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Writing ecological disfigurement: First Nations poetry after 'the black grass of bitumen'

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Abstract:

This article examines selected First Nations poetries, showing how intertextual parodic language strategies, dynamic elegy and polyphonic poetic registers critique proleptic environmental mourning, simplistic environmental apocalypticism and compromised visions of political reconciliation – ‘all this potplanting in our sovereignty’, as Evelyn Araluen (2020b, p. 81) describes it. Alison Whittaker, Jeanine Leane, Evelyn Araluen, Ellen van Neerven, Alexis Wright and others are also shown as inheritors of the environmental-activist poetries of Oodgeroo, Kevin Gilbert and Lionel Fogarty. I analyse how each of these poets represents Country in a ‘permanently disfigured state’ (Daniels & Lorimer, 2012, p. 5), bearing witness to environments that exist *after* settler ‘nature’, dismantling Western theologies of poetic nature alongside. To wit, I also show how poems assert temporal vantage points outside the linear telos and material endgames of extractive colonial time, reinforcing enduring and intrinsic spiritual fealty with Country, community and ‘ancestor time’. In Ali Cobby Eckermann’s words, ‘These poems are taking the time. They are honouring the story’ (2020, p. 147).

Biographical note:

A. Frances Johnson won the 2020 ABR international Peter Porter Poetry Prize. She has published four collections of poetry; including *Save As* (Puncher and Wattmann, 2021) and *Rendition for Harp and Kalashnikov* (Puncher and Wattmann, 2017), the latter shortlisted in the 2018 Melbourne Prize for Literature Best New Writing Award. In 2017, she took up an Australia Council B. R. Whiting Fellowship to Rome. A novel, *Eugene’s Falls* (Arcadia, 2007), retraced the Victorian journeys of colonial painter Eugene von Guerard. A new novel in progress, *The Lost Garden*, explores first-contact histories in remote Southern Tasmania, evoking early horticultural attempts to colonise by seed. A monograph, *Australian Fiction as Archival Salvage*, was published by Brill in 2015. She currently teaches Poetry and Poetics and Contemporary Eco-fiction on unceded Wurundjeri land at the University of Melbourne.

Keywords: Aboriginal ecopoetics, Aboriginal poetries, Australian post-pastoral poetry, environmental poetry, First Nations poetry

Ancestor, you are exploding the wheelie bin. The plastic crap stuff is all over the place and flying with the sea gulls in the storm, slapped amongst filthy kimbies, the polystyrene meat trays and empty beer cans, thousands spinning in the atmosphere ... A wild wind is screwing off the tops of trees for kilometres around, and bashing the tree trunks into the ground. Ash clouds preceded a wall of mud water rushing over country, carrying cattle and sheep with trucks and cars past flooded houses. I am only an old man with poor eyesight, but I get the picture. Bloody oath. *Country time everyday*. (Wright, 2018/2020, p. 13)

Desert, sea, bush, rainforest, pastoral lease, contested Country: Australian environmental poetry has a long and vivid history, riven by politics and romance in equal part. Wanyji woman Alexis Wright's abject lyric prose poem 'Hey ancestor!' surely explodes residual romance in relation to the history of environmental elegy, the politics fiercer than ever. Wright's uncompromising images of toxified Country confront readers, shaming the 'rubbish palaces', in Peter Minter's phrase (2014). The poem's Aboriginal interlocutor 'gets the picture', awe-filled but not particularly surprised that his ancestor demonstrates the epic agency to explode the bin lid, even helping to whip up the hurricane of pollutants and rubbish in a wild fury of retribution. For settler readers, there's no romanticised tropes of First Nations peoples taking/claiming responsibility to heal a country they never ruined in the first place. In the words of Gomeri woman, scholar and poet Alison Whittaker, someone 'is made responsible *by* the work' (2020, p. xi).

Decades after the first influential lyrical, activist poetries of Kevin Gilbert, Lionel Fogarty, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and others appeared, a new generation of First Nations Australian poets, including Alison Whittaker, Ellen van Neerven, Samuel Wagan Watson, Evelyn Araluen, Alexis Wright and Jeanine Leane are producing vigorous poetic portrayals of toxified Country as critiques of colonial pastorales. The selected poets discussed here differently generate an aesthetics of despoliation, though they may not strictly define themselves as 'environmental-activist poets' – the over-arching term this article uses to single out poems that operate from a position of radical environmental postcoloniality. This positioning nonetheless affords space for poets such as Leane, van Neerven and others to address a range of subject matters adjacent to, and interrelated with, environmental themes. For many poets, 'writing *after* nature' (Daniels & Lorimer, 2012, p. 5) is a means of revealing the myriad disposessions of the continuing colonial encounter and contesting the stranglehold of settler cultural imaginaries. But for these poets, a Western cultural binary of pastoral versus post-pastoral poetry rarely applies: 'Aboriginal poetry is not obliged to respond to the canon', Dharug writer and Bundjalung nation descendant Araluen confirms, though she does not rule out the role of parodic intercultural intertextualities (2020a, p. 42). 'Aboriginal realism' may be the more appropriate frame by which to consider new First Nations environmental poetries here. For Wright, this term – cited and discussed in Alison Ravenscroft (2010, p. 216) and Leane (2015) – resists Western literary labels of fabulism and magical thinking and is necessarily differentiated from

ideas of Western literary realism. The term is one of modern narrative complexity, reflecting how First Nations poems and stories interweave stories of place and spiritual belief with stories of Aboriginal political struggle and resistance under colonialism. For these poets, environment is not read in an ecological vacuum; Country continues to be read as the ground of spiritual and cultural belonging, as a deeply instantiated poetic (inter)text.

The poets discussed deploy poetical strategies that include heightened intertextual quotation, language strategies, polyphony, parody and satire, as well as anthropomorphic approaches. These techniques are called on to disrupt colonial pastorales and foreground images of toxicity. They also disrupt tropes of linear time and end time (the telos of extractive colonial ‘productivity’). Many of these poems also put paid to capitalist tropes of greenwash sustainability that phantomise that ecological restoration is nigh.

The poets and poems to be discussed have been chosen because they bring readers close to grievous, often unwanted truths, that ‘shadow places’ (Plumwood, 2008), are not simply ‘out there’; they are with us, they are close. They are, indeed, within us.

Pertinent to this discussion of First Nations poets is the fact that expropriation of natural resources over decades continues to impact First Nations communities and Country in complex, deleterious ways. Witness recent controversy following the troubled closure and proposed ‘clean-up’ of the Ranger Uranium Mine on Mirarr Country within the World Heritage Area of Kakadu National Park [1]. Globally and locally, there has been criticism of Ranger’s operational and site-specific impacts. Extensive documentation records nearly a thousand leaks, spills, incidents and operational breaches since the mine began operation in the early 1980s (Lawrence & Sweeney, 2020, p. 9).

