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Highways, activism and solastalgia: Poetic responses to Roe 8

Abstract
This paper is a response to activism in the summer of 2016/17 when bulldozers pushed a 5km highway footprint, known as the Roe 8 extension, through urban wetlands and woodlands in Perth's southern suburbs. We argue that the impact of the community campaign to halt Roe 8, and the clearing of this land evoked a form of cultural mourning and loss that can be thought of as solastalgia (Albrecht 2008). As an increasingly common experience in the Anthropocene, we are interested in how solastalgia can be expressed. In our need to comprehend and articulate solastalgia, we propose that a poetic response to the Roe 8 bulldozing offers a complex and intense a form of mourning which is not restricted to that summer of activism but connects with broader experiences of environmental loss. Poetry has long been a form of writing that unsettles, that gives voice to the un-namable, to the currents and sinews that run beneath the surface of an often alienating and incomprehensible society. As part of a tradition of activist poetics, this article includes poetry written in response to the physical affect of witnessing radical ecological destruction.
Keywords: Activism, solastalgia, poetry

The Poets

The day the poets arrived
the bulldozer churned back time
to the beginning when the earth was soft
and there were only spirits
roaming the flat cold sand.

And the poets had to create
the world all over again;
they paced the fence line reciting names;
germinating species on their tongues.

The poets filmed themselves
re-making the world
and tweeted the footage,
posted it on Facebook.

Huddled under a flapping tarpaulin
we hoped the incantations would stop
banksia roots being torn from the ground;
would hold the present in stasis;
so that marri flowers will always
bloom in February.

Introduction

We are interested in creative responses to environmental loss, and in this article we reflect on the poetic responses written by Nandi Chinna to witnessing land clearing in a much loved local wetland and bushland. We argue that poetic writings on environmental degradation offer a complex and intense expression of emotional mourning and a language of loss. 'The Poets', above, draws on deep time, mythical powers, and creative sources alongside the mundane practices of social media and bulldozing, to invoke a long-term vision of the impact of building highways, becoming activist, and feeling solastalgia. Such responses provide a legacy of local events, and are also part of a tradition of activist poetics. We sketch this tradition generally and specifically from nature poetry through to the poetics of loss.

Highways

The occasion for the writing of the poems included in this article was the controversial highway known as the Roe 8 extension. The Roe Highway is a proposed outer-suburban partial ring-road that skirts the cities of Perth and Fremantle. Planned in the 1950s (Gaynor & Newman 2017: 2), it has been progressively built since the 1980s and the next extension, Roe 8, was scheduled to forge another 5km section through Perth's southern suburbs. Since the road was planned the city has expanded substantially and Roe 8 is no longer a ring-road; its trajectory now cuts a swathe through heavily populated suburbs. The section was controversial for a number of reasons, including the extraordinary political deals over funding, undue process regarding environmental reporting, lack of a business case, inadequate noise and traffic modeling, erasure of Indigenous heritage sites, and clearing of the sensitive Beeliar wetlands and Coolbellup banksia woodlands which were designated a Threatened Ecological Community in 2016 (Department of Environment and Energy 2016).

These formal legislative and governance issues however do not account for the intensity of personal and collective identification with that environment – known as topophilia (Tuan 1974). The affective relations between people and place meant that community resistance to Roe 8 had been mobilized for years, as far back as the 1980s (Gaynor, Jennings & Newman 2017: 17), however the summer of 2016/2017 brought it to a flashpoint as contractors were given the go ahead to fence off one area at a time and then bulldoze through a footprint for the highway extension. This was accompanied by a disproportionate police presence in anticipation of community resistance. The first portion of land to be cleared was in the suburb of Coolbellup. The arrival of bulldozers along Malvolio Road brought over a thousand people from across the city to Coolbellup at 5am one morning before Christmas in one of the largest protests ever seen in the state. Over the next three months alongside constant protest 40 hectares of bush was bulldozed and deposited back on the site in heaps 3 metres high which were left to rot as the windy summer topsoil blew across the suburb and into our houses. The project stopped the night before the state election of 11 March 2017. One of the promises of the Opposition was to stop Roe 8, and their election was partly attributed to the high degree of animosity and grief engendered by Roe 8 (Gaynor & Newman: 4).

Beeliar

Dec 6, 2016

Swan and sedge,
Dugite and tiger snake,
Nuytstia floribunda, fringe lily, woody pear
Marri, mungite, dianella, jarrah, balga, hibbertia
Quenda, yoorna, lerista, skink, peacock spider,
Christmas spider, pardalote, striated pardalote,
Heron, spoonbill, ibis, swamp harrier, little eagle,
Musk duck, pied cormorant, long-necked turtle,
Aquifer, mud, algae, water, donkey orchid, spearwood
Dune, bassendean dune, tadpole, frog, banded stilt,
Pelican, clicking frog, moaning frog,
I call on you to survive.

