

DECENTRING THE HUMAN, IMAGINING THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN (Poetry, Plants, and the New England Region of Australia)

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Abstract

Located in the state of New South Wales, Australia, the Northern Tablelands bioregion is a high plateau landscape unique for its geological, faunal, and floristic variety. Known widely as the New England of Australia, the Tablelands is “a strange, almost inverted landscape” of undulating plains aside steep chasms. This article analyzes poetry about the flora of the New England Tablelands region of New South Wales, Australia. The article focuses on the importance of plants and poetry to the biocultural heritage of Australia. The research objective was to understand the natural and cultural dimensions of Tablelands plants as expressed in poetry. The research involved visiting botanical communities, examining historical documents, interviewing conservationists, and writing poetry. The results suggest that poetry encourages engagement with, and respect for, human and more-than-human life. The article concludes that, in the Anthropocene age, environmental poetry is essential to environmental ethics.

Keywords: poetry, ecopoetics, plants, New England Tablelands, Australia

MEMULIAKAN MANUSIA, IMAJINASI MELEBIHI BATAS KEMANUSIAAN (Puisi, Tanaman, dan Wilayah New England Australia)

Abstrak

Terletak di negara bagian New South Wales, Australia, bioregion Tablelands Utara adalah lanskap dataran tinggi yang unik karena keanekaragaman geologis, fauna, dan floristiknya. Dikenal luas sebagai New England of Australia, Tablelands adalah “pemandangan aneh, lanskap yang hampir terbalik” dari dataran bergelombang dan jurang yang curam. Artikel ini menganalisis puisi tentang flora wilayah New England Tablelands di New South Wales, Australia. Artikel ini berfokus pada pentingnya tanaman bagi warisan biokultural Australia. Tujuan penelitian adalah untuk memahami dimensi alami dan budaya tanaman Tablelands seperti yang diungkapkan dalam puisi. Penelitian ini melibatkan mengunjungi komunitas botani; memeriksa dokumen sejarah; mewawancarai konservasionis; dan menulis puisi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa puisi mendorong keterlibatan dengan, dan menghormati, kehidupan manusia dan lebih dari-manusia. Artikel itu menyimpulkan bahwa, di zaman Anthropocene, puisi lingkungan sangat penting bagi etika lingkungan.

Kata kunci: puisi, ekopuisi, tanaman, New England Tablelands, Australia

INTRODUCTION

This article approaches the notion of Society 5.0 from a non-anthropocentric, non-humanistic, and multispecies perspective, aiming to decenter the preeminence of the human within the planetary community. Global-scale transformation toward a sustainable biospheric society requires the formation of positive ecological values such as empathy, compassion, and care oriented beyond the present (human) generation and embracing the notion of family as *Earth Family*—as a network of beings in which the more-than-human is rendered *familiar*, *familial*, and *filiated*.

Towards these aims, this article develops a biocentric poetic response to the diverse plants (flora) of the New England Tablelands region of New South Wales, Australia, where the author lived between 2017 and 2020. Since the Anglo-European colonization of Australia beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, the Tablelands region has been cleared intensively of its original botanical communities. Consisting mostly of eucalyptus and other species, these plants had evolved—over many millennia—in response to the harsh and demanding regional conditions of the Tablelands. Those species that have survived the catastrophic effects of settlement exist as vestiges along the margins of pastoral properties or within gorge ecosystems protected by the very inaccessibility of the landscape. The staggering loss of flora in Australia—up to 95% in some places—is not merely an issue of science, aesthetics, emotion, or history. In contrast, these plant communities support a broad range of animals—

including the charismatic koala—birds, insects, and other non-human beings well-adapted to the ecology of the island continent. As scholars have argued, plants are essential to the biocultural heritage of Australia (for example, Clarke, 2007; Keogh, 2011; Ryan, 2012). Nonetheless, no previous studies have focused on the biocultural value of Northern Tablelands plants specifically in relation to literary (poetic) expression.

Located in the state of New South Wales, Australia, the Northern Tablelands bioregion is a high plateau landscape unique for its geological, faunal, and floristic variety (Dunn & Sahukar, 2003) (see Figure 1). Intensively cleared and transformed since British colonization (Butzer & Helgren, 2005), the bioregion encompasses a series of deeply incised gorges around which an extensive conservation network, including the Oxley Wild Rivers National Park, has emerged in recent decades. Known widely as the New England of Australia, the Tablelands is “a strange, almost inverted landscape” of undulating plains aside steep chasms (Haworth, 2006, p. 23). In 1818, after crossing the lowlands of the Liverpool Plains and traversing the upwarped Great Escarpment marking the western edge of the bioregion (Ollier, 1982), renowned British explorer John Oxley and his expeditionary team became the first Anglo-Europeans to reach the Tablelands bioregion. Simultaneously attracted to and disturbed by the extremes of the fractured topography, the explorer-surveyor described the Tablelands as “exceedingly grand and picturesque” although “divided longitudinally by deep and apparently

impassable glens” (Oxley, 1964, pp. 293–294). Oxley’s journal reveals an alternation between fondness and revulsion for the Tablelands. Detailing the vegetation and land forms of the gorges, he recalls that “the rocks were covered with climbing plants, and the glens abounded with new and beautiful ones” (Oxley, 1964, p. 294).