As early as the bicentennial year of 1988, the late poet Kevin Gilbert wrote:

you boast of your gains
in woodchip and uranium
the anguished death you spread
will leave the children of the land
a heritage that’s dead (Gilbert, 1998/2020, p. 67)

Gilbert’s prescient poem is made doubly poignant by ongoing First Nations struggles to lobby successive governments to properly monitor and co-fund clean-up costs for a mine that local Aboriginal people never agreed to in the first place. What is additionally poignant is Mirrar people’s grasp of the global threat posed by nuclear waste beyond toxic impacts on Country. In April 2011, the current Mirrar senior Traditional Owner Yvonne Margarula wrote to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon to convey her sorrow over the Fukushima disaster, stating: ‘It

is likely that the radiation problems at Fukushima are, at least in part, fuelled by uranium derived from our traditional lands. This makes us feel very sad' (as cited in Lawrence & Sweeney, 2019, p. 9). Subsequently, in August 2014, the former Prime Minister of Japan, Mr Naoto Kan – who presided over the Fukushima crisis – 'visited Kakadu to meet with the Mirarr community and acknowledge this shared sadness and impact' (Lawrence & Sweeney, 2019, p. 9). Thus, Mirarr Elders foreground that the impacts of extractive economies in the local setting also have a devastating global reach; layers of mourning, as well as the chemical and political fallout, proliferate.

In the poem 'Cullen Bullen', Wiradjuri woman and poet Brenda Saunders reflects on the devastating impacts of extractive mining on Country in a different setting near present-day Lithgow. The narrator learns that 'new plans for an open cut' have been posted by 'the Company', though the seam was thought mined out. Then, as now, the old 'cut', as with the proposed new, is a double wound, a bleeding out of Country over time:

I follow the road to 'Invincible Colliery', pace
the high fence, count the stakes on the cyclone wire
Ignore warnings of 'Danger' and 'Keep Out'

This working mine has cut a swathe for miles
worked underground till the last seam is spent
Up close, I find a hill sliced in two, the cliff-face
left gaping red (Saunders, 2021, n.p.)

Saunders' 'cliff-face' is an anthropomorphised descriptor, but here it metonymically alludes to historical violence wrought on Country and on the bodies of Aboriginal people. The poet-narrator expresses disbelief, but is cold-eyed in weighing how colonial profits come at the expense of violent dispossession. But Saunders' strategy of embodiment also *returns* the cliff to her people, wound and all, as a passionate injunction to Wiradjuri mob to remember culture and Country, the spilt blood of ancestors:

Remember fragments passed down. Generations
of hillside burials, ground slaked
with the blood of Ancestors after 'the Round Up'. (Saunders, 2021, n.p.)

The free-verse rhythms arise from a psychogeographic tracery that is both ancient and modern. Saunders walks and walks, (re)mapping Country, ignoring warning signs, forming a cogent document of interlinked social, cultural and ecological disaster. The whole forms a potent and complex mourning gesture. Saunders conveys how her people have been not only rounded up and killed, but also burdened by histories of massacre, deprived of memorials. Saunders interpolates settler readers, daring them not to turn away from euphemistic phrases of violent ethnic cleansing. The language of murder and murderous intent ('after "the Round Up"') is capitalised and pinned to the page: 'Google has nothing to say about the clans / on Cullen

Bullen / fleeing men on horses / Instead, we read of adventurers / Prospectors searching for treasure / Rivers of gold, here for the taking' (Saunders, 2021, n.p.). Settler cultural celebrations of successful (read 'invincible') extraction of resources overwrite these crimes and incalculable losses and are shown as an enduring colonial blindness. As Bruce Pascoe writes: 'The logic went that murder and dispossession could be labelled 'just wars' and applied for the benefit of the murdered and dispossessed' (2018, para. 9). For Pascoe, settler cultures take little account of 'the vision of the Old People in constructing our culture on such egalitarian and environmentally loving principles' (2020, p. 71).

And, as Saunders concludes, violence is still being done to Country; even as the tunnels of the old mine close, a new mine opens. The discourse is a colonial repeat cycle of destructive extraction:

... the giant scrapers will scour
 remnant of rock for coking coal
 until the last tree and gully are stripped away. (Saunders, 2021, n.p.)

Yoogum and Kujela man Lionel Fogarty has long been producing poems of driving political and spiritual ecopoetic force. Many of these were written before the immediate provocations of Australian bicentennial 'celebrations'. Fogarty was more recently a winner of the 2015 Kate Challis RAKA Award for *Mogwie-Idan: Stories of the Land* (Vagabond Press, 2012). Many of his poems pre-empt the rise of new environmental explorations across Aboriginal and settler poetries of recent decades. Early poems of Aboriginal dispossession and environmental despoliation hark back to the political and elegiac impulses of his historical 'collaborators' Oodgeroo and Gilbert. As Araluen observes, Fogarty 'writes of Gilbert and Noonuccal as callers to collaboration: a linguistic resistance to the great venom, the great vernacular against which black writing is performed and energised in communal acts of voice and inscriptions, reminding us how ancestors are made' (2020a, p. 41). In his poem 'Balance of nature', Fogarty (1982) writes with storytelling gravitas:

One day we stand surviving
 making sure we know the laws
 of respect for earth and people
 lies not needed to attract money-faced people (p. 77)

Prior to proudly asserting the crucial symbiosis of story and Country in the poem's coda, bold tonal and formal shifts interweave with the authoritative collective voice. For example, parodying Judeo-Christian biblical imagery of nature, the poet opens with abrupt intertextual enjambments: 'Telling stories / that's greener than the pastures / filth' (Fogarty, 1982, p. 77). In this deft parodic flourish that anticipates Wright's 'Hey ancestor!', the narrator rejects imposts of colonial Christian rhetoric, colonial agricultural economic imperatives, and

despoliation of Country. The poem asserts with great ironic precision that settler cultures have no stories or blueprints for care of Country. Stories of Country and ancestral fealty with Country are ultimately far richer and ‘greener’ than the ‘pastures green’ signified in Psalm 23 of the King James Bible (and well-known Anglo-Celtic hymn), ‘The Lord is My Shepherd’. Fogarty does not mince words in summing up settler ecological impacts as ‘filth’. With cinematic brevity and postcolonial wit, the poem’s mid-section deconstructs the ‘poetic transplant’ of Christianised Arcadian rhetoric and unchecked pastoral expansion as one and the same, or at least as powerfully interlinked ideological agents of dispossession. The poem’s searing citational irony locates in the fact that ‘pastures green’, heavenly and earthly, are claimed by white people at devastating cost to First Nations peoples.

