

University of New England

John Charles Ryan

Writing the New England tablelands region of Australia: Radical plant poetry and the gorge-text

Abstract:

Gorge is an experimental, heteroglossic poetry sequence composed collaboratively with the plant life of the Northern Tablelands region of New South Wales, Australia. This article theorises *Gorge* as a work of ‘radical plant poetry’ and as a ‘gorge-text’ derived from – rather than merely representing – the chasmic environments of the Tablelands. Radical plant poetry attends to the phenomenological interplay between human and vegetal domains while highlighting the embodied percipience of plants. My conceptualisation of a gorge-text, moreover, is predicated on the *writing-back* – the modes of communication and signification – of nonhuman dwellers and, in particular, plants. A gorge-text encodes the writing that plants themselves do *in* – and *about* – their worlds as well as the human writer’s *composing-with* plants to create a poetic work. Towards the enactment of these conceptual frames, *Gorge* experiments with vegetal script, poetic composting and sonic composition across its three parts, extracts from which are included in the article.

Biographical note:

John Charles Ryan is a poet and scholar who holds appointments as Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at the University of New England in Australia and Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Humanities at the University of Western Australia. His teaching and research cross between the environmental and digital humanities. He is the author or editor of the books *Digital Arts* (Bloomsbury, 2014), *The Language of Plants* (University of Minnesota, 2017), *Plants in Contemporary Poetry* (Routledge, 2017), *Southeast Asian Ecocriticism* (Lexington, 2017) and *Forest Family* (Brill, 2018).

Keywords:

ecopoetics – writing in regions – radical plant poetry – environmental texts – Northern Tablelands, Australia

Edgar's Lookout, Wollomombi Gorge, 30.5325° S, 152.0334° E

In a manila folder
 at the Beadle Herbarium,
 the golden everlasting
Xerochrysum bracteatum
 with its faded papery bracts.
 Collected at Wollomombi
 in the nineteenth century,
 it was known in Europe
 then as *immortelle*.

The immortal specimen.
 Its dried rootlets adhere
 to miniscule cosmoses of soil.
 Its lanky stems appear
 gasping for last breath. It itches
 to fulfill some chthonic
 covenant, which will remain
 broken until the right
 time comes to us.

And when it does,
 we will overbrim with
 blessing. Gums, geckos and
 echidnas, too, will welcome
 kin home. What is this feeling
 shared among us? What
 commonness tugs like gravity
 at us? Without one another,
 what will become of us?
 (Gorge Part I, 'scriptorium', 2018)

Preamble: Out for a walk

Since 2017, I have been living and working in the Northern Tablelands region of New South Wales, Australia, halfway between Sydney and Brisbane, and a two-hour drive west of the Pacific Ocean. Throughout Australia, the plateau is known for its unusual elevation, plunge waterfalls, and four discrete seasons, as well as its considerable geological and biological diversity (Atkinson, Ryan, Davidson & Piper 2006). Intensively cleared of its original vegetation since European colonisation in the early nineteenth century, the region comprises a network of deeply incised gorges around which a conservation system – including Oxley Wild Rivers National Park, named after the British explorer – has developed in recent decades. Although the plateau has

been heavily modified by agricultural activity over the last two hundred years, the gorges themselves remain sanctuaries for plants and animals adapted to the rugged terrain and largely shielded from the catastrophic impacts of settlement.

In my poetry, I return to the idea (and spirit) of the gorge – the chasm, canyon, valley, glen, void – as sanctuary and refuge. I view the gorge as a haven for mind, spirit and body, for non-human and human beings. I approach the gorge as a locus of self- and other-seeking and self-to-other-actualisation. As a writer-naturalist, I am enthralled by the botanical domain and regard plants as teachers, allies, friends, confidantes and living fountainheads of inspiration and wellbeing. My unpublished poetry sequence, *Gorge*, experiments with voice, address, form, structure, lineation and syntax in an effort to express something new about the mysteries of the gorges, particularly their vegetal – tree, shrub, herb – inhabitants. In writing the work, I employed a field-based, site-focused, *en plein air* practice. I visited, walked in, read about, observed, touched, smelled, tasted – where possible – and listened to different gorges within a one-hour drive of Armidale. I captured my sensory impressions in a notebook and also with an audio recorder – especially for Part III of *Gorge* – then transformed this raw data, garnered from the field, into what I regard as an experimental work of poetry.

Although a speculative and, at times, playful expression of the idea of flora talking back, *Gorge* does reflect my thinking about theoretical developments in vegetal cognition and phyto-acoustics. Through laboratory-based evidence, both fields suggest that plants have a kind of intelligence and voice. Indeed, empirical studies demonstrate to an increasing degree that plants exhibit complex behaviour, including the capacity to make judgements and engage in decision-making processes (Karban & Orrock 2018). Moreover, phyto-acoustic research confirms that plants emit particular sound signatures that enable them to distinguish between stimuli and communicate with other organisms in their habitats (Gagliano 2012). The ecological function of sound implies the presence of agency in the plant, which has been regarded in the Western intellectual tradition as the polar opposite of the animal – that is, as passive, mute, and lacking cognitive abilities (Marder 2013).