Ideals of the picturesque and scenic drawn from the dominant European landscape aesthetic were challenged by the strangeness of the botanical world and the sublime danger of the geological features Oxley and his party faced. The chasm walls, for instance, were “clothed with stately trees [and] creepers” growing “so extremely thick that we found it impossible to penetrate through them” (Oxley, 1964, p. 303). From a taxonomic perspective, however, he noted rocks “covered with epidendra [orchids], bignoniae [bignonias], or trumpet-flowers, and clematides [clematis], or virgin’s bower” (Oxley, 1964, p. 294). In the present era, these “grand natural” spectacles—referred to variously as glens, gorges, ravines, chasms, and valleys in Oxley’s journal—have become increasingly crucial sanctuaries for Tablelands flora. Protected from the widespread effects of colonization on the Australian environment, endemic plants—such as those named above, as observed by the explorer-surveyor—inhabit the rim and outermost reaches of the Tablelands gorges. Some species, indeed, depend on specific sites and niches. As an example, the golden-flowering Ingram’s wattle (*Acacia ingramii*) is endemic to the Apsley-Macleay ravines near the town of Armidale (Wright, 1991, p. 97). What’s more, the vulnerable gorge hakea

or corkwood oak (*Hakea fraseri*) occurs at merely a handful of locations in the Tableland, and its actual distribution remains unknown (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). As Oxley’s account suggests, devising language for the “extremely deep, entrenched gorge system that cuts cross-wise through the Tableland to the eastern sea” (Haworth, 2006, p. 25) requires a dual awareness of the botanical complexities and geological extremes of the bioregion.

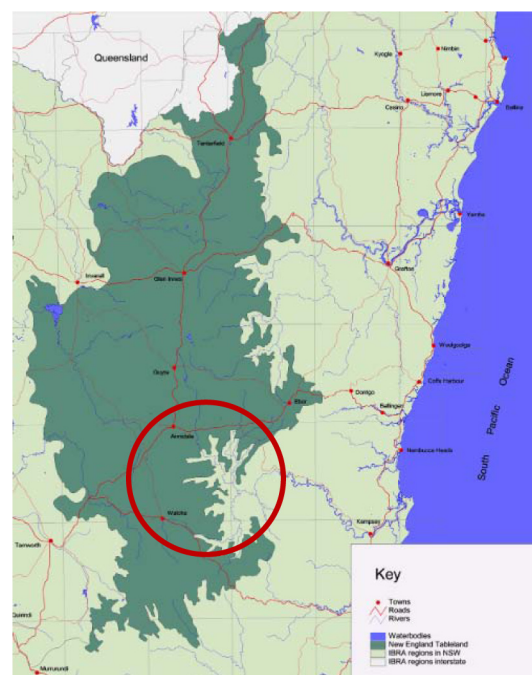


Figure 1. Map of New England Tablelands, Australia, with Armidale and gorge country circled in red.

Source: www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/nature/newEnglandTableland.pdf

In response to the Tablelands environment, the author—a scholar and poet trained in both literary studies and botanical science—wrote a range of poems about the flora of the bioregion. The poems comprising the project, *The Botanical Imagination*, address not only the beauty and rarity

of plant species but also the serious environmental issues threatening the floristic diversity of the region. The central theoretical perspective adopted by the author was ecopoetics, a field that is related to, yet distinct from, ecocriticism and the environmental humanities. Notwithstanding their common theoretical trajectories and shared political focus, ecopoetics and ecocriticism have pursued relatively independent directions characterized by a general lack of agreement among scholars over their exact relationship. In *Walt Whitman and the Earth* (2010), for instance, M. Jimmie Killingsworth characterizes ecopoetics as a branch of—or specialism within—the interdisciplinary field of ecocriticism: “For me, ecopoetics remains a tributary of ecocriticism, not a separate stream as [Jonathan] Bate sometimes suggests” (p. 6).

Killingsworth applies the term *ecopoetics* for phenomenological analyses of poetry and *ecocriticism* for textual approaches informed by environmentalist and ecopolitical discourses. Nonetheless, such a distinction between analysis and activism risks obscuring the prominent *ecopolitics* underlying *ecopoetics*. What is more, whereas ecocriticism places literary and cultural critique at the front and center—and generally keeps it separate to the praxis of creative writing—ecopoetics is an approach to both reading (analysis) and writing (creativity). Ecopoetic scholars—including Jonathan Skinner, John Kinsella, and Harriet Tarlo—are literary critics as well as creative writers. Notwithstanding these advances in ecopoetics, few ecopoetic scholar-poets

have focused on plant life and even fewer on Australian regions (Ryan, 2017).

METHOD

The phytopoetic (or plant-focused) method developed for *The Botanical Imagination* combined *field-based* approaches (visiting unique plant communities in the Tablelands), as detailed below; *archival strategies* (sourcing historical documents of relevance to botanical species); and *ethnographic techniques* (interviewing conservationists and, in some instances, the plants themselves). This eclectic application of phytopoetic theory in the Tablelands of New South Wales also made use of ekphrastic techniques of writing poetry in response to images, including photographs taken by the poet-researcher and botanical illustrations created by artist-naturalists during the nineteenth century in Australia.