Malvolio Road Goodbyes

Between what has been
erased
and what has yet to be;

five metres of sand,
one hundred metres of fence,
three security guards,
and a pair of tawny frogmouths
disguised as a jarrah tree.

My body is a banner strung up;
like tensile wire I sing the fence,
voice cracked open snapping and whipping;

and the kind dog-walking woman lays her hand
on my shoulder as the names burn
out of my mouth rusting my body to the steel mesh;

as if names could somehow hold back
bulldozers, and police, and men in white utes
hi-vis jackets, hardhats.

Goodbye woody pear, goodbye Quenda
Goodbye marri, tawny frogmouth, cockatoo
Goodbye orchids, goodbye dugite
Goodbye bobtail, blue wren, purple fringe lily
Goodbye balga, wattle bird

Goodbye ground where my feet have stepped
my ears have listened, my nose has smelled,
my body has lived.

These two poems, back to back, are an invocation to survive, and an elegy or lament for the destruction. The invocation strongly evokes the specifics of species endemic to the Beeliar wetlands in the Spearwood dunes of southern Perth, in the layers of air, earth, and water, drawing on Latin, Noongar and common English names. The lament is occasional to the clearing along Malvolio Road but it invokes a general form of mourning.

Both authors of this paper were involved in the summer of protest, remembered by some as 'the war'. Nandi has been pivotal in the organization of the group Save Beeliar Wetlands who, among other activities, met fortnightly for eight years. We both live in the area, and experienced the protest as part of our everyday lives. We would often be up at dawn during those three months, for a protest event, or to report on movements of fencers or trappers or bulldozers in anticipation of the day's action. The protestors would swell before work, and then dwindle after 9am to mostly parents with children over the school holidays. We would also be up during the night, at meetings, at training, pushing down fences in the hope of delaying the next day's clearing, at poetry readings, or fundraising concerts, printing hi-vis vests, uploading digital footage. Sometimes we'd just be up at night because there was so much dust in the air, in our houses, in our mouths, from the removal of plant growth from sandy Perth dunes. The next three poems are responses to the protests.

The Law

So this is it:
60 or so of us standing in the road.
The riot squad are yelling MOVE, MOVE

but my feet have become stones cemented into the tarmac.
Someone grabs my hand and the police horse
staggers into my shoulder,

her sweat and fear smell like my own,
pulse galloping around the field of my body
charging and kicking at fences.

When the drilling rig enters the wetlands
surrounded by officers with tasers and guns,
the horse's legs and chest push

into my spine causing me
to trip, stand, fall, stumble,
the swamp clicks and sighs;

the Siberian birds wade into the centre,
their beaks piercing the lake's membrane,
their law trembling in the mud.

Nannas

Because silver hair shines in the moonlight
we dress in black and cover our heads
when we stalk at night in the banksia woods.

The dumped couch is a handy screen;
fallen branches make crooked spoons
to stir our diversionary recipe.

Buckets of cement in each hand we stagger
towards the fence line, becoming statues
in the headlights of passing cars;

becoming tuart, balga, marri.

When I tell the policeman that I'm old enough to be his Nanna
he snarls *Why don't you act like one*,
which is what I am doing; mixing and stirring,

pouring wet cement into the fence post holes,
holding the future from the inside of the compound,
railing against extinction from the muted

grey space of the paddy wagon.

Wind

When you undressed last night,
nuts and bolts spilled from your pockets
twirling like spinning tops across the floorboards
into the corners off the room.

You said that the hardware store
had run out of spanners of a particular size,
as every day the fencers come
to repair the nights damage,
and every night the ghosts
of banksia and quenda, dressed
in the shadows of moon and cloud,
unmake the wire that keeps people out
and bulldozers in.

In the morning we all agree
that the wind was very strong last night
suddenly blowing a howling tempest;
strong enough to knock down fences,
gentle enough to leave trees standing.

Creative responses

During the Roe 8 protests poets met to share their responses, to recite their incantations at the site, to film them and post them on YouTube and even to publish a chapbook, prompting academic Tony Hughes-d'Aeth to provide commentary in *The Conversation* with the title 'Can poetry stop a highway?' (Hughes-d'Aeth 2017a). Poets were not the only active creatives: artists responded with public projects, musicians constantly at the site recorded 2 albums with over 30 original songs during the campaign (Musicians for Beeliar 2017). There was street theatre, graffiti, even a musical set in motion (Whish-Wilson et al 2017).