This article provides a critical commentary on *Gorge* beginning with an overview of the structure of the sequence followed by a discussion of my perception of the writing as difficult, unruly and transgressive. I posit ‘radical plant poetry’ as a new ecopoetic genre and also propose the concept of the ‘gorge-text’ as a poetic work derived from – rather than merely serving as an aesthetic representation of – New England gorges. I then go on to detail the multi-sensorial, ecological, field-based, collaborative, reflexive and arts-based practice as research methodology devised for the sequence before analysing in detail the three parts of *Gorge* – scriptorium, tree and excubitorium – respectively, in terms of their formal features and experimental enactments.

Introduction to *Gorge*: The value of difficult, unruly and transgressive poetry

Across its three parts, *Gorge* comprises approximately twenty-six poems. The precise poem count, however, would vary considerably according to how a reader or critic

would define these elements. Part I, ‘scriptorium: a place of writing’, for instance, is both a single, long, heteroglossic poem and an arrangement of eight separate poems mediated by a particular overarching aesthetic. The poems are punctuated by digitally stylised black and white photographs; source texts translated to Chinese, Greek, Latin, Pashto and Thai; found texts sourced from national park information kiosks and tourist venues; and direct quotations from historical documents, namely, Oxley’s *Journals of Two Expeditions Into the Interior of New South Wales* (1964, first published in 1820), and a firsthand account of the scene of the murder of John Stapleton at the Hillgrove mines (1888). Part II, ‘tree: fifteen composted sonnets’, similarly is a single narrative meditation as well as a micro-collection of fifteen independent sonnets interleaved with photographs rendered as pencil sketches in order to generate visual cohesion across the poems. Part III, ‘excubitorium: a place of vigil’, furthermore, comprises three poems, each consisting of four stanzas and named after one of the three main tree species – wattle, bertya and bulloak – prevalent on the rim of Dangar’s Gorge in the New England region.

The title of the work, *Gorge*, invokes the dual inflection of the word as a noun and verb. Indeed, the etymological origins of ‘gorge’ in the late Latin and Old French terms for ‘throat’ are endlessly intriguing to me, especially in light of the narrative of John Stapleton’s ghastly murder in the late 1800s, referenced in ‘Hillgrove Mine Lookout’ in Part I. As its etymology indicates, first and foremost, a gorge is a body – consuming, swallowing, and digesting but also regurgitating, replenishing, and protecting. Indeed, it is the idea of the gorge as sanctuary that I have found most generative. Hensleigh Wedgwood’s *A Dictionary of English Etymology*, for example, traces the English term back to the Old French *gorge* for ‘throat or narrow passage’ and the Italian *gorgo* for gulph, whirlpool, spout or roiling water (Wedgwood 1862: 168). Wedgwood also highlights the curious etymological interplay of *gorge* and *gorgeous* in which the adjective originally denoted a holding ‘back the head and thrust[ing] forwards the throat and chest’ as a form of ostentatious body display. Douglas Harper (2018: paras 1–2), moreover, explains that, as a noun, ‘gorge’ originated in the fourteenth century from the late Latin ‘gorges’ for ‘gullet, throat, jaws’ and the Latin ‘gurgulio’ for ‘gullet or windpipe’. In the 1520s, additionally, ‘gorge’ began to signify ‘what has been swallowed’ (ibid). The term arose as a verb in the fourteenth century from the Old French for ‘to eat greedily or swallow by gulps’ (ibid).

Without question, gorges are physically and metaphysically exacting environments – defined by steep terrain, unstable slopes and unpredictable weather – and, thus, I intended for *Gorge* to be an unruly and ‘difficult’ poetry sequence mimetic of the gorges themselves. Reginald Shepherd describes difficult poetry as focused on ‘a kind of pleasure, in the words, the rhythms, the palpable texture of the poem. It’s the opposite of boredom’ (2008: sect. 1, para. 3). Shepherd rejects a feel-good view that equates poetry to Hallmark greeting cards composed in a sweet lyric voice, easily assimilable by readers – that is, placing no excessive demands upon them – and relatively mono-dimensional in meaning, message, and presentation. Although challenging the intellect, difficult poetry is careful not to alienate: ‘I don’t object to being baffled, though I also don’t want to remain in bafflement indefinitely’ (ibid:

para 6). To be certain, Shepherd contends that incomprehension and frustration ‘can seduce in poems just as they can in people: many objects of desire are *obscure, but their outlines are clear*’ (ibid: para 7, emphasis added). His statement is an apposite characterisation of Part II of *Gorge* in which the obscure forms of plant-texts become objects of desire in discourse with the environment (through the practice of sonnetic composting) and the human subject (through the direct address of the first-(plant)person).

Gorge experiments with all modes of poetic difficulty enumerated by Shepherd (ibid: sect. 2, paras 1–3): *lexical* (language with specialised or idiosyncratic meaning); *allusive* (references not readily understood by general readers); *syntactical* (complex, indeterminate or fractured syntax); *semantic* (open-ended meaning); *formal* (readers cannot immediately identify the poem as of a certain kind); and *modal* (readers cannot determine if the work is, in fact, poetry or not). The difficulty, intractability and transgressiveness of *Gorge* and its many lively plant speakers reflect the natural world’s refusal of comprehensibility. Defying the human temporal frame, the deep time of the gorges suffuses all dimensions of these dramatically incised landforms and our experiences of them. Hence, *Gorge* is predicated on the idea that to walk in, around and above the New England gorges – and to encounter their unique vegetal forms – is to venture into an incomprehensible yet tangible, remote yet accessible, timescape.