Writing decades later in the poem ‘Connoisseur’, Fogarty (2014/2020a) is still acutely focused on impacts of cultural and environmental colonisation while upholding broad messages of activism and resistance:

They [settler peoples] are excursionist on our culture ...
 We are spirits of levity
 This globe wide by massive
 Textures are becoming a
 Friction with nature
 At the delta we die
 At the peninsula we live
 Your vaporisation of lives
 Won’t corroborate within us (p. 53)

The poet’s strategic enjambments are more jump-cut in mature poems such as this one. As Sumner (2019) writes: ‘Explosions of narrative order, unexpected movements from the political to the personal or from the constitutive to the alien and back again, are well-known characteristics of Fogarty’s verse’ (p. 1). She goes on to say that such strategies ‘distort a political semiotics at the same time as they inject meaning into the unimaginable’ (p.1). Writerly acts of distortion locate in an imperative to expose excesses of monological political language that continue to be implicated in acts of dispossession. But it is the use of volleyed citations that enables the poet to build new meaning, demand and demonstrate resistance. In ‘Connoisseur’, Fogarty writes eloquently of kin: ‘We are in a degree of velocity’ from which ‘You recoil in a ricochet of / Love to retro-active beliefs’ (2014/2020a, p. 53). In his declamatory interpellation of settlers, it is as if the traumas of colonisation have built/sped up as the colonial capitalist mill grinds on, ever faster. White love itself is murderous, a ricochet and a perpetual massacre memory. This poem evokes the velocity and cumulative intensity of trauma through use of deliberately disrupted, broken phrases that return readers to a continually irruptive colonial present. This fragmented mode, with verbs, adjectives and punctuation prohibiting easy reading ‘logic’, and not least the logic of capitalist time, asks settler readers like me to work hard. But I am nonetheless invited to slow down and sit with Fogarty’s poetic fragmentation, even though I do not fully grasp the poem’s range of citations, the personal

allusions, the joyful and jagged memories of Country. Settler readers cannot hope, nor should they hope, to ‘mine’ and understand all aspects of Fogarty’s vocal and citational play – to fully parse the distinctive texture of his Aboriginal English. In an interview from 2019 with Dashiell Moore, Fogarty asserted that:

Just cause you’re an English teacher, you can’t teach us about language. We’re teaching you the English, our upbringing and lexi-grammatical values gives us confidence to say that even if we are with the highest English teaching, we’re teaching them about how language works culturally. (Moore & Fogarty, 2019, p. 5)

The key word here is ‘culturally’. Fogarty’s poetry of land rejects Eagletonian constructs. There is no ‘how to read a poem’ on offer. The poet insists on his own distinctive lingua franca. Fogarty’s is also the fragmented, high-velocity language of poetic lamentation distinctive to Aboriginal experience under colonialism – in essence, a poetic instantiation of Aboriginal realism. In a recent interview with Tyne Daile Sumner (2019), Fogarty discussed his intertextual process:

What I try to do to English is to destroy it mosaically. Some people see the intellectual and academic and the ‘proper way’ of speaking, but broken English makes sense to be in poetry – Creole language, crisscross of pub talk, and whole array of other language – this mosaic language reflects the world more accurately. (p. 2)

Volleyed citational strategies, for Fogarty, speak directly to First Nations peoples’ experiences of colonisation in which binding relationships between ecology, environment, community and story are continually sundered by the exercise of colonial power.

Fogarty’s unique, pulsing poems can therefore be read as open manifestoes that are never a means to an end. Dramatic arcs culminating in poetic epiphanies and/or codas reasserting the life-affirming values of Country are not always on offer, cannot be on offer in the damaged, treaty-less world of contemporary Australia, whose rivers and aquifers threaten to run dry, whose earth is compacted from overgrazing [2]. What *is* universally on offer is the poem’s evocation of activated, galvanising elegy.

Elegy, threnody and lamentation – traditional modes of Western textual mourning – continue to play key roles in postcolonial environmental poetries, given the long arm of dispossession and ecological ruination of Country. And yet, First Nations and settler poet alike can fall into the trap of proleptic elegy, give into the funeral-parlour hands of extinction discourse, so that species loss, as with loss of Country, becomes an acceptable or naturalised by-product of capitalist extractive excess. ‘Ecological poetry must ... transcend the elegiac mode’, argues Timothy Morton (2010, p. 255), if poets are not to capitulate to eternal mourning and passive melancholia.

However, the First Nations poets selected for discussion here are more than cognisant of the fine line between grief and simplistic apocalypticism articulated in recent ecocritical discourses. Here is Fogarty (1995) again, in ‘Weather comes’, writing in a simpler narratorial register:

We can’t hardly believe this
was once our dreamtime home
The sky turns strangler and
clouds hide behind smoked
pollutions. (p. 38)

Here, Fogarty alternates between confessional observations of nature and a violently anthropomorphised sky, moving away from his signature use of abruptly enjambed lines that eschew ‘logical’ narrative completion: ‘The weather is wearily / The winds are webbing / blowing voices of help’ (Fogarty, 1995, p. 38). For settler poet David Brooks (2017), this language is nonetheless ‘also a kind of declaration, a notice that the rules are destabilized. It’s language being opened, grammar being opened’ (p. 3).

First Nations poets lead the way in relation to contemporary poetries attending environmental issues, as two important new collections attest: *Fire Front: First Nations Poetry and Power Today* (Whittaker, 2020b) and *Guwayu – For All Times: A Collection of First Nations Poems* (Leane, 2020a) [3]. *Guwayu* features key environmental themes; among others, ‘Extinction elegies’ and ‘New shoots’ focus on non-human species and their habits to reflect on global environmental change, often meditating on ‘connections between the temporal and physical landscape’ and ‘cultural place-making’ (Leane, 2020a, p. xix). Such poems interweave stories of 232 years of historical dispossession, but they also look before and beyond settler temporal markers of linear time, adamantly refusing ‘the colonial voyeuristic obsession with tragedy and trauma as the ultimate and only contribution of Aboriginal writing to Australian literary studies’ (Leane, 2020a, p. xix).

Working within and beyond what I call the ‘ecological restorations of the page’, recent First Nations poetries acknowledge the efficacy of certain techniques over others, and the failings of certain time-honoured pastoral techniques (to that end, metaphor and simile may well be dead ends for poets writing toxic subject matters, where symbolic resemblance loses out to an echo chamber of images of ruin). But poems discussed in this article nonetheless clear formally imaginative pathways to the ecological ‘real’, foregrounding loss and often revealing, beyond colonial capitalist paradigms, the cultural, spiritual and social significance of ecological subjects over time.