In this paper, however, we're interested in what we do with those feelings of loss and grief after the heat of protests, after the focus of collective activity, after witnessing radical ecological destruction. After the cessation of Roe 8 we reclaim the scarred land, patrol for signs of regrowth, lobby for land protection and form organisations to prevent it happening again, but we wonder what can be done with the broken hearts and the broken ribs from being cornered by police horses, with the gut-wrenching sounds of trees falling and the dry mouths filled with dust, but mostly with the physical symptoms that we still feel down in the pit of our stomach. Our psychoterratic relations are played out in our bodies and demand expression.

Topophilia is a term first used by poet WH Auden in the 1940s, however its articulation of a 'love of place' has arguably been superseded by Glenn Albrecht's term *solastalgia* (2005). Solastalgia combines the Latin roots *solacium* (solace), *nostos* (return home), and *algos* (pain) to articulate literally, 'the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one's home and territory' (Albrecht 2005: 17). It is 'a form of homesickness like that experienced with traditionally defined nostalgia, except that the victim has not left their home or home environment' (McManus et al 2014: 59). Developed in relation to the psychic effects of long term drought, and open cut mining in the Hunter Valley, solastalgia is 'typically the distress manifest at the chronic change to the external, physical environment' (59), however as Albrecht suggests,

> the most poignant moments of solastalgia occur when individuals directly experience the transformation of a loved environment. Watching land clearing (tree removal) or building demolition, for example, can be the cause of a profound distress that can be manifest as intense visceral pain and mental anguish. (2005: 46)

Solastalgia thus enfolds both melancholia and mourning, terms which Freud distinguished as different responses to the loss of a loved object (1914): mourning is a conscious response to grief and its resolution, while melancholia is the ongoing, chronic incapacity to do so at an unconscious level, which becomes pathological. These terms are useful for finding a language to speak about the physical intensity we experience just reflecting on that summer's activism (and every time we have presented this as a paper). Such terms allow us to make sense of, in the words of Australian philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, of 'the peculiar relations that art establishes between the living body, the forces of the universe and the creation of the future' (Grosz 2008: 3).

Symptoms of Solastalgia

Today the bulldozer is scheduled to scrape
the centuries from the sacred swamp,
and I should be there to witness
but my limbs are heavy as wood,
my stomach hard as a stone;
my heart is slamming blood around my body
faster than my arteries can hold it; pounding
against my skull like a drummer marching

away from this body immobile on the bed,
and out into the rain where a group of mourners
are standing at the gates in raincoats,
under umbrellas, keening a lament and even
the police have turned their faces away
to hide the tears in their eyes.
My breath is an exequy moving
like wind through an empty clearing;
this bulldozing of bush is in the body,
roots, branches, leaves and fruit;
rain falling out of season
into freshly churned wheel
ruts carved in the sand.

Activist poetics

Acute and commanding, poetry is a genre that unsettles, resists and speaks truth to those powerful institutions whose main rhetoric is designed to obscure and manipulate. Poetry scholar Philip Mead notes poetry's 'linguistic resistance' to the dominant ideological language of governments and institutions (Mead 2008: 18), and characterises poetry as 'always a meaningful human response to the time and place of its creation' (1). English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1821 essay 'A Defence of Poetry' famously claims that 'poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world', arguing that poetry speaks a more powerful truth than the rhetoric or morality of policy and governance (Shelley 1973: 750). Philosophers have attested to the role of poets in drawing attention to social change. Twentieth century German philosopher Martin Heidegger writes hat 'to be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet in the time of the world's night utters the holy' (Heidegger 1971: 94). As if to underscore this, the publisher at a recent poetry launch in Western Australia commented that she has published no less than 30 poetry titles in the last two years, more than any other publisher she knows. The reason for this, she stated, is that poetry is needed in these contested times (White 2018). Poetry might therefore be said to engage with the limits of the world, the self, and language through what Mead calls the 'lexical unconscious' (2008: 28), bringing to our attention that which is repressed, hidden, or to too terrible to consider.