Radical plant poetry and the emergence of the gorge-text

One means to contextualise *Gorge* is in relation to the emergence of ‘new nature writing’, defined as a genre of environmental literature examining the dynamics between landscape, ethics and human selfhood (Smith 2017). Literary critic Richard Kerridge first alluded to the term in 2001, in his assertion that ‘environmentalism calls for a *new nature writing*, clearly differentiated from the conservative tradition and aware of its appeal and dangers’ (qtd in Smith 2017: 11, emphasis added). In his defence of the genre, Robert Macfarlane cites social scientist Gregory Bateson’s ‘ecological aesthetics’ as a re-enchantment with the natural world, entailing a movement away from object-subject reductionism through literature, art, music, and other creative forms that attend to the dynamic presence of nature (2015: para 1). Macfarlane further argues that new nature writing ‘can revise our ethical relations with the natural world, shaping our place consciousness and our place conscience’ (2015: para 1). Critiquing the excesses of *technocracy* yet recognising the importance of *technology* in the world, the genre – in Macfarlane’s view – is ‘ethically alert, theoretically literate and wary of the seductions and corruptions of the pastoral’ (2015: para 14).

For new nature writers and ecocritics, the ‘pastoral’ signifies an outdated mode of landscape aesthetics and environmental writing predicated on Romantic ideals that risk marginalising ethical responsibility for human impacts on place, for instance, through broadscale industrialisation, soil degradation, water pollution and biodiversity loss. *Gorge* is a poetic transgression aligned with the ideals of new nature writing yet consciously departing from the lyric mode that dominates landscape aesthetics. In its

use of form and language, the work confronts some of the wider concerns of the Anthropocene – the current geological epoch characterised by widespread, human-induced ecological change (Zalasiewicz 2017) – but through an intense focus on the New England region of Australia.

Gorge is also a polyphonic sequence representative of an ecopoetic genre I call ‘radical plant poetry’. I position the text within the Western tradition of landscape poetry, characterised as ‘poetry which engages with place, locality and “nature” (or what we have left of it)’ (Tarlo 2011: 7). More precisely, the sequence is an Australian enactment of contemporary British ‘radical landscape poetry’ using exploratory and experimental techniques to expand the limits of form (Tarlo 2011: 8). The work of British modernist poets, such as Wendy Mulford (1998), Peter Riley (2003) and Colin Simms (2004), exhibits a prominent interconnection between the spatial arrangement of poems on the page and the landscapes to which they refer (Tarlo 2011: 8). The poetry of Mulford, Riley and Simms incorporate, for instance, prose blocks, found texts, unusual stanza structures, kennings (compound expressions), neologisms, parataxis (short sentences linked by coordinating conjunctions) and other experimental elements to engender what literary critic Clive Scott provocatively terms a ‘textual ecology’ (2015: 285). Rather than sentimentalising pastoral (and plant) life, radical landscape (and plant) poetry remains ‘more realistic in its view of contemporary landscape, rural people and past and present agricultural and social issues’ (Tarlo 2011: 11). Radical plant poetry – as I proffer the term here – attends to the phenomenological interplay between human and vegetal domains while highlighting the embodied percipience of plants.

Gorge can furthermore be regarded as a ‘gorge-text’ – a poetic work emerging in collaboration with chasmic environments and their inhabitants. I understand a gorge-text as more than a linguistic representation of the natural world. It is a sentient, agentic, mutable, indeterminate, and responsive poem-object-being whose structure emerges continuously through the sustained interaction of the writer and the living landscape. In his seminal study, *The environmental imagination*, ecocritic Lawrence Buell outlines four attributes of an ‘environmental text’: (a) the non-human presence in the work imbricates human and natural histories; (b) human value is merely one of many possible values; (c) an ethical orientation to nature recognises human accountability; and (d) the environment is a process rather than a fixity (Buell 1995: 7–8). What’s more, Pippa Marland and Anna Stenning theorise ‘walk-texts’ as those evolving from ‘embodied practice and performance ... stimulating an ecologically ethical sensibility’ (2017: 3–4). Unlike Buell, Marland and Stenning, however, my conceptualisation of a gorge-text is predicated on the *writing-back* – the modes of communication and signification – of nonhuman dwellers and, in particular, plants. A gorge-text encodes the writing that plants themselves do in – and about – their life-worlds as well as the human author’s *writing-with* plants collaboratively to create a poetic work. Vegetal intelligence and creativity, thus, perfuse a gorge-text and, thereby, destabilise a view of authorship as egoistic, human-privileged and sharply separated from nonhuman activity.