In creating *The Botanical Imagination*—a sequence of about 60 poems in total—the author devised a multisensorial, ecological, field-based, collaborative, reflexive, and arts practice-led methodology tailored to the New England plantscape (see Figure 2). The approach was multisensorial insofar as the researcher attempted to engage his full range of senses—seeing, listening, touching, smelling, tasting—while also remaining open to the potential sensory experiences of plants in response to his actions, as detailed by biologist Daniel Chamovitz in the book *What a Plant Knows* (2013). The writing process was ecological in that it considered the relationship between environmental phenomena—elements, weather, seasons, rocks, plants,

animals—and the poetry while also conceptualizing the poems themselves as autonomous natural phenomena subject to patterns of growth and decay, and of appearance and disappearance. Thus, from the perspective of the researcher, the poems on the page remain part of the Tablelands ecosystem, with dirt clinging metaphorically to their roots.

The practice was field-based insofar as the researcher visited New England gorges, namely, Guy Fawkes, Wollomombi, Metz, Gara, Macleay, Dangar's, Apsley and Tia gorges, on a regular basis. To be certain, a field-based approach has been a feature of Western 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 this ecological and field-based approach, *The Botanical Imagination* employed GPS coordinates in titling and ordering some of the poems, thus affirming the primacy of place and locatedness in the sequence. Other parts of the work experimented with sonnetic composting—the actual burying of poems in the ground—in order to introduce the biological processes of the gorges into the formal features of the text.

The approach was collaborative in that the researcher regarded the gorges and their plants as active contributors to, and co-authors of, the poetry. In particular, the composition of some poems reflected the application of theoretical principles from experimental filmmaking and environmental art that centralize processes of deconstruction

and decay. While not minimizing his role in mediating the actual writing (as poet), the researcher did attempt to relinquish creative control, if only fleetingly and if only as a conceptual experiment. The approach was reflexive insofar as the researcher tested different writing ideas and techniques in and away from the field, identifying what worked well and what required more development. To this effect, he positioned his poetry writing practice reflexively within the theoretical frame of ecopoetics, enabling himself to refine, enlarge, and gain critical awareness of his creative decisions. In this regard, Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson (2006, p. 4) differentiate 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.” Reflexivity is essential to an arts practice-led methodology—known variously as practice-led research, practice-based research, creative research, and practice as research—signifying “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, p. 2). The creative research, practice-led foundation of *The Botanical Imagination* hinged on a movement between field writing; drafting poems away from the field; and contemplating the whole

process through the conceptual lens of eco-poetics.

In addition to the field practice, the approach taken in the writing project also made use of archival strategies and ethnographic techniques. The researcher consulted online archives, such as the National Library of Australia's Trove platform, and physical archives located at the University of New England in Armidale, New South Wales, Australia, as well as around the New England region. These archival documents were analyzed in order to understand how early settlers, explorers, naturalists, and botanists perceived the plantscape of New England and particular species within it. Phrases extracted from the archival content figured into the composition of some poems.

The researcher also interviewed botanists, conservationists, artists, and writers to appreciate their perceptions of New England plants; excerpts from the interviews were occasionally integrated into the verse. Moreover, the researcher experimented with the idea of the "plant interview" elaborated by anthropologist John Hartigan (2017), who describes how attending carefully to plants can alter traditional ethnographic methodologies: "How do plants as subjects alter an ethnographic account? The process here is twofold. First, relying on the age-old apparatus of field notes, I recorded both my thoughts and what I was seeing, thus describing the scene. Then, in conveying all this to you, the reader, I was compelled to describe plants in some detail, which required developing my capacities to see and to think through these life forms" (p. 281). In this passage, Hartigan is

not referring to actual conversations conducted with plants (although he doesn't rule out the possibility). Instead, by *interview*, the anthropologist means spending time in the presence of plants and opening human awareness to the nuances of vegetal behavior.



Figure 2. Writing at Long Point, Macleay Gorge, Australia, August 2018.

Source: J. Ryan

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion sections will analyze the substantive intrinsic and extrinsic elements of the poems the author composed for the project *The Botanical Imagination* in relation to current theoretical trends in ecocriticism and eco-poetics. The first five poems (poems 1–5 in the appendix) demonstrate the poet-researcher's interest in conveying the stories of plants and people that circulate around the Tablelands bioregion of Australia. The second five poems (poems 6–10 in the appendix) reflect the writer's experimentation with form (lineation, spacing, centering, etc.) as a means to express the particularities of a plant in the context of its habitat at a certain moment in time and space.

Results

Poem 1, “Racecourse Lagoon, Uralla, New South Wales,” narrates the intermingling of native and exotic plant species at a New England site known as Racecourse Lagoon near the town of Uralla, New South Wales. In the early 1900s, the site was used for horse racing by local settlers. Images of northern hemispherical plants, such as Queen Anne’s lace, mullein, and clover, contrast to the wetland species known as *nardoo*, traditionally ground by Aboriginal Australian people to make a damper or nutritive bread. The poem investigates the idea of “intercorporeality” in which the wetland environment becomes a living reflection of the walking human figure rather than an empty screen on to which his pathos is projected a la Wordsworth.