In her powerful free-verse elegy ‘Native grasses’, Wiradjuri poet and scholar Jeanine Leane personalises threatened grasses – now the subject of numerous First Nations restoration programs, as historian, fiction writer and poet Bruce Pascoe’s farm on Yuin Country attests

(Allam & Moore, 2020) [4]. But in Leane's poem, the grasses are treated as a personalised enemy of the settler gardener:

Native grasses
have got to watch their backs
be careful where they put their heads up
nobody wants
them
on their property or in their garden (Leane, 2020b, p. 13)

The poem focuses on the settler garden as a metaphor of enduring colonial border control and an analogue for the continuing tragic control of First Nations peoples' lives. Grasses must be controlled and/or eliminated, an 'abjectified' enemy. The approach is partly reminiscent of Noonuccal-Peewee poet Oodgeroo's moving threnody 'Municipal gum', though Oodgeroo's proselytising lament to the bitumen-sealed eucalypt is not metaphorically or parodically 'disguised':

To see you thus
Set in your black grass of bitumen – O fellow citizen,
What have they done to us? (Oodgeroo, 1966, p. 10)

By 'disguise', I am inferring that the mutuality between tree and First Nations citizen in 'Municipal gum' is so deeply identified that the technique is less one of anthropomorphic interpellation than an early example (published in the coloniser's language) of 'Aboriginal realism' in which spirit, story, cosmos and Country intertwine with legacies of colonialism. Oodgeroo's short, complex poem signals such aggregate and interwoven storying, reflecting her work as a dedicated environmental and political activist-poet.

In Leane's 'Native grasses', different techniques are mobilised. In the second half of the poem, settler anxieties are parodied in a tour de force of postcolonial mimicry. The parodic narrator urges caution about grasses or 'pests' that 'spread like wildfire' and which require poisoning. Leane's satirical enumerations of the horticultural violence wrought upon extant native grasses (in reality, sustainable sources of nutrition with remnant populations under continuing ecological threat) concludes with a metafictional interpellation of the settler gardener as a planter of colonial cultural imaginaries, armed with pen and spade and likely a cannister of toxic Roundup:

you'll lose control
they'll
take over the other story you're planting
under rose privets irises and wheat
fields no introduced species has a chance
against a stand of natives... (Leane, 2020b, p. 13)

A victory twist is suggested here ('a stand of natives' also suggests, via a deft double entendre, a stand against the arriviste colonisers) and may function as an allusion to First Nations bravery in successive Black Wars of resistance. The poem's violent coda completely dismantles the conventionally life-affirming, mythological tropes and poesies of the European garden. Thus the 're-planting' of First Nations historical narratives is foregrounded and interconnected to the ecological real: the demise of grassland ecosystems under rapid colonial alienation and exploitation of land.

First Nations poets and writers are, therefore, issuing provocations. Many, like Pascoe, are working directly with communities and alongside community conservation organisations and Landcare Australia to undertake restoration projects or participate in political lobbying in relation to conservation zones and egregious governmental misrule over natural resources. These are restoration practices of different kinds (again, through myriad modes of direct action, the text of the land is restored as the page is restored).

Many First Nations poets ask how beauty and grief can sit in productive tension with disfigurement and toxicity. Each explores the ways in which particular poetic techniques activate ecocritical resistance, eschewing evocations of remnant arcadias and simplistic apocalypticisms. New 'First Nations environmental poetics', for want of a better term, are burgeoning as the burden of ecological grief has grown. More words, better words, need to be found. *Are* being found. As settler writer Cameron Muir (2019) asserts:

The burden [of ecological grief] can't rest with a handful of scientists. We [all] need to feel their grief... Grief can garner solidarity and resolve. The collective experience of grief, argue social scientists Ashlee Cunsolo and Neville Ellis 'may coalesce into a strengthened sense of love and commitment to the places, ecosystems and species that inspire, nurture and sustain us'. (p. 227)

Muir enlists First Nations and settler writers generally here. And yet ecological mourning has been felt, discussed, painted and storied by First Nations peoples since the onset of colonisation. As a writer of Anglo-Celtic origin writing on Wurundjeri and Gadabanud Country, I am mindful, in Araluen's cogent phrase, that 'Aboriginal poetics have always existed' (2020a, p. 42), intimately connected to Country, ecology, and the stories Country tells:

Aboriginal poetics always have, and always will be here – extending the land and waters and air. Our poetics will grow as we grow, as we remember and return. Our words bear with them more than scholars like myself know what to do with them. They speak to the kind of always that isn't threatened by words spinning on around it. (p. 45)

Whittaker uses the term 'relational' poetry, which is also central to this discussion of new Aboriginal environmental poetics. Whittaker (2020b) clearly signals the activist function of poetry when she states:

the fire of poetry is fundamentally relational. There is someone who is spoken to, and someone who is the speaker, sure – but there is also someone who is made responsible to the work and someone who is made responsible by the work, and an ecological sense that all this poetry relates to and enables the other. (p. xi)

Whittaker follows this up with a more complex, incendiary provocation to settlers that justifiably refuses to offer a bough of watered-down reconciliation. Gone are the mediating niceties of Marcia Langton's notion of 'intercultural subjectivities' (2003, p. 118), which argue that both First Nations and settler artists create Aboriginalities (as they create tropes of environment and place) and that both must perform raids upon the cultural archives, representing findings as potential forms of reconciliatory postcolonial agitprop. After all, as the *Fire Front* poetry project was developed across 2019 and 2020, the continent experienced unprecedented fires with major loss of human life, species and habitat. For Whittaker, these cataclysmic events were the result not only of climate change, but of dispossession and continuing colonial deprivation of the rights of First Nations peoples to care for Country (Whittaker, 2020a, 'Acknowledgements', p. 178). She notes further that:

The relationality of *Fire Front* ... fundamentally addresses the question of the coloniser, how to tussle with the settler colony, and how to account for just what both have wrought on us. The Fire is as much a threat of reckoning with what is improperly imposed, as it is an offer of restoration. It is insurrectionist. (Whittaker, 2020a, p. xii)

The coupling of 'restoration' and 'insurrection' proposes that the restoration of culture may only arise through revolutionary action, of which the poems (or 'fires') are revolutionary vehicles for each First Nations poet represented in the collection, enabling them to challenge the 'improper' hand of colonial power and control. Similarly, Wiradjuri scholar and poet Jeanine Leane insists that *Guwayu*'s vision of Black Australia – 'uncut and unleashed on the page' (2020a, p. xii), with all works untrimmed and unmanipulated by settler editors – is a radical intervention in poetry that wakes up the Australian literary landscape 'from the 232-year slumber and the dream of the settler mythscape' (p. xix).