Towards a methodology of field-based gorge poetics

As mentioned in the preamble, in composing *Gorge*, I developed a multi-sensorial, ecological, field-based, collaborative, reflexive and arts-based practice as research methodology tailored to the New England gorge-scape. My approach was multi-sensorial insofar as I attempted to engage my full palette of senses – seeing, listening, touching, smelling, tasting – while also considering the potential sensory experiences of plants in response to me, as summarised by biologist Daniel Chamovitz in *What a Plant Knows* (2012). My writing was ecological in that it considered the relationship between environmental phenomena (elements, weather, seasons, rocks, plants, animals) and the poems – while also conceptualising the poems *themselves* as autonomous natural phenomena subject to states of growth and decay, of appearance and disappearance. Thus, from my perspective, the poems on the page remain part of the gorge ecosystem – with dirt clinging metaphorically to their roots, much like the golden everlasting specimen in ‘Edgar’s Lookout’. My practice was field-based insofar as, during 2018, I visited New England gorge-scapes, namely, Guy Fawkes, Wollomombi, Metz, Gara, Macleay, Dangar’s, Apsley and Tia gorges (Figure 1). To be certain, a field-based approach has been a hallmark of environmental writing since the origins of the genre in nineteenth-century British Romanticism (Caplow & Cohen 2010). Walking, for instance, was integral to Wordsworth’s poetics (Wallace 1993). As an example of my ecological and field-based approach, Part I of *Gorge* employs GPS coordinates in titling and ordering the poems, affirming the primacy of emplacement and locatedness in the sequence. Part II, additionally, experiments with sonnetic composting in order to introduce the biological processes of the gorges into the formal features of the text.



Figure 1: Long Point, Macleay Gorge, August 2018. Source: Author

My approach was collaborative in that I regarded the gorges and their plants as active contributors to – and, indeed, as co-authors of – the poetry. In particular, the composition of Part II reflects the application of theoretical principles from experimental filmmaking (Ramey 2016: 5–32) and environmental art (Wallis & Kastner 1998) that centralise processes of deconstruction and decay. While not removing my role in mediating the writing of *Gorge*, I did attempt to relinquish creative control – if only momentarily and if only as a thought experiment. The methodology was reflexive insofar as I acid-tested different writing ideas and techniques in and away from the field, uncovering what worked and what required more development. To this effect, I positioned my regionally-based writing practice reflexively within the theoretical frame elaborated in this article, enabling myself to refine, enlarge and gain critical awareness of my decisions. In this regard, Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson distinguish between reflection and reflexivity:

Where reflection could be said to involve taking something into oneself – a topic, an event, a relationship – for the purpose of contemplation or examination, reflexivity involves putting something out in order that something new might come into being. It involves creating an internal space, distancing ourselves from ourselves. (Hunt & Sampson 2006: 4)

Reflexivity is essential to an arts-based approach that underscores ‘the way in which practice can result in research insights, such as those that arise out of making a creative work and/or in the documentation and theorisation of that work’ (Smith & Dean 2009: 2). I prefer the term *practice as research* to encompass research processes that result in creative artefacts – including poetic texts – as well as those in which a creative outcome is one dimension of a multi-methodological approach. For Estelle Barrett, practice as research centres on the theory-practice interchange and involves ‘the production of knowledge or philosophy in action’ (2010: 1). The methodology developed for *Gorge* hinged on a movement between field writing, drafting poems away from the field, and contemplating the whole process through the conceptual optics of radical plant poetry and the gorge-text.

In the ensuing three sections, I provide further methodological details about the three parts of *Gorge*. I want to conclude this section by briefly alluding to four poetic works – Alice Oswald’s *Dart* (2002), Angela Rawlings’ *Wide Slumber for Lepidopterists* (2006), Jody Gladding’s *Translations from Bark Beetle* (2014) and Wendy Burk’s *Tree Talks* (2016) – that I have found inspiring and that reflect the use of some of the approaches I have delineated above. Oswald’s *Dart* is the T.S. Eliot prize-winning outcome of three years of natural, cultural, and phenomenological research into the River Dart in Devon. The poet characterises the long poem as ‘a sound-map of the river, a songline from the source to the sea ... all voices should be read as the river’s mutterings’ (Oswald 2002: np). Unlike Oswald, Rawlings interrogates the harsh laboratory procedures used to acquire knowledge of butterflies and caterpillars by appropriating the technical language of entomological discourse: ‘*Catch specimen in aerial net. / Pinch thorax between thumb and forefinger. / Slide specimen into envelope; store in box with insecticide*’ (Rawlings 2006: 23, italics in original). The poetic inscriptions drawn from science are accompanied by illustrations by bookmaker Matt Ceolin. In contrast, Gladding’s *Translations* considers the physical

traces left by bark beetles in trees and other natural objects as a lexicon of the nonhuman world. Burk's *Tree Talks* (2016) also examines the heteroglossia of the natural world through transcriptions of 'unstructured interviews' with eight Southern Arizona trees: cottonwood, pine, willow, juniper, eucalyptus, mesquite, palo verde and weeping fig. A transcript-poem with a cottonwood, for instance, begins with this question: 'Tell me about your experience of time here' (Burk 2016: 5).