Poem 2, “After Visiting Beadle’s Grevillea,” tells the somewhat humorous story of a field trip taken with undergraduate conservation students to locate the rare species named in the poem’s title. On leaving the site at dusk, after surveying the population of the plant at a cliffside site, the bus became trapped in mud. As a group of instructors tried to extract the stricken vehicle by pushing, pulling, and digging, a contingent of young students stood by, unsure of what to do, perhaps with nervous visions of being stranded in the bush for the night. In this way, the poem calls attention to the sharp divide between the urban and wild that precludes immersive experiences of plant life and hinders the development of deep forms of cultural memory.

Poem 3, “To Spring Hope, Here and There” is dedicated to John O’Rourke for whom it was written on request.

The verse considers how awareness of place is engendered by plants through a cross-continental conversation between the poet in New South Wales and the dedicatee in Western Australia (WA). Species such as golden grevillea and the Western Australian (WA) Christmas tree, both of which are endemic to the Southwest corner of WA, figure into the writer’s botanical imagination of where he lives, where he has lived, and, perhaps, where he is heading. Plants thus provide a living compass point galvanizing a sense of temporality that spans the past, present, and future.

Poem 4, “Rusty Ficus,” is told from the perspective of the plant (using the first-person voice), a local species of fig. The plant’s evolutionary memory vastly exceeds that of the human observer: “I was once water flowing around stone. I hardened in waiting.” In contrast, Poem 5, “The Churchill of New England” is a jocular work also about the ficus species featured in Poem 4. The speaker likens the old fig to Winston Churchill bearing the weight of his life’s regrets: “Larvae of his synconia: those flowers sting him innerly.” Although the poems address a similar subject (the fig), they use markedly contrasting tones (serious in comparison to light-hearted).

The second group of five poems experiments in particular with form. Poem 6, “Ingram’s Wattle,” is arranged in columns with some of the words truncated or hyphenated to visually represent the jagged quality of the gorge environment where the plant grows. Ingram’s wattle is a highly localized species that is known to occur at only two sites in New England, one of which is Dangar’s Falls where the poem is set.

Poems 7 and 8 are Petrarchan sonnets that more or less adhere to the traditional meter of the form. In these poems, as in Poem 4, the plants themselves speak directly to the reader in the first-person voice. “Two Old Trees Embrace” concerns the Antarctic beech, a remnant species from the last Ice Age. The sonnet playfully likens the two trunks of the gnarled tree to an elderly coupled “locked in eons of terse conversation.” In contrast, “A Conference of Casuarina” takes a more serious tone yet employs a demanding lexicon to express something about the life-world of this riverside-dwelling species. Colloquially named “river sheoak,” the large tree is known to protect against erosion and provides rare habitat for animals in the Australian bush: “Cleft and groaning at full height, I certify your sheoak asylum.”

Poem 9, “Variations on the Theme of Gorges,” comprises ten three-line haiku poems written while the author camped near Wollomombi Falls outside of Armidale, New South Wales. The poems are austere and bare, just like the gorges themselves. The sequence of poems is meant to summon the tradition of Japanese and Chinese monk-poets who composed formal verse in the seclusion of wilderness.

Finally, Poem 10, “Gondwanan Beech Walk,” attempts to evoke the experience of walking in the ancient forests of the Tablelands through its sinuous arrangement evocative of a footpath. Through the twisting form of the poem, the reader experiences the sensation of moving through the ancient forest with the narrator.

Discussion

Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne argue in their introduction to a recent edited collection, *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field* (2018) that an inclusive approach to ecopoetics that is not limited to processes of reading and writing but also underscores the significance of “experiments in community making,” ranging from poetry and interactive art to cooking and foraging (p. 2). *The Botanical Imagination* is one kind of “experiment in community making” that engaged local plants, people, and places. Hume and Osborne’s volume brings together incisive essays addressing diverse activist and political perspectives. The editors historicize ecopoetics as an outgrowth of contemporary, post-1945 Western poetry and poetics. Early studies under the aegis of ecopoetics such as Gary Snyder’s *The Practice of the Wild* and Bate’s *The Song of the Earth* started to appear in the 1990s and at the turn of the millennium. In contrast, ecocriticism gained traction in the 1980s and ’90s with early environmental critics building on the work of Leo Marx, Roderick Nash, Raymond Williams, and other literary and cultural theorists. Early ecocriticism called attention to the representation of the environment in prose and formulated a nature writing canon dominated by British Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. Nonetheless, few ecopoets have addressed plant life in the sustained manner put into practice in *The Botanical Imagination*.