The critical ideas of Araluen, Leane and Whittaker bring important focus, insight and balance to this article, but in writing I may still risk capitulation to what Fogarty (2014/2020a) deems 'just [white] exactitude' typical of 'illiterate manic scholars' (p. 53) [5]. I therefore continue to review a methodological structure that may tip at any time and become 'toxically' weighted towards Europeanist epistemologies and critical traditions, and which may sometimes reflect underinformed settler editorial commentaries. As Ravenscroft (2010) cautions, Western discourses of analysis of First Nations literatures too easily foreground generic tropes of magic, superstition and the supernatural so that the knowledge systems of marginalised peoples become abstracted and mystified: 'We make others objects of knowledge 'magic' in a move that paradoxically tames and familiarises' (p. 216). While that is not my intention here or elsewhere, Ravenscroft's point is important for an article seeking to show how First Nations

poets imaginatively evoke the ecological real alongside, and as part of, specific social, political and cultural realities. To that end, I continue to learn and enter into dialogue with First Nations poets and scholars, acknowledging my limited settler purview of the expanding field of Aboriginal poetics.

Another methodological challenge for settler reflection on intercultural poetics of the land is that English ‘entered Aboriginal life as a vehicle of governmentality and control’ and is therefore ‘always marked by these violences’ (Penny Van Toorn, as cited in Araluen, 2020a, p. 42). I aim to keep that knowledge close in this reading of the poems, to understand that poetic evocations of environmental ruin/violence link to all aspects of violent dispossession regardless of the compelling and witty ways Aboriginal poets innovate standard Australian English, parodying the language of the colonial archive to ‘make the introduced language our own’, as Leane puts it (2020a, p. xiv). Leane’s reminder that English is the introduced language is salient. Araluen in turn laments that ‘We are always writing around the implied sub-alternity of Aboriginal poets writing in English’ (2020a, p. 44). But she also avers that ‘there’s fun to be had in satirising the transplanted cadence of Anglo-Saxon verse through fragmentation and irony, straining and interrogating the positionality of settler-colonial poeticism’ (Araluen, 2020a, p. 44).

First Nations stewardship of land provides settler culture with more than a metaphor of care of the land; in so many instances, it enables it. First Nations poetry is intimately implicated in this task, always ‘extending the land and waters and air’ (Araluen, 2020a, p. 45). In conjunction with direct environmental action, poetry can help us, under severe ecological pressure, to confront, prepare and survive.

How, then, are other First Nations poets foregrounding toxic subject matters, enabling politically and lyrically activated expressions of mourning? How do poems connect back to key ideas drawn from recent Aboriginal poetics scholarship, speaking with authority and requisite emotional power to an urgent ecological present? I now want to focus on poems that feature heightened intertextual borrowing and linguistic mash-ups, often in service to what I might call the dissident power of First Nations laughter.

Contemporary Aboriginal poets ‘build as much as they break’, Araluen confirms (2020a, p. 42); Whittaker, in turn, emphasises the importance of parodic interrogation across First Nations poetry when she asks whether the power of new First Nations poetics comes from ‘challenging and subverting the English language, or [from] the poetic forms and traditions of the West? Or does it come from creating space for other ways of thinking and rethinking and returning to proper thought?’ (2020b, p. ix). The answer, as Whittaker implies, may be all of the above, but close analysis of key recent poems will help determine conclusively if intensified intertextual, polyphonic and parodic strategies are at work across new environmental poetics as part of ‘proper’ poetic thought [6].

A dimension of ‘proper poetic thought’ is reckoning with long term trauma. Consider more closely the manifestation of such traumatic effects in Waanyi writer Alexis Wright’s searing postcolonial poetic parody, ‘Hey ancestor!’. Wright’s poem glances at but leaps past the disease and anxieties of Randolph Stow’s (1969/2010) and Dorothy Hewitt’s (2001) blistering postcolonial poetries. Stow, Hewitt and Wright were early adopters of environmental and postcolonial themes, exploring the waste and ruination of Country as a result of illegal imposition of settler sovereignty in poems such as ‘The land’s meaning’ (Stow, 1969/2010) and ‘Nullabor tea party (1929)’ (Hewitt, 2001, pp. 71-72) [7]. But Wright’s parodic interpellation raises the comedic and political stakes: ‘*Country time everyday*’, the ancestor repeats to the long-suffering narrator. The latter opens the poem in wisecracking Aboriginal English:

Hey ancestor, you talking to me?

Country time everyday.

I know, I know, but wouldn’t you know it, it’s the 26th of January again, old Whitefella Day.

Party time for some, sad day for others.

...

What’s to celebrate? Country ripped? Country broken? You looking at all that type of thing? Tens of thousands of years it took for learning that kind of knowledge for managing land right way, waters, the skies, and the stars.

Me! Not bothering too much because I am country.

Country time everyday (Wright, 2020, p. 9)

The narrator, an Elder spirit man, is transcendently funny and roguishly familial in his vernacular address to his ancestor: ‘You look awesome twisting in the sky at sunset’ (Wright, 2020, p. 11). But the intimacy between them is as real as it is confronting. When kinning dialogue pauses, a lamentation on stolen sovereignty is declaimed forcefully to settler occupier/readers:

You are not owner. Scrap of paper only painful in the heart, only cover the surface with poison. It can’t get inside proper deep law in my head. (Wright, 2020, p. 10)

The poem’s rhetorical opening then devolves into prose ruminations on poisoned (shadow) places. But the clowning, parodic voice is maintained as the narrator regales a cinematic

apocalypse of pollution. ‘The plastic crap stuff is all over the place and flying with the seagulls in the storm, slapped amongst filthy kimbies, the polystyrene meat trays and empty beer cans’ (Wright, 2020, p. 13). These abject enumerations are critical because, at a certain point, pure cinematic abjection becomes real. ‘You looking at all that type of thing?’ (p. 9) the narrator ponders. Here, ambiguous interpellation addresses both the narrator’s ancestor (for advice/counsel/story) and the settler gaze (as caution and challenge).

Wright’s poem is no less moving for its deployment of comedic strategies. After every kind of grim documentation of toxified Country, the hieratic ancestral voice of Country speaks back, in repeat broadcasts from the ancestral realm: ‘Country time everyday’. The driving repetition of this phrase is at the poem’s dramatic heart. The tender, strengthening, paternal voice of the chorus asserts the perpetuity of Country, even in its toxified state, reinforcing ancient lore and the importance of ongoing stewardship. The First Nations criterion of place, as Plumwood (2008) has it, is time-honoured, a restoration of ‘ancestral dreaming inside the old song man spirit’ (Wright, 2020, p. 11), but again, this focus simultaneously brings the ecological shadow places, the poisoned surface, into devastating relief.