scriptorium

Part I of *Gorge* is titled 'scriptorium' with the intentional use of decapitalisation. In her foreword to Melissa Range's recent poetry collection *Scriptorium* (2016: xii), American Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith characterises this unusual titular term as 'a room where monks sat copying manuscripts. The word calls to the sense of what is precious, what must be made and remade, what one could give one's entire life to preserving'. My invocation of the peculiar, monastic, Latinate noun is meant to connote the austerity, isolation and – ecological – urgencies of the New England gorges. Yet, in another sense, I regard the chasmic landscapes of the tablelands as loci of diverse nonhuman linguae in which plants and other beings write the letters of their lives in material strata, addressed to us, each other, and their gods. The gorges, then, are fundamentally linguistic topoi, constituted by vocabularies humankind has yet to fully recognise or comprehend. Towards the ecopoetic enactment of gorge-as-scriptorium, Part I comprises a wide array of elements and styles: eight poems, each with a distinctive form, mode of address, and formulation of language; ten photographs converted to black and white sketches (using the online software Lunapic); three excerpts from Oxley's published journal translated to Latin, Greek, and Chinese (using Google Translate); one prose quotation from my field notebook translated to Thai (using Google Translate); passages taken from a story about the Hillgrove murder appearing originally in *The Armidale Chronicle* and reproduced later in *The Brisbane Courier* (1888); and the unpaginated errata from Oxley's journal, appropriated *in toto* as a found text for Part I's conclusion.

In the radical landscape sense articulated by Tarlo (2011), the eight poems comprising 'scriptorium' push the boundaries of poetic form and display a high degree of topographical specificity. Precise locations and GPS coordinates supplied in the courier-font headlines serve ambiguously as titles locating the reader geographically, as well as blunt rubrics for indexing site visits in non-poetic language. The poems 'Chaelundi Camp' and 'Edgar's Lookout' begin Part I with observational narratives from the field presented in the omniscient third-person voice: the bogging of a bus packed with conservation students departing Guy Fawkes National Park after dark and the examination of a pressed specimen of golden everlasting (*Xerochrysum bracteatum*) at the Beadle Herbarium in Armidale. The poems exhibit visually pleasing forms that, by all accounts, neither disorient nor discomfit. 'Hillgrove Mine Lookout', in contrast, constitutes an abrupt shift away from the attractive forms and quietening voices of these poems, particularly through its incorporation of boxed quotes from *The Brisbane Courier* story. The text-knives following the second boxed quote as well as the parallel mine shaft forms – translated to Greek, Pashto and

mirrored text – after the fourth boxed quote produce a distinctly unsettling effect in the reader. In addition to experimenting with form, the poem underscores heteroglossia as an attribute of the gorges. Ultimately, however, translation between human-nonhuman languages – and ‘histories’, as in Buell’s theorisation of the ‘environmental text’ referenced earlier – proves difficult, if not impossible. In other instances from Part I, modernist British landscape poetry influenced my usage of certain forms. The table-like layout of ‘Salisbury Waters’, as a case in point, reflects my appreciation of Bill Griffith’s use of textual columniation in *Fragments: A history of the solar system* (1978).

A conspicuous aspect of Part I is its engagement with Oxley’s journal – the first published European account of the Northern Tablelands gorges of New South Wales. The surveyor-explorer was an astute observer of plants and, with a taxonomic eye, noted rocks ‘covered with epidendra [orchids], bignoniae [bignonias], or trumpet-flowers and clematides [clematis], or virgin’s bower’ (Oxley 1964: 294). His journal is also an *abyss-text* in which his journey on foot through and around the gorges engendered the shape, style and content of his narrative. I also found it oddly coincidental that Oxley passed through the tablelands in September 1818, exactly two hundred years ago (or nearly, at the time of this writing). My palimpsesting of an entry from 23 September 1818 about the literal bursting of one of his mares ‘with the violent exertion which the ascent required’ (Oxley 1964: 310) provoked my writing of ‘Long Point’, in which I relate an experience of Macleay Gorge (included below). The poem likens Oxley’s mare to a thought burdened by an oppressive mental terrain and which must be eliminated in order not to hinder one’s metaphysical progress. Oxley’s mare reappears in ‘Riverglade Boundary Trail’, a palimpsesting of the eleventh poem of Part II. A mirroring effect in the structure of the poem approximates the passage of sound through the gorges but also evokes the echoic movement of thought from one side of the mind to the other over the gulf that is consciousness. In its narration from the mare’s perspective, the poem marks a transition to the first-(plant)person voice that directs Part II.

Long Point, Macleay Gorge, 30.6662° S, 151.9368° E

The Thought Mare
plateaus across canter
wordless to edge mere
of world-rough dermis
infields rimple by step—
IN She steep IS Thought mere.

See She body beneath
at piece asleep wooded
prone thigh-seep peace
wind-brush bryophyte feld
wimples quaver by cleft—
IN She Thought IS gorge seethe.

Touch She timed-etch
 brusque in pangeal purge
 plummet from glyph fold
 schlerophyll of peripheral
 trilled winged falsetto fill—
IS She Thought IN mottled flesh.