Throughout its history, ecopoetics, in contradistinction to ecocriticism, has attended to alternative environmental imaginaries beyond concerns of naturalistic, or mimetic, representation

(Hume & Osborne, 2018, 7). Thus evolving on the margin of ecocriticism's preoccupation with aesthetics and representation, ecopoetics constitutes, for Hume and Osborne, "a recuperative imaginative act" (p. 10), one which contributes to the overarching debates of the Anthropocene, especially regarding matters of affect and scale. Considering the socioecological function of poetry—what it performs or accomplishes in the world—the introduction to *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field* characterizes ecopoetics in terms of potentialities for worlding and reworlding: "While poetry may not transform human systems, the practice of ecopoetics can constitute an openness to what exists or what might exist" (Hume & Osborne, 2018, p. 6). The collection, to be certain, provides a record of the ongoing evolution of ecopoetics particularly through the field's recent intersections with critical studies of gender, sexuality, race, and disability (Hume & Osborne, 2018, p. 3). The ten poems included in the appendix reflect experiments in *worlding* and *reworlding*—of understanding the various biological and cultural worlds of which plants are part.

Jonathan Skinner's chapter "Visceral Ecopoetics in Charles Olson and Michael McClure" (2018) links embodiment to ecology and poetry through the idea of a *visceral poetics* that "aims to activate matter from within," allowing poets to capitalize on their own physiological energies and exchanges (p. 83). Skinner's intriguing conceptualization of the work of American poets Olson and McClure pivots on an "overlooked exchange" between the two poets that, for Skinner, repositions their work in terms of

ecological thinking (66). In tracing the emergence of contemporary American ecopoetics, Skinner underscores the importance of the "projectivist process-based poetics" central to post-1945 American modernist poetics (66). The poem "Two Old Trees Embrace" (poem 7 in the appendix), for instance, exemplifies Skinner's idea of a *visceral poetics* in lines such as "A conjoined duo tethered at sternum, / filmy fern-fur, fused feet, and femora." The poem demonstrates the congruences between human and plant bodies, implying our mutual dependencies.

Another provocative although questionable contribution to *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field* is Lynn Keller's "Making Art 'Under These Apocalyptic Rays'" (2018a), which attempts to develop an argument for the prevalence of apocalypticism in the ecopoetics of Jorie Graham and Evelyn Reilly. Keller makes an effort to highlight "how apocalypticism shapes politically consequential individual and social affects" pertinent to the overwhelming disempowerment brought on by widescale transformation of the environment in the Anthropocene (p. 21). From Keller's perspective—although ultimately contradictory and replete with circumlocution—both Graham and Reilly use apocalyptic rhetoric as a means to respond to ecological crisis yet also critique this mode by reminding us of our corporeal enmeshment in the environment. For Graham, this is the pastoral landscape, and, for Reilly, this is the domain of non-human animals. The apocalypticism of their work hinges on an ecological imperative to *dwell in crisis*. This distinctive "double awareness of crisis and apocalypse"

engages with the pleasures of dwelling contra Lawrence Buell and other ecocritics who have warned against the environmental value of apocalyptic rhetoric. Although presenting an inherently specious argument, Keller concludes plainly that “eco-apocalyptic art must offer some kind of revelry or pleasure if it is to help people immersed in ongoing crisis muster the will to avert devastation” (41).

Keller’s *Recomposing Ecopoetics* (2018b) presents itself as the leading contribution to Anglophone ecopoetic criticism. In this study of North American ecopoetics, Keller characterizes the *self-conscious Anthropocene* as “a powerful cultural phenomenon tied to reflexive, critical and often anxious awareness of the scale and severity of human effects” on the biosphere (p. 2). The monograph attempts to bring attention to recent ecopoetic work—specifically of the last fifteen years—that disrupts the prominence of the lyric mode. Through an overwrought analysis, Keller makes the simple point that the radical, experimental, urban, abstruse, and non-lyric—the “fractured” and “asyntactic”—have been mostly excluded from studies of North American ecopoetry (p. 11). Her elaboration of the process of *recomposing* centers on six themes prevalent in the environmental humanities and studies of the Anthropocene, namely, scalar thinking, plastic waste, apocalypticism, species-species communication, translocal sense of place, and ecosocial justice. Keller enumerates ecopoetry’s contribution to each of these areas through extended analyses of poets, such as Evelyn Reilly and Ed Roberson, who appropriate pastoral modes to

express current ecopolitical urgencies. The most important contribution of the monograph is its bringing to prominence the ecopoetics of Forrest Gander, Adam Dickinson, and other innovative Western poets whose work had not previously received this kind of critical attention. Keller’s focus on experimental poems that manipulate form to express meaning aligns with the aims of Poems 6–10 in the appendix.

In attempting to make a case for eco-experimentalism, Keller widens the ambit of ecopoetics beyond the “‘mainstream’ expressive lyric” (p. 11). *Recomposing Ecopoetics* points to new possibilities for ecopoetic readings of urban landscapes, industrialized environments, uncanny wastelands, digital productions, and un-(non-)charismatic organisms. The monograph elucidates some of the processes by which experimental poetry intervenes in—but also extends and exploits—the expressive lyric tradition. To this effect, Keller leverages a bewilderingly complex lexicon to underscore ecopoetry’s transformative agency. A vocabulary expressive of discontinuity imparts precision in demonstrating how contemporary ecopoetic meaning arises, for instance, from “digitally inflected punctuation” and “proliferating links generated through parataxis” (p. 23). The chapter “Understanding Nonhumans” highlights ecopoetic mediation of species-species semiosis. Keller’s analysis remains somewhat conscious of the pitfalls of literary anthropomorphism yet affirms the integral connection between nonhuman polysemy and ecopoetic expression. “Rusty Ficus” (Poem 4) is present from the perspective of the tree,

suggesting the possibility of plant voice yet attempting to avoid the pitfalls of anthropomorphism.

