled histories."[34] Simply altering our conception of the Real and the *anthropos* does not by itself guarantee reciprocity and respect between humans and nonhumans.

33 Ó Maoilearca, "Non-Human Philosophy", 370.

34 Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 42.

By contrast, the radical personhood exemplified in Matiúwàa's poetics expands the category of person beyond the human to encompass all earthlings. Drawing from Mè'phàà cosmology, in which bodies are understood as either vessels or flesh to be contained, personhood emerges as a shared structural and ontological condition that unites humans and nonhumans without erasing their differences. In this framework, beetles, plants, animals, and humans all possess the qualities of persons: self-awareness, a first-person perspective, and the capacity to relate to and mirror themselves in others. The radical aspect lies in displacing "the human" as the measure of all subjectivity; instead, personhood becomes a plural, embodied condition grounded in the material commonalities of life. This redefinition not only challenges anthropocentric taxonomies but also creates a space in which humans and nonhumans can coexist as agents within the same collective.

Personhood is thus shared by humans and nonhumans, since the concept and its enactment (the "saying and doing" of all living forms, in Ó Maoilearca's terms) are broad enough to include others without homogenizing them. The heterogeneity of bodies supports and illustrates the possibility of a common ground that respects differences and variations among humans and nonhumans. For scholars mindful of the dangers of homogenization in political regimes and in philosophical and ecological thought, respect for diversity becomes a precondition for any true or positive statement.

Viveiros de Castro and Ó Maoilearca can be read as examples of Western anthropologists and philosophers who seek expand Western thought. In this context, Matiúwàa's poetry becomes even more significant. Not because his poetics merely *complements* Western thought, but rather because he demonstrates that Mè'phàà cosmology and his personal poetics are already in tune with radical philosophical claims. Western thought can learn from non-Western poetry and philosophy, and even adopt some of their founding principles, in order to move beyond a situation in which the "other" (animals and other nonhumans) can be different from humans only up to a point and can be permitted to join the community only on

the condition of relinquishing those properties that mark their difference, whether these are traits that make us human or traits that makes them nonhuman.

Concluding Thoughts

In this article, I have identified four core aspects of Matiúwàa's poetic project that together articulate a form of radical personhood grounded in Mè'phàà cosmology. First, Matiúwàa makes ontological claims that align with radical personhood by including humans and nonhumans within shared structural units—vessels and flesh—in the poetic images that redefine a "we" encompassing all earthlings while respecting their differences. Second, he redefines the fundamental language of personhood, which here includes sharing a first-person perspective, the ability to mirror one's bodies and sense in those of other species, self-awareness, and an awareness of belonging to a collective. Third, he provides political representation for ethnic and linguistic minorities, underrepresented gender and sexual orientations, and the diversity of sexualities and desires within the ethnic minority in question. And fourth, he offers examples of poetry in which embodiment, sexual desire, pleasure, and consensual relationships balance allegorical and material realms.

The poems invite readers to inhabit a nonhuman perspective through images and structural units that differ from a human-centred anatomy. In so doing, Matiúwàa's poetry redefines the basic terms of the relationship between humans and nonhumans, opening the possibility of an expanded system of thought and an expanded understanding of life that explicitly includes nonhumans. It follows that Matiúwàa's poetry also contributes to contemporary ecological thought by affirming that humans and nonhumans alike can serve as subjects of contemporary philosophy within this expanded framework. Finally, both Matiúwàa's poetics and Mè'phàà cosmology resonate with the claims of Viveiros de Castro and Ó Maoilearca, helping to consolidate Indigenous systems of thought as integral to contemporary philosophical discourse.

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