Olfact She diacritic frill
 smokespiral from abyss
 waddle width praematurus
 in yellow dentata sublingual
 her velvet curve belly burst—
IS She Thought IN I must kill.
 (from *Gorge* Part I, 'scriptorium', 2018)

tree

Unlike Part I, the second part of the sequence bears a simple name: 'tree'. This de(re)generative midsection of *Gorge* consists of fifteen variations on the Petrarchan sonnet composed in collaboration with chasms, plants, insects, soil, elements – cold, warmth, moisture, dryness – and processes of decay. Centred on the page and, thus, delineating text-bodies, the sonnets adhere to – yet often deviate from – the conventional Petrarchan rhyme scheme ABBA ABBA CDCDCD. Set in intertextual relation to Joyce Kilmer's lyric poem 'Trees' (1914), Part II incorporates concrete-visual forms, archaic language, taxonomic allusions, and glossolalic gestalt to produce a readerly experience of linguistic dissolution and convergence. I envision the sonnetic cycle as a digital projection played on a loop, prompting a hypnotic response from viewer-readers as the organic text-bodies morph into one another. Towards the notion of interspecies collaboration proposed earlier, I planted, composted, digested, and seeded the poems at New England gorges (Figure 2). A sense of human-nonhuman reciprocity emerged through the ceremonial earthing and unearthing – gorging and disgorging – of sonnets and fragments. An assemblage of seen and unseen chasm-dwellers worked over the source-sonnets, contributing terms, connotations, inflections, syntax, marginalia, elisions, and deletions, which I then integrated into successive versions of these gorge-texts.



Figure 2: Composted sonnets with evidence of insect activity, July–August 2018. Source: Author



Figure 3: The de(re)composing of Kilmer's 'Trees' after decay introduces indeterminacy into classic couplets such as these. Source: Author

The open-ended sonnetic cycle, accordingly, fluctuates with seasonal conditions, soil moisture, root activity, burrowing insects, microbial digesting, human (umm, my

own) forgetting and other de(re)compositional processes. Weeks of heavy rain, for instance, rapidly intensified decay, resulting in a papier-mâché clod. Agents of de(re)construction, furthermore, rewrote a couplet from ‘Trees’ as ‘I think I shall never / A poem lovely as a tr’, injecting hesitation and indeterminacy into Kilmer’s classic, as well as into the Petrarchan arrangement (Figure 3). Another example from this collaboratively authored work is the palimpsested sonnet beginning ‘Nor am eye mere spectacle’ (eleventh in the sequence). This sonnet came about when source poems fused to produce composite lines such as ‘a munted fetish of cruelest seeing’. Additional weeks of decomposition – and co-authorial fiddling – resulted in the final poem of Part I, which begins ‘Nor am aye mare spectacle’. Eschewing the third-person all-knowing point-of-view, the sonnets of Part II deploy the first-(plant)person mode of address consistently throughout. Endowing tableland flora with cognition, perception, and emotion, the sonnets engender heteroglossia. This inverts the anthropocentric gaze, placing attention instead on the fallibility of the human writer. The sonnet-cycle, in this way, joins contemporary poetic work, notably Louise Glück’s *The Wild Iris* (1992) and Les Murray’s *Translations from the Natural World* (1992), narrated from the standpoint of vegetal life and propounding a view of plant-subjects as intelligent. As the plants examine and express their interior lives, liberated from the distancing function of third-person voice, the sonnets come to represent ever-evolving collaborative forays into the consciousness of the botanical world.

granite above meme above granite.
 whatbird left me herehere me left birdwhat.
 justheard gust beneathbeneath gust heardjust.
 planted bones underunder bones planted.
 canit be long herehere long be itcan.
 touch of rime overover rime of touch.
 clutchrim of pure brinkbrink pure of rimclutch.
 planet below meme below planet.
 fineniche of soil slantslant soil of nichefine.
 shadow behind meme behind shadow.
 whineof gorge torrenttorrent gorge ofwhine.
 below is bellowbellow is below.
 chineof me still herehere still me ofchine.
 bellow is belowbelow is bellow.
 (from *Gorge* Part II, ‘tree’, 2018)

Sonnetic composting experiments with nonhuman editing in an attempt to saturate poetry with the voice(s) of nature. In this regard, I have been inspired by transgressive techniques of ‘distressing’ film that foreground the ways in which images break down through burying, exposing to wind, hanging outside and submerging in water (Ramey 2016: 23). To create *Self Portrait Post Mortem*, for instance, filmmaker Louise Bourque buried family footage in her backyard garden, retrieving the film several years later to disclose ‘an unearthed time capsule ... with nature as collaborator’ (Bourque qtd in Takahashi 2008: 58). The degradation of the sonnets signifies their materiality as well as their various relations in the world.