In terms of political heft, Oodgeroo may be read as Alexis Wright’s poetic antecedent, though Oodgeroo does not deploy comedic polyphonic techniques per se in her stylised verses or ‘versifying’, a term that may reference the Minjerribah poet’s proselytising ardour. Her iconic poem ‘Municipal gum’ (discussed earlier), from *The Dawn is at Hand* (1966) and written three years before Stow’s ‘The singing bones’ (Stow, 1968), is a powerful and incisive metaphorical postcolonial work crafted on the eve of the 1967 Referendum, which sought to vote on including Aboriginal people in the census.

Gum tree in the city street,
Hard Bitumen around your feet,
Rather you would be
In the cool world of leafy forest halls
And wild bird calls (Oodgeroo, 1966, p. 10)

As I have discussed briefly elsewhere (Johnson, 2018), Oodgeroo’s tree with its concealed ‘feet’ (also suggesting the rhythmic feet of the poem) is read as the narrator’s fellow citizen, her non-human kin. The poem’s small tragedy locates in the bituminous fixing of the tree so that it cannot breathe and grow. Bitumen is shown as toxic, abject, an image of settler civic control and order, an overlay poisoning and concealing Country. By virtue of this metaphor of colonisation, the cultural roots of the First Nations subject are lost through dispossession. In this powerful threnody, the fragile restorative optimism is that narrator and tree are asserted as ‘kinfolk’, as Ursula Le Guin describes it (2017). Thus, any reading of the tree as picturesque subject or timber resource is destabilised.

Oodgeroo’s poem raises concerns that cannot be addressed fully here. How can violent histories of dispossession be reconciled in an Australia without treaty, given ongoing

contestations regarding expropriation of Country, resources and culturally significant objects? Many younger First Nations poets are responding to this overarching question by cleverly grafting parodic and/or satirical poetic techniques to lamentation which has the effect of hybridising elegy in interesting ways while strengthening the poem as an act of resistance. Van Neerven's 'ecopotent' is a dialogical, free-verse poem that casts a satirical eye over the failures of cultural greenwash rhetoric and the scholarly solipsism that can attend the best-intentioned ecocritical debates:

dugai askes me
to pen poems
for ecopoetics journal (van Neerven, 2020, p. 49)

Writers such as Oodgeroo evoked ecocritical postcolonial meaning in their poems well before such ideas were theorised in the academy. Two generations along, van Neerven's poem 'ecopotent' expresses a cynical rhetorical – neither poems nor academic texts have a hope of protecting the environment: 'whattttt you think words will save trees?' (van Neerven, 2020, p. 49).

van Neerven's satirical lyric recalls Delia Falconer's (2015) emphasis on 'seeing what we can do', a reminder that environmental 'restoration' on the page ideally happens in parallel with ecological restoration. 'ecopotent' concludes with the admonition to an unknown recipient to 'label your art ecopoetic' though the narrator believes the artwork in question to be 'ecopornographic' (van Neerven, 2020, p. 49). The narrator has all but given up on dialogue with those committed to environmental causes – this even includes her 'tidda' who 'asks me / to pen poems / for Yugambeh translation'. The narrator wryly responds in deceptively casual vernacular: 'could do but / if it wasn't for colonisation / wouldn't have anything to write about / trugod' (p. 49).

Other Aboriginal writers are choosing to parodically target iconic settler pastorales. Many of us recall the oft-chanted nationalistic settler verse of Dorothea Mackellar's 'My country' (written in 1904 and published in 1908 as 'Core of my heart'):

I love a sunburnt country,
A land of sweeping plains,
Of ragged mountain ranges,
Of droughts and flooding rains.
I love her far horizons,
I love her jewel-sea,
Her beauty and her terror
The wide brown land for me!
The stark white ring-barked forests,
All tragic to the moon,

The sapphire-misted mountains,
The hot gold hush of noon... (Mackellar, 1908, n.p.)

We might, perhaps, be grateful that Mackellar's poem (which I grew to loathe as a child for reasons I could not name), at least mentions sunburn, droughts, floods and 'stark ring-barked forests'. Mackellar's is, however, no jeremiad view, but a loving white colonial pastorate that affectionately accommodates myths of terra nullius and colonial foundation-making. Ring-barking is naturalised in the most pleasant of tones, potentials for dramatic gothic imagery tamed.

'Core of my heart' ('My country') has become a ripe subject of satire and parody for First Nations poets including Gilbert, Wagan Watson, Fogarty and Whittaker. Whittaker's magisterial revision of 'Core of my heart' transposes to a new work: 'A love like Dorothea's' (2018, pp. 5-7). By virtue of its hyperbolic intertextuality, this poem demonstrates continuity with poetic techniques and traditions drawn from settler poetries, while undertaking direct and radical intertextual raids in order to build a searing metafictional parody of Mackellar's 'fetish verse'. Settler mythic temporalities (the illusory permanent present of 'I love a sunburnt country') are swiftly despatched with the modification of a verb phrase from present to past tense, 'I loved a sunburnt country', foregrounding environmental, cultural, social and economic dispossession:

It burns my eyes to turn to hers, my wide brown land out of like hands	
but traced in fetish verse –	
'I love a sunburnt country'	I loved a sunburnt country.
	I loved white nativity
that digs its roots and ticks to suck the floodplains and the sea –	
the love that swept those sweeping plains from Nan, from Mum, from me	
	(Whittaker, 2018, p. 5)

Elsewhere, Mununjali and Birri-Gubba poet Samuel Wagan Watson alludes to the Mackellar poem in his metafictionally titled poem 'The grounding sentence': '*A sunburnt country / land of extreme prejudice / Advance Australia where?*' (Wagan Watson, 2020, p. 47).

Wagan Watson splices moving confessional prose poetry ('The world my children inherit is a scattered plain') with fragmented, jammed intertextual phrases, triplets and rhetorical lines excised from Mackellar's 'Core of my heart'; lyrics of the woebegone, unrepresentative national anthem, *Advance Australia Fair*, are also sampled. The humour is of the grave kind, if that is possible to say, for the 'skin of the country is branded deep with crosshairs and warning signs', and in the devastating pronouncement that the speaker 'cannot interpret the words of my Dreaming' (Wagan Watson, 2020, p. 48), there is little to 'rejoice'. Thus Mackellar's epiphanic aesthetics of sunburnt land fall flat once more. Wagan Watson feeds the reader only the tiniest fragment of Mackellar's imagery, removing the active verb-phrase 'I love' that comes before 'sunburnt country' in the Mackellar original. The iconic image is still

recognisable but settler subjectivity is dethroned in the erasure of the 'I'. Love of Country is moot in a time of despoiled ground, for both settler and First Nations subject alike. Country is simply sunburned. In Wagan Watson's tragic poem, the lamenting poet is left with a 'grounding sentence' that does not (yet) assume restoration of ground and thence of Dreaming and story: 'I cannot interpret the words of my Dreaming' (p. 48) he concludes with devastating simplicity.