Nonetheless, the overriding US emphasis of the monograph makes little of the connections between American developments, British radical landscape poetics, and non-Anglophone experimentalisms. Keller's text indeed remains fixated on eco-poetics as an American phenomenon, notwithstanding long-lived traditions in Britain, New Zealand, Australia, Southeast Asia, and the Global South. Framed in anglocentric terms, the experimentalism detailed in *Recomposing Eco-poetics* addresses animals and other mobile organisms yet leaves plants, fungi, algae, landforms, and other comparatively immobile phenomena on the periphery of Keller's formulation. This conspicuous gap could generatively be redressed in ensuing studies by other scholars, notably in the context of recent developments in critical plant studies, geocriticism, and postcolonial ecocriticism. *The Botanical Imagination* expands Keller's work by contributing a plant-focused example of eco-poetics in practice.

Angela Hume and Samia Rahimtoola's introduction to a special themed section of articles published in the journal *ISLE* on "Queering Eco-poetics" (2018) considers the impacts of queer theory and queer ecocriticism on eco-poetics and, in turn, the expansion of queer ecologies by eco-poetic practice and theory. Hume and Rahimtoola use the term *eco-poetics* to signify poetry as well as critical writing about poetry and praxis. What is more, they theorize *eco-poiesis* as integral to human-non-human

socialities outside national, political, ethnic, and familial normativities (p. 134). The editors conceptualize *queer eco-poetics* as the "affects, kinship practices and erotic exchanges that shape dwelling as a relational endeavor" (p. 139). Queer eco-poetics thus pursues human-non-human entanglements apart from heterocentric, mainstream environmental politics, a position also explored by literary critic Nicole Seymour in *Bad Environmentalism* (2018). At the confluence of eco-poetics and queer theory, Hume and Rahimtoola develop two case studies in particular—reproductive futurity and toxic discourse. Firstly, queer eco-poetics imagines possibilities for environmental care beyond the mainstream perception of the future as contingent on reproductivity (ensuring future human offspring). Secondly, queer eco-poetics critiques what the editors call *toxic discourse*, or the premise that ecocriticism should expand beyond its foundational emphasis on the preservation of nature to address human well-being. In contrast, queer eco-poetics argues that such a position promulgates a sexist, anthropocentric health paradigm that excludes others from dominant health discourses.

"Queering Eco-poetics" also explores queer theory's relation to eco-poetics, ecocriticism, and heteronormative environmental ethics, particularly the friction between asceticism, eros, and pleasure. Sarah Ensor (2018) theorizes an intransitive eco-poetics in which contact becomes inhabitation and touch exists phenomenally without an object of touch. Three modes of contact—touching, cruising, and gleaning—are evident in three eco-poetic texts,

respectively: Wordsworth's 1798 poem "Nutting," Samuel Delany's 1999 nonfiction narrative *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, and Agnès Varda's 2000 documentary film *The Gleaners and I*. Delany's account, for example, examines "how cruising both generates and illumines the ecological lineaments of urban livability" (Ensor, 2018, p. 155). In a similar manner, Varda's film exemplifies the phenomenon of "fleeting touch" in eco-poetic narratives (Ensor, 2018, p. 160). For Ensor, queer eco-poetics reconfigures the very idea of contact and defamiliarizes mainstream environmentalism. "Queering Eco-poetics" also puts queer theory into contact with the fields of animal studies and Indigenous studies. At this conjunction, David Huebert (2018) sketches an *equine erotopoetics* in response to the Indigenous decolonial eco-poetics of Linda Hogan and Joy Harjo. For Huebert, the work of Hogan and Harjo reveals directions for interspecies filiation and, more specifically, for equine eros as a decolonial energy.

While Huebert, Keller, and others continue to reinforce the primacy of animal agency in the mainstream conceptualization of eco-poetics, others have turned to plants and the botanical world. The idea of *phytopoetics* counters the animalization of eco-poetics and the zoocentrism of eco-poetic practice (Ryan, 2017). Plants compose the vast majority of life on Earth but have been framed historically as deficient in intelligence and devoid of most other positive qualities associated with animals. In contrast, phytopoetics attends to the specific agencies, autonomies, and capacities of vegetal life as mediated in poetry and expressed in the life-

world through a variety of practices (activist, artistic, literary). The overall aim of phytopoetics is to stimulate new biological, social, political, cognitive, and representational approaches to flora.