Nonetheless, composting is also symbolic of poems as seeds – of hope, renewal, inspiration and transformation. Activist-author Rebecca Solnit comments that ‘writers understand that action is seldom direct. You write your books. You scatter your seeds. Rats might eat them, or they might just rot [...] some seeds lie dormant for decades because they only germinate after fire’ (Solnit: para. 9). Nineteenth-century American Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau well before Solnit, of course, wrote that

though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders. (Thoreau 1993)

The sonnet-seeds of Part II symbolise the restorative potential of the gorges in a bioregion that has been widely devastated by colonisation during the two hundred years since Oxley’s mare burst.

excubitorium

Part III ‘excubitorium’ refers to a place of poetic vigil and acts as a coda or outro, bringing *Gorge* to a close. In the gallery of a church, an excubitorium is ‘where public watch was formerly kept at night on the eve of a festival’ and, in a medieval monastery, refers to ‘an apartment for night watchers whose duty it was to call monks to their nocturnal devotions’ (Harris 1977: 57). This final part of the sequence comprises three sonic movements organised around the three main tree species populating the rim of Dangar’s Gorge: gorge wattle (*Acacia ingramii*), gorge bertya (*Bertya ingramii*), and bulloak (*Allocasuarina luehmanii*). Each movement consists of four five-line stanzas and incorporates notation from Frédéric Chopin’s *Nocturne in G Minor, Opus 15, Number 3* (1878, composed originally in 1833). My use of notational extracts from Chopin was influenced by an emerging area of literary theory called ‘notational poetics’, defined as reading and writing that is ‘attentive to everything from actually interpolated musical scores to the silent, “invisible” registers of discourse in texts that are not (necessarily) explicitly scored’ (Carruthers 2017b: xviii). Works of notational poetics, including A.J. Carruthers’ *Axis Book 1: ‘Areal’* (2017a) and Jessica Wilkinson’s *Suite for Percy Grainger* (2014), often integrate graphic elements associated with musical scores and, thereby, call attention to the interplay of music and poetry.



Figure 4: Recording the soundscape at the base of a bulloak. Source: Author

The methodology I devised for writing Part III involved creating short audio recordings of the ambient environments of three trees (Figure 4). These recordings included birdsong as well as the sound of wind percussing branches and leaves. I converted the files from Android format (3gpp) to MP4 then uploaded them to Trint (a free online audio transcription tool) to create sound signatures – or what are known as time codes – for each tree species and its soundscape. I extracted the time codes from Trint and inserted them into the *mise en page* of Part III to act as graphic baselines for the stanzas. I sourced a score of *Nocturne in G Minor* from the International Music Score Library Project and integrated segments in the *mise en page* as a graphic means to set the measure for each stanza. I then wrote the poems in response to what I heard in the audio recordings and, moreover, revised the writing while listening to *Nocturne in G Minor* (Chopin 1878). Indeed, there are occasions in Part III when the words correspond to the audio signature of each species and become mimetic of the soundscapes of gorge plants – for example, in the second stanza of ‘Gorge Wattle’ when ‘[digital|crash]’ signifies the alighting of a cockatoo in a nearby tree.

Gorge rim soon to flower – *scrunch* – flick of Bic lighter,
 plastic click, feedback underheel, thump on drum skin,
 crescendo of interstitial rasp, *somebody’s about to gasp*,
 polite formalities then interview ends, hasty handclasp.
My voice is a heteroglossic bird before you [digital|crash].
 (from *Gorge* Part III, ‘excubitorium’, 2018)

This sonic methodology, however, departed from my original intention to appropriate the online transcription software for directly translating all recorded sounds to the

Roman alphabet. I soon discovered that this technique would have required extensive programming of open-source software because Trint only registers English words, ignores everything else, and is designed efficiently to avoid the transcription of glossolalia and gibberish (two forms of nonhuman vocalisation that, in fact, I am intensely interested in). The approach devised for Part III also deviated from my usual practice of writing by photographs and in response to images. As a consequence, the poems in the final part of *Gorge* are less imagistic and more onomatopoeiac than Parts I and II.

Dream. time consists of mists through me. a falling star
across scorches the hidden lucid. *mared* (*merde*, what I
could do, except this eternal). *armed.* I'm manied. birdly-
baited. weighted with witness and sounded. *derma.* be still
as skin. rapt. in yogic listening. *madre.* orchestral within.
(from *Gorge* Part III, 'excubitorium', 2018)

Conclusion

Through an analysis of *Gorge*, I have proposed the genre of 'radical plant poetry' and characterised the work as a heteroglossic gorge-text composed in collaboration with the chasmic environments and plants of the Northern Tablelands region of New South Wales, Australia. The multi-sensorial, ecological, field-based, collaborative, reflexive and arts based practice as research methodology could be further refined and applied to other gorges in Australia and elsewhere. However, the question of impact remains: how might it be possible for the regionally-based ecological message of *Gorge* to reach a broad audience? One approach would be to extend this mode of collaboration to other human creators, such as artists, illustrators, graphic designers, experimental poets, novelists, playwrights, bloggers, performers, philosophers, botanists, and conservationists. Linked by a love of region and place – *topophilia* – and a love of plants – *phytophilia* – together we would devote ourselves to 'what is precious, what must be made and remade, what one could give one's entire life to preserving' (Smith qtd in Range 2016: xii).