Wagan Watson and Whittaker may be responding not just to Mackellar's text but to a significant poem by Wiradjuri man and activist-poet Kevin Gilbert. Writing, printmaking, performing and advocating energetically since the 1970s until his death, Gilbert powerfully mimics and demolishes the form and content of Mackellar's poem with its bouncing iambic quatrains and idealised pastoral visions. Gilbert's 'The new true anthem' (reproduced in Whittaker, 2020a, pp. 66-67) [9], written in the year of bicentennial 'celebrations', is a sustained parody of 'Core of my heart'. It is a damning direct address to settler culture, penned in the midst of settler celebrations in 1988. In this work, nearly every celebratory line of Mackellar's poem is subverted with images of despoiled Country that are worth repeating in full:

Despite what Dorothea has said
about the sun scorched land
you've never really loved her
nor sought to make her grand
you pollute all the rivers
and litter every road

your barbaric graffiti

cut scars where tall trees grow
...
the mud polluted rivers

are fenced off from the gaze
of travellers and the thirsty
for foreign hooves to graze (Gilbert, 1988/2020, p. 66)

Ruined images of Country proliferate: 'you boast on of your gains / in woodchip and uranium' (p. 67) until the coda reprises Gilbert's mid-section lament in urgent declamatory style:

Australia oh Australia
you could stand proud and free
we weep in bitter anguish
at your hate and tyranny. (Gilbert, 1988/2020, p. 67)

Subtle changes occur in the concluding refrain; ‘proud’ is replaced by ‘tall’, and the driving rhyme re-harnessed as a political chorus that demands settler Australia (‘to your own image blind’) be better than itself, to wake up to the fact that ‘the anguished death you spread / will leave the children of the land / a heritage that’s dead’ (p. 67).

Gilbert’s searing indictments find their contemporary match in Alexis Wright’s ‘Hey ancestor!’, written over thirty years later in response to exacerbated pollution of Country and old/new failings of governance. Van Neerven differently responds to both Wright’s and Gilbert’s driving observations about the despoliation of Country. She opens her polyphonic poem ‘QLDR’ (2020, pp. 118-19) with an epigram from Wright that cuts to the heart of this article: ‘How do you find the words to tell the story of the environmental emergency of our times?’ (Wright, 2019).

The answer in this case is found in van Neerven’s irreverent free-verse lyrical couplets, which splice Aboriginal English (‘Shadow of blame / risin firelegs / lost my generation / to spotify’ with confessional social media vernacular (‘I come bk & climate loses the election ... // in dutton’s electorate / 18 yos tell me they r voting // for their future / my tongue bites bk’) (2020, pp. 118-19). The coda is a sombre deployment of the rugby ‘Queenslander!’ cry, which van Neerven notes ‘was first used by whitefella player Billy Moore to motivate an underdog Maroons team at the start of a 1995 State of Origin Match’ (van Neerven, 2020, p. 136): ‘who speaks? / QLDR QLDR QLDR’ (p. 119).

But in van Neerven’s poem, the time-honoured rhythmic device of poetic repetition deliberately fails. The chant is not accompanied by the usual exclamation marks. Thus, chant converts to melancholy threnody. A sporting acronymic, anthemic cry is the only acceptable cultural way of the ‘state tellin story’. The poem warns that acculturated racism and cultural and environmental neglect risk a devastating prohibition of the respective songlines and song of ‘black throats & black-throated finch’ (p. 118) [8].

Many First Nations poetries also productively ‘mine’ the colonial bureaucratic archives. *Archival-Poetics* by Narrunga writer Natalie Harkin (2019) is an example in which the poet represents fragments of colonial bureaucratic records as a personal poetic story of Country, blood memory and haunting. For Harkin, Saunders (see Saunders’ poem ‘La-pa’, 2012/2020, p. 100) and others, direct quotations from colonial archival materials are interwoven as political necessity; for others such as Barkinji poet and novelist Paul Collis, inclusions of untranslated Barkinji language, literally (re)claim the ‘white page’, although general *interpretations* made in collaboration with Barkinji people appear at the bottom of the page as a footnote. In ‘Barka – Murdie (Darling, black person)’ Collis writes with great beauty and sensitivity of the ailing Darling River, figuring it in the poem as lover, self and sacred ancestor. Ironising settler words of endearment, the poet asserts his enfolded relationship with his Country and its stories, to fashion a devastating environmental elegy:

Murrdie–Barka
 Black person–my darling.
 Barka, Barka, murdie Barkindji murrdie
 My darling, my darling, black Barkindji person
 Nga, kappa
 I will follow.

Nhantarna. Nhantarna ...
 Again, again

...until makaraa thutha palpa
 Again, again ... I (will) follow until it rains like ashes (Collis, 2020, p. 29)

When settler poets and ecocritics theorise and contextualise environmental poetics (and I include myself in that number), the philosophical paths mapped often cite environmental philosopher Val Plumwood's notion of 'shadow places' (2008), the influential vital materialist ideas of Jane Bennett on non-human others (2010), and ecocritical theories of toxic discourse and hyper objects (Buell, 1989; Morton, 2010; Marland & Parham, 2014; Marland, 2015). More broadly, the thinking of Donna Haraway (2016) and Anna Tsing et al. (2017), has usefully undergirded the ways in which some settler environmental-activist poets determinedly evoke 'agentic assemblages' in creative artefacts, or 'kinships' with the 'natural world' that de-emphasise anthropogenic hierarchies [9]. Australian settler poets such as Jennifer Maiden, B R Dionysius, John Kinsella and Anthony Lawrence have variously evoked post-pastoral imperatives in their poems and writings, dismantling the poetry of the so-called natural world.

But the valuable 'wake-up calls' of Western ecopoetics may not be relevant to contemporary First Nations poets, as Tsing herself points out (Tsing et al., 2017, G2), and as Leane and Fogarty variously assert. Tsing et al. write that the work of the present anthropocene moment urgently requires 'moving beyond the disciplinary prejudices into which each scholar is trained, to instead take a generous view of what varied knowledge practices might offer' (2017).