This photosynthetically-oriented specialization within contemporary eco-poetics generates a diverse range of biosocial possibilities toward a phytopolitics of the future that more adequately acknowledges—and learns to live with—plants as sentient co-agents in the world(s) that all beings inhabit. Phytopoetics troubles and resists the Enlightenment era-based characterization of plants as passive, inert, unresponsive, and mechanistic components of landscapes with no felt-experiences and inner worlds of their own. Vegetal poetics draws from recent work in critical plant studies that attempts to liberate plants from utilitarianist paradigms in which they are exploited for food, fiber, medicine, and other purposes yet lack an internal telos or innate self-directedness. What is more, phytopoetics considers the queerness of the plant world in its non-animalistic agencies and inversion of zoonormativities. The poetry of *The Botanical Imagination* reflects these and other theoretical developments, and delineates a field-based, bioregional praxis of phytopoetics in the New England Tablelands of New South Wales, Australia.

CONCLUSION

The age of the Anthropocene, in which climate change continues to jeopardize the survival of species around the world, demands new approaches to other-than-human life that decenter

the preeminence of humankind. A sustainable Society 5.0 will emerge only through non-anthropocentric, non-humanistic, and multispecies perspectives that place value on all life. Poetry provides a means of rethinking the human relationship to the natural world and in this way becomes crucial to the development of ethical models that ensure the continuation of plant diversity in postcolonial societies such as Australia where the degree of historical loss is staggering. Through poetic practice such as that put into action in *The Botanical Imagination*, humankind might learn to see vegetal life as a biocultural source of inspiration for both local and planetary transformation.

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Appendix

Poem 1

Racecourse Lagoon, Uralla, New South Wales

I can only believe that it was caused by a meteorite.

—Uralla settler Morris Melvane, circa 1880

The mares, gone, the hounds, no longer
Yelping, marsupial shadows, now, sheltering
Inside sanctorum of lagoon shallows.

Spring seep moistening this hollow from
Beneath—no meteorite, no heavenly origin,
Only immeasurable forbearance of waterkin.

Queen Anne's lace filigrees fringes here,
A hacked-at conifer stands stout afront wire
Fence—a strange bonsai in mullein hurled in

From distant provinces. In soft swamp abdomen,
Clover leaves of nardoo float, spores round
As peas gathered, ground, baked for damper.

I see myself ambling along the ice-age-old lunette
Who is he? Bucket hat slunk low, stray stitches
Blowing in tableland wind—breathing out, in.

From the periphery, nothing gleams yet, even so,
The lagoon is a mirror of me, doppelgänger,
Our aqueous bodies, our bogheartbeat.

Poem 2

After Visiting Beadle's Grevillea

The bus, weighted
With conservation students,
Bogged in the greasy autumn
Mud of the road winding out of
Guy Fawkes River National Park.

Darkness dropped
Like a mallet around us. The students,
Too afraid to alight. The rest of
Us huffed and hacked up some downed

Branches to lend enough traction for

Our beast to climb.

We had come there to survey
Rare Beadle's grevillea flowers, their
One-sided mauve racemes, upright
As blood-hued horse-brush bristles.

Once presumed extinct,

(The species, not the passengers)
They were rediscovered in the '70s
And now are known to populate a mere
Five locales in northern New South Wales,

Much like the one we visited:

A sanctum of ravine-crossed country
Pollinated by eastern spinebills,
Yellow-tufted honeyeaters,
Crimson rosellas and the less frequent

Undergrad feathered in fluoro ribbon.

With their silky deep-lobed penmanship,
The Beadles resembled bonsai among
Less mature sheoak-wisps of the friable
Slope. Their red flowers scripted a fusillade

In the thick olive-green bush.

The bus snarled up the gradient. Its pallid
Light frenzied spectral shapes into motion
But, by the time we reached drowsy Ebor,
The fusillade had softened into an afterglow.

Poem 3

To Spring Hope, Here and There

For John O'Rourke

"Hope is the thing with feathers" – Emily Dickinson

This morning, a kookaburra surfed the fence post
outside my kitchen window, headstrong in the squall,
unfussed in the gale, a stubborn figure in a snow globe.

Furry green apricots plunged to the ground, sprawled
in litterfall, pirouetted into the parsley patch (yellowing
and gone to seed) pinged the tin roof as noisy miners

mimed in feather bushes nearby. But, for you, Christmas
trees will soon bloom in fiery coronas bellowed by falsettos
of long-billed corellas, and kangaroo paws will overstep

the ancient scarp. I remember the sensation of noonlight
sharpening to summer's taper on my neck near the river
of the black swan, as sulphur-crested cockatoos wheeled

daredevilishly in a mob on the horizon. Here, crimson
rosellas veer then disappear into the olive orchard, hulking
wallaroos chew wadges of couch grass, magpies gargle

among their parliament before rain gurgles into the concrete
tank—and when I think I understand what ensouls us all, this land,
it bolts from the warm inside of my hand—green elusive pulse

of wren and wagtail, our filigreed dreams of hope unleashed.
I won't forget, at Jarrahdale, when ring-neck parrots seesawed
in the golden grevillea and, at dusk, red-tailed black cockatoos

rummaged for marri nuts with their beaks hard as steel pincers.
I think hope is as tough as feathers—a seed scatters, a bird shudders
on spectral wings, sings of things we must have faith in to imagine.

Poem 4
Rusty Ficus

In this province of currawongs and goats, I am watching.
As you cross the fence and enter the field, I am watching.