Activist poetry in response to environmental loss arises from a venerable tradition over centuries. The Nature poetry associated with the Romantic poets – Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the Wordsworths, and John Clare in Britain – is arguably one of the first movements of activist poetics, alongside the American Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, to Walt Whitman, Emily Dickenson, and then Robert Frost, and a later twentieth century movement associated with William Stafford, Denise Levertov and Gary Snyder. The ongoing legacy of those literary movements is evident when Rachel Carson's groundbreaking environmental work *Silent Spring* (1962) begins with an epigraph from Keats' poem, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci': 'the sedge has wither'd from the lake/ and no birds sing'. As John Felstiner argues in *Can Poetry Save the Earth?*:

> Science, policy and activism point the way towards solutions, but something deeper must draw us there. Poetry speaks to connection, attentiveness, aliveness, it brings the urgency of the dying reed and the bird without habitat to our attention. (Felstiner 2009: 13)

Articulating affinities with the landscape, and the topographies of belonging, has been a critical feature for environmental poets. The title of Gary Snyder's publication *Earth House Hold* (Snyder 1969), for example, plays on the etymology of the word 'ecology' which was originally coined in 1873 by the German zoologist Ernst Haeckel as 'Okologie'. 'Okologie' is derived from the Greek word 'oikos' meaning 'house, dwelling place, and habitation' (Harper 2011). Thus the term ecology points to earth as home and the reciprocal, responsible relationship with the earth that sustains us. Nineteenth century American poet and philosopher Henry Thoreau describes this relationship in his journals of 1858 in terms of inhabiting the local New England cliffs, meadows, and seasons:

> Here I am at home. In the bare and bleached crust of the earth I recognize my friend… A man dwells in his native valley like a corolla in its calyx, like an acorn in its cup. *Here,* of course, is

> all that you love, all that you expect, all that you are. (Thoreau 2009: 521)

In New England, Australia, a century later, poet Judith Wright is scathing about the ongoing modernist project to flatten and build, as in her poem 'Sanctuary' about the development of a suburb by that name:

> Sanctuary, the sign said. Sanctuary –
> trees, not houses; flat skins pinned to the road
> of possum and native cat; and here the old tree stood
> for how many thousand years? – that old gnome-tree
> some axe-new boy cut down. Sanctuary, it said... (Wright 1994: 139)

Wright's activism is integrally linked with her poetic work (she established the Wildlife Preservation Society in 1960s Queensland, and campaigned endlessly to stop land clearing and sand mining). A contemporary of Wright, Western Australian Dorothy Hewett, was also calling to account the devastation of her home-land wrought by her ancestors; as Hughes-d'Aeth remarks:

> Hewett exhibits the same controlled alarm that Wright so brilliantly mastered, the terror of one who has inherited the earth at the very moment they realize that the earth is under the gravest threat. (Hughes-d'Aeth 2017b: 287)

In the Anthropocene, contemporary ecopoetics is giving voice to urgent concerns about climate change and loss of biodiversity, along with an equally important ecopoetic scholarly criticism that examines issues of colonisation and settler poetics. Peter Minter argues that in the Australian context what is needed is a collaborative move towards 'a decolonised geopoethics' in which 'an existential common ground' between colonised first-nation people and settler poetics addresses issues of how culture, land and country is imagined, felt and expressed (Minter 2016).

In the current milieu poetry serves as activist in both speaking out against destruction of Earth's biological systems, and as an expression of grief and mourning, or solastalgia when ecosystems are destroyed. In October 2017, *Plumwood Mountain, The Australian Journal of Ecopoetry and Ecopoetics*, published poetry responding to the Adani Group's proposed Carmichael thermal coal mine in the north of the Galilee Basin in Central Queensland. Titled 'Poets Speak Up to Adani – Day of Action', the issue included poetry from over 40 prominent Australian poets (Plumwood Inc 2017). Localised campaigns like Adani and Roe 8 that generate poetic responses are critical in building an archive of ecopoetics and activist poetry, which although site-specific, address the wider global issues of environmental destruction and climate change.

Home place

The Swan Coastal Plain as a 'home place' has been irrevocably altered so that many of the species and spatial markers that defined it as a bioregion are no longer in existence. The country that the city of Perth has been built upon is a storied landscape, named, known and cared for by thousands of generations of Noongar people. Noongar people of the Swan Coastal Plain surely experience solastalgia on a profound cultural level, having lived through dispossession, loss of habitat and biodiversity, culture and language. This too can be traced through poetry.

The publication of Kath Walker's collection of poetry *We Are Going* in 1964 has been attributed as 'the "arrival" of Aboriginal writing' (Rooney 2009: 61; Davis 1985: 12), and signals another movement of activist poetics in response to of environmental loss, from an Indigenous perspective. A Noonuccal woman of Minjerribah/Stradbroke Island, later known under the name of Oodgeroo, her title poem is figured around loss:

> We are nature and the past, all the old ways
> Gone now and scattered.
> The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter.
> The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place.
> The bora ring is gone.
> The corroboree is gone.
> And we are going. (Walker 1981: 78)

The poem parallels the loss of animals and land with ritual, culture, and echoes the dominant white sentiment of the time of the 'dying race', while also arriving to resist it. The devastation of land/culture is a feature of Indigenous poetry since then. Western Australian Noongar poet Jack Davis, who was writing since the 1930s and finally published in 1970 following Oodgeroo's success, laments the destruction of the south-west forests in his poem 'Forest Giant', closely identifying himself with the old forest giant.