As shown, the poets discussed variously deploy intertextual strategies, surreal imaging, polyphonic linguistic mashups, cinematic disjuncture, polyphonic dialogism, hyper-anthropomorphism, radically inventive rhyme schemes, gallows humour and concrete language strategies (and *language* strategies). While some of these techniques suggest dedicated flirtations with postmodern poetic mechanics, such formal and conceptual complexity is distinctive to modes of Aboriginal realism that interweave stories of place and spiritual belief with political struggle and resistance under colonialism. Or, to reprise Fogarty, the poems discussed show 'how language works culturally', how it responds to the words of the coloniser in myriad ways.

Environmental poetic proselytising has never before been so imaginatively and politically calibrated by so many First Nations poets. As this discussion reiterates, environment is never read by contemporary Aboriginal poets in an ecological, biological or other scientific vacuum. And yet, continuities of culture are increasingly evoked and celebrated in tandem with calls for environmental awareness and action. ‘Environment’, a word that interestingly appears in none of the poems discussed, may be a curiously detached signifier for those for whom ‘Country’ – past, present and future – is always claimed as the ground of spiritual, cultural and ecological belonging.

I live and work on unceded lands of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung, and I pay my respects to Elders past and present.

Notes

[1] A new report co-authored by the Sydney Environmental Institute (SEI) and the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) has found Australia’s largest national park is at long-term risk unless the clean-up of the mine is done comprehensively and effectively: ‘Critics of the Ranger operation have also highlighted the direct connection between Australian uranium sales and the increased production of long-lived high-level radioactive waste. Large volumes of lower-level radioactive tailings at uranium mines, as well as concentrated higher-level radioactive waste at nuclear power facilities, create complex intergenerational management challenges. This highlights that, while nuclear generated electricity may have a lower carbon footprint than fossil fuels, it is a very long way from a low risk or ‘clean’ energy source’ (Lawrence & Sweeney, 2019). The mitigation and clean-up challenge ongoing is to ensure that mine tailings, radioactive slurry and toxic by-products of mining are isolated from the surrounding environment for 10,000 years. Lawrence and Sweeney confirm the epic scale of environmental and governance challenges: ‘Ranger is the longest running uranium mine in Australia. It was imposed against the explicit opposition of the region’s Mirarr Traditional Owners and for forty years has conducted deeply contested operations in a monsoonal tropical environment. And not just any tropical environment – the mine is an industrial zone surrounded by Australia’s largest national park – Kakadu’ (Lawrence & Sweeney, 2020).

[2] As Araluen cautions, Aboriginal poets also need to be wary of settler editorial propositions (as with settler analyses such as this one) suggesting a need for heightened cogency and fluency when the forms and structures of Aboriginal English poetry ‘are not yet ready for the fullness of our histories’ (2020a, p. 43). Araluen’s caution is a radical and assertive positioning of cultural difference, though perhaps Fogarty has little cause to worry, writing elsewhere that ‘I witness this great [colonial] venom / I withstand this great vernacular ... The dictum by those written dead poets are to oppress terror / by the white man’s laws’ (Fogarty, 2020b, p. 50). Settler poet David Brooks (2017) has noted (in what he provocatively calls, within creative writing classrooms, Fogarty’s ‘Shakespearian’ textures): ‘his agrammaticality, a departure from normative usage that can seem a lexical version of what in painting might be called naïf and which can be [mistakenly] misapprehended as grammatical ignorance or failure’.

[3] *Fire Front* dynamically situates seminal poets alongside ascendant talents (e.g. Oodgeroo, Lionel Fogarty, Raelee Lancaster, Baker Boy). Bruce Pascoe, Chelsea Bond and other First Nations public

intellectuals provide searing commentaries on myriad poetic ways of ‘doing power’. *Guwayu – For All Times* focuses on the last sixteen years of Aboriginal poetry and thirty-six poets auspiced over this period by Sydney-based, non-profit poetry organisation, Red Room Poetry. In both collections, interlinked themes articulate the survival, endurance and continuities of Aboriginal cultures.

[4] Pascoe describes his sustainable farm as a project ‘trying to make sure that Aboriginal people are part of the resurgence in these grains, rather than being on the periphery and being dispossessed again’ (as cited in Allam & Moore, 2020). See also grassland restoration programs on Wurundjeri land at Melbourne’s Royal Park (Instone, 2020) and Wathaurong (Wadawarrung) grassland restoration projects on tracts of land at the foot of the Wurdi Youang (You Yangs) in the Brisbane ranges in Victoria.

[5] First published in *Eelahroo (Long Ago) Nyah (Looking) Möbö-Möbö (Future)*, Vagabond Press, Sydney, 2014. Fogarty also lampoons ‘Conventional wine academics’ in ‘Waste or worse’ (in Leane, 2020a, p. 121).

[6] Scale does not permit here a larger comparative study of techniques across generations of First Nations and white writers addressing environmental themes; this analysis draws conclusions based on a symbolic selection of significant new works by black and white writers to demonstrate how new poetries of disfigured Country boldly dis-figure the dispossessing colonial eye and ongoing environmental depredations.

[7] In Stow’s parodic poem ‘The land’s meaning’, notions of empire are unsettled as a litany of desolate objects in a desert bar (glass, weed, flyspray can, tin, dust) that form a strange postcolonial agentic assemblage:

The love of man is a weed of the waste places,
One may think of it as the spinifex of dry souls. ...
And certain of our young men,
who turned in despair from the bar, upsetting a glass,
and swore: ‘No more’ (for the tin rooms stank of flyspray)
are sending word that the mastery of silence
alone is empire...
And the question (applauded, derided) falls like dust (Stow, 1969/2010)

[8] In a special issue of ecopoetics journal *Plumwood Mountain* (‘Poets speak up to Adani’), 30 October 2017, van Neerven’s fellow Queenslander, settler writer B R Dionysius (2017), also writes to the subject of ecological mourning in ‘Black-throated finch’, referencing the bird whose remnant populations are currently under pressure due to the environmental impacts of Queensland’s controversial Adani mine:

...in the billionaire’s thoughts he’s ripped
Out the earth’s coal-black throat; the box trees cut open
Like rich sediment. Their habitat halved like a seed cake.

[9] Donna Haraway’s (2016) provocation to ‘stay with the trouble’ and Tsing et al.’s (2017) culturally sensitive invitation that writers develop modes of kinship with the land are, in effect, pertinent, urgent invitations to every human being in the geological struggle town of the Anthropocene. But in Australia, it must still be noted that First Nations kinship with Country and histories of stewardship predate Haraway’s and Tsing et al.’s thoughts.

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