I am the cornea of this winter field preparing to enclose you.
Tell me, is today the day when the southerly wind is blowing?

Tell me, is today the day when the stacked stones will topple?
I was once water flowing around stone. I hardened in waiting.

The ribbons of tumbling water calcified to ligaments and bones.
My leaves agreed with the stones, sand, stars and sun watching.

The grazers stave off other trees. Goats manicure this foliate gloss.

When will these inner fruits ripen? My wasps will cease waiting.

From this rock-strewn rise, I shepherd the slow flexures of seasons.
New families come. Children mature. They leave. I am left waiting.

See my purpling air roots spider darkly as venous blood. Lean in.
Soothe this calloused skin with your touch. Breathe in. Watching.

Poem 5

The Churchill of New England

One of the fig trees at Mount Yarrowyck bears
An uncanny likeness to Winston Churchill, were he
Reincarnated as a Green Man: an imperious chlorophyll
Sourpuss with leafy jowls, bloated stomach, barrel chest

And generous buttocks. The wind has blown off
His top hat and blown out his cigar, but he sharpens his
Oratory in the presence of whoever will listen, for instance,
An impressionable young wattle or new generation of duff

Eucalypts. And other audiences. But I cringe a bit at
This crude comparison, for to blemish *Ficus* with politics
Seems gratuitous and does no justice to the consummate
Magnificence of this portly persona on his plinth of granite.

Doubtless, some bird once puked or pooped him out
Here. And he deigned to deem the rock home-enough.
His single root like a bonded-pair cable has intruded a
Fissure and plunges whole-heartedly into dry terra firma.

Now he is free from the trauma of the Iron Curtain era.
Yet his pomposity belies a sensitivity. An affection for the
Brusque warmth of monoliths. A forbearance with wasp
Larvae of his synconia: those flowers sting him innerly.

Poem 6

Ingram's Wattle

in full abandon
ingramii at Dan-
lucid aureate
bees with elixir

flowering
gars Falls
pom poms
of early sun

Acacia
bursting
seducing
springing

forward to witness
over glorious brim
to Salisbury Waters
wattles gilded
fire language
with quiet sing-
swallows flitting near
head of falls
as eels migrate
inmost essence

dangling haloes
of vertiginous
underneath
are adroitly
are combusting
eing radiance
blossoms ever
honeyeaters
to distant seas
of gorge glowing

blazing
plunging
cartwheeling
acquiring
chasmus
consuming
goldening
trilling
multiplying
in full abandon.

Poem 7

Two Old Trees Embrace

A conjoined duo tethered at sternum,
filmy fern-fur, fused feet, and femora
in clique of cryptogams, etcetera;
We concede not having nerve to stir them;
We agree 'twould be a risk to spurn them,
those fellow late Cretaceous genera,
crisping our muscles like thick tempura.
Towards one another we, therefore, turn in,
halfdressed, chest-to-chest, stomach-to-stomach,
locked in eons of terse conversation,
fantasizing of some younger hummock,
free from the drear of glaciation—
perhaps filled with the tune of a dunnock,
anything other than this speciation.

Poem 8

A Conference of Casuarina

Envoi of casuarine conference
at wellspring of Gwydir whisper
into gurgling Boorolong bistro—
cue of silvereve consonance.
I test subterranean essence
and shelter azure kingfisher,
my cortex of filligreed fissure,
root of medusan tumescence;
My progeny elbow for daylight
or idealize tussocky islands,
away from bruising epiphytes,
near river churning up diamonds;

Cleft and groaning at full height,
I certify your sheoak asylum.

Poem 9

Variations on the Theme of Gorges

1.

At Wollomombi
burning gorge-wattles borrow
the spume of the falls.

2.

Near Dangar's lookout
brush-tailed wallabies escape
the gape of walkers.

3.

Under coachwood a
lyrebird struts with aplomb but
forgets to greet us.

4.

Clinging to the lip
of a scenic vista herbs
as fragrant as thyme.

5.

A mother possum
claws the coarse skin of a tree,
her dusk-eyes squinting.

6.

The kangaroo bounds
across the water-logged track,
a forest stream purls.

7.

Craving its quiet
the rare grevillea bush
wants no visitors.

8.

En route to Walcha

memories of stone orchids
laden with storm-drift.

9.

Three-tiered waterfall
where a tired nature poet
once lost his footing.

10.

Restless night in camp
awoke to the earsplitting
fever of gorge talk.

Poem 10

Gondwanan Beech Walk

The rawness of the air
is rare in the prehistoric
beech forest at Pt Lookout
as panoramic vertebrae

across the Bellinger valley
unroll fully to the Pacific
mosses of the mostly
vivid verdure bandage

buttress roots & fleece
knurled, time-worn trunks

composed of convolutions
inscribed by indentations
& woody vines coil

into bearded lariats
as dull orange fungi
punctuate hirsute masses
like solar flares flashing

seconds before fading
& basalt cliff face of

Weeping Rock seeping
iridescently with springs
sheltering sphagnum frogs
scrambling up slippery steps
beside knotted-gnarled-rooted bodies.