> High on the hill, you missed
> the faller's ace and saw
> But they destroyed the others
> down the slope
> and on the valley floor.
> Now you and I
> bleed in sorrow and in silence
> for what once had been
> while the rapists still
> stride across
> and desecrate the land. (Davis 1992: 63)

Almost three decades later Noongar poet Alf Taylor laments his mother's ancestral country while driving through

> the cancerous salinity
> that dies under the hot sun
> after the first, second, third… settlers
> have ripped out all the trees
> in the farming areas of the land
> we have just passed… (Taylor 2009: 89-90)

Just as western environmental activist poetry arises from a long tradition of nature poetry, Aboriginal activist poetry stems from an attentive relation with the natural world. Before publication of written poetry in the western tradition, the Noongar Bibbulmun songs that anthropologist Daisy Bates recorded in 1905 in Western Australia made her proclaim Aboriginal Australians to be 'the first poets' (Bates 1992: 142) given their oral transmission and improvisation over thousands of generations. Given the loss of hundreds of languages involved in the colonization of Australia and dispossession of its first peoples, it is significant that the protests to stop Roe 8 generated a poem/song in Noongar. 'Dabakarn', written by Della Rae Morrison, is one of a select group of poems included in the publication *Never Again*, which documents and analyses environmental responsibility after the Roe 8 campaign.

Dabakarn nidja bilya
Dabakarn noon aba koorndarm… (Morrison 2017: 75)

While the content of the poem might be inaccessible to those unfamiliar with Noongar language, its rhythms and sounds in its collective chanting were unmistakably powerful ground. Literary ecocritic Tony Hughes-d'Aeth writes that poetry is 'an invocation of the power of language to speak to a higher law, to a judgement that has no official courts, but nevertheless holds each of us accountable' (2017a). It is with these legacies that we position the creative responses to Roe 8.

Conclusion

As an increasingly common experience in the Anthropocene, solastalgia will demand expression. In our need to comprehend and articulate solastalgia, we propose that a poetic response to the Roe 8 bulldozing offers a complex and intense form of expression that is not restricted to our summer of activism but connects with broader experiences of solastalgia. The expression of personal grief also gives form to collective mourning, in considering 'the ways in which environmental losses leave their mark on the psychic structure of a community, culture, or society' (Mark 2016: 61). We are not suggesting that writing poetry somehow resolves solastalgia in a cathartic way; in fact, it often renders the devastation more acute in its reminder of the depth of feeling at last summer's protests. Rather, these reminders rendered into poetic form act to document and creatively harness such communal experiences, placing this local protest in a much longer and broader transnational forum while also building on the archive of activist ecopoetics. In applying ideas of solastalgia to the 2016/2017 summer, the dread in our guts and heaviness in our chest is articulated into something we can make sense of as part of a collective experience, as well as adding to the circulation of solastalgia as a credible and useful term in the Anthropocene.

In future developments that impact ecological environments, the potential effect on human communities will need to be factored. As McManus, Albrecht and Graham note, formal impact assessment methods in environmental conflicts are limited as they privilege particular discourses associated with scientific, economic and demographic data which offer a formal, distanced, and quantified assessment of landscape (2014). The poetry included in this article provides another form of expression, privileging alternate languages of intimacy, embodiment, and emotional relations with place. As Andrew Mark notes in respect to ecomusicology, 'the creative arts give language, signification, ritual, and community to otherwise unspeakable, un-acknowledgeable, and un-grievable loss and repercussions' (2016: 51). Along with McManus, Albrect and Graham, we call for 'the inclusion of concepts such as solastalgia and topophilia' to be part of formal environmental assessment processes and specifically, in social impact assessments (2014: 59), and we offer this poetry as an avenue for expressing these concepts.

Solastalgia Insomnia
20/01/17

As we roll over in our beds tonight
our hearts swing inside our body cavities
like extinguished lanterns in the wind.

Turn to the left and the pod cracks,
the seed tumbles, photosynthetic fingers
of green shrivel on the branch;

and the branch is a ghost stolen from the sky.
No matter which way we lie there is a hollow
Thud, a falling forest crashing into our ribs.

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