Works cited

- Armidale Chronicle, The 1888 'Horrible Murder at Hillgrove Mines', *The Brisbane Courier*, 6 February, <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/3466978>> (accessed 22 August 2018)
- Atkinson, Alan, Ryan, John S., Davidson, Iain and Piper, Andrew (eds) 2006 *High Lean Country: Land, People and Memory in New England* Crow's Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin
- Barrett, Estelle 2010 'Introduction' *Practice As Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (2nd ed) Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (eds) London: I.B. Tauris, 1–13
- Buell, Lawrence 1995 *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press
- Burk, Wendy 2016 *Tree Talks: Southern Arizona* Fort Collins, CO: Delete Press

- Caplow, Florence and Cohen, Susan (eds) 2010 *Wildbranch: An Anthology of Nature, Environmental and Place-Based Writing* Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press
- Carruthers, A.J. 2017a *Axis Book 1: 'Areal'* Sydney: Vagabond Press
- Carruthers, A.J. 2017b *Notational Experiments in North American Long Poems, 1961–2011: Stave Sightings* London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Chamovitz, Daniel 2012 *What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses* Melbourne: Scribe
- Gagliano, Monica 2012 'Green Symphonies: A Call for Studies on Acoustic Communication in Plants', *Behavioral Ecology*, 1–7, doi:10.1093/beheco/ars206
- Gladding, Jody 2014 *Translations from Bark Beetle: Poems* Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions
- Glück, Louise 1992 *The Wild Iris* New York: Harper Collins Publishers
- Griffiths, Bill 1978 *Fragments: A History of the Solar System* London: Writers' Forum
- Harper, Douglas 2018 'Gorge', *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <www.etymonline.com/word/gorge> (accessed 19 August 2018)
- Harris, Cyril 1983 *Illustrated Dictionary of Historic Architecture* Mineola, NY: Dover Publications
- Hunt, Celia and Sampson, Fiona 2006 *Writing: Self and Reflexivity* (3rd ed) Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan
- Karban, Richard and Orrock, John 2018 'A Judgment and Decision-Making Model for Plant Behavior', *Ecology* 99 (9), 1909–19, doi:10.1002/ecy.2418
- Kilmer, Joyce 1914 *Trees and Other Poems* New York, NY: George H. Doran Company
- Macfarlane, Robert 2015 'Why We Need Nature Writing', *New Statesman*, 2 September, <www.newstatesman.com/culture/nature/2015/09/robert-macfarlane-why-we-need-nature-writing> (accessed 11 August 2018)
- Marder, Michael 2013 *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* New York, NY: Columbia University Press
- Marland, Pippa and Stenning, Anna 2017 'Introduction', *Critical Survey* 29 (1), 1–11, doi:10.3167/cs.2017.290101
- Mulford, Wendy 1998 *The East Anglia Sequence: Norfolk 1984–Suffolk 1994* Peterborough, UK: Spectacular Diseases
- Murray, Les 1992 *Translations from the Natural World* Paddington, NSW: Isabella Press
- Oswald, Alice 2002 *Dart* London: Faber
- Oxley, John 1964 *Journals of Two Expeditions into the Interior of New South Wales, Undertaken by Order of the British Government in the Years 1817–18* London: John Murray, originally 1820
- Ramey, Kathryn 2016 *Experimental Filmmaking: Break the Machine* New York: Focal Press
- Range, Melissa 2016 *Scriptorium: Poems* Boston: Beacon Press
- Rawlings, Angela 2006 *Wide Slumber for Lepidopterists* Toronto: Coach House Books
- Riley, Peter 2003 *Alstonefield: A Poem* Manchester: Carcanet Press
- Scott, Clive 2015 'Translating the Nineteenth Century: A Poetics of Eco-translation', *Dix-Neuf* 19 (3), 285–302, doi:10.1179/1478731815Z.000000000083
- Shepherd, Reginald 2008 'On Difficulty in Poetry', *The Writer's Chronicle*, May/Summer, <www.awpwriter.org/magazine_media/writers_chronicle_view/2382/on_difficulty_in_poetry> (accessed 11 August 2018)
- Simms, Colin 2004 *Otters and Martens* Exeter: Shearsman Books

- Smith, Hazel and Dean, Roger 2009 'Towards the Iterative Cyclic Web' *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts* Hazel Dean and Roger Smith (eds) Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1–38
- Smith, Jos 2017 *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literature of Place* London: Bloomsbury Academic
- Solnit, Rebecca n.d. 'Acts of Hope: Challenging Empire on the World Stage' *Project SafeCom Inc.*, <<https://www.safecom.org.au/acts-of-hope.htm>> (accessed 23 August 2018)
- Takahashi, Tess 2008 'After the Death of Film: Writing the Natural World in the Digital Age', *Visible Language* 42 (1), 44–69
- Tarlo, Harriet 2011 'Introduction' *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry* Harriet Tarlo (ed) Exeter: Shearsman Books, 7–18
- Thoreau, Henry David 1993 *Faith in a Seed: The Dispersion of Seeds and Other Late Natural History Writings* Bradley Dean (ed) Washington, D.C.: Island Press
- Wallace, Anne 1993 *Walking, Literature and English Culture: The Origins and Uses of Peripatetic in the Nineteenth Century* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Wallis, Brian and Kastner, Jeffrey 1998 *Land and Environmental Art* London: Phaidon
- Wedgwood, Hensleigh 1862 *A Dictionary of English Etymology* vol. 2 London: Trübner & Co
- Wilkinson, Jessica 2014 *Suite for Percy Grainger* Sydney: Vagabond Press
- Zalasiewicz, Jan 2017 'The Extraordinary Strata of the Anthropocene' *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene* Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino (eds) London: Rowman and Littlefield, 115–131