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Environmental crises in Kerala, Adelaide, and beyond: a collaborative poetic inquiry

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Abstract:

The earth presently suffers multiple anthropogenic (human-affected) environmental crises. Broad scale global issues like climate change now receive relatively high public attention, but need remains to look closely at localised problems and to enact dialogues about how environmental crisis manifests across differing geographical sites. Fusing the creative and collaborative techniques of research methodologies including duoethnography, poetic inquiry, and writing-as-research, this article stages an exchange through which two poets, one based in Kerala, India, the other in Adelaide, Australia, respond to one another's writings about local environmental issues. In drawing on feminist and ecofeminist theories in connection with Félix Guatari's work on the 'three ecologies', the article probes interconnections between environmental and social issues including but exceeding the ongoing effects of invasion or colonisation in both our countries; the insufficiencies of official responses to catastrophes; oppression and privilege based on gender and intersecting factors; the globalised capitalist economy; and more.

Biographical notes:

Professor KV Dominic is an Indian poet, short story writer, editor, and critic, writing in English, and a retired professor of the PG & Research Department of English, Newman College, Thodupuzha, Kerala, India. He took his PhD on the topic 'East-West Conflicts in the Novels of RK Narayan with Special Reference to *The Vendor of Sweets*, *Waiting for the Mahatma*, *The Painter of Signs*, and *The Guide*. His PhD was awarded at Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala.

Dr Amelia Walker is a poet, researcher, and former member of the executive board of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP). Since 2018, she has worked on *TEXT* journal as co-editor of book reviews. She acknowledges that she was born, and lives, on the land of the Kaurna people, as a person of mixed caucasian descent. Sovereignty was never ceded; this always was, always will be Aboriginal land.

Keywords:

Ecopoetry – collaborative research – climate change – colonialism – poetry as research

Introduction

The earth currently suffers multiple and catastrophic anthropogenic (human-affected) environmental problems. Global environmental crises like climate change, pollution, and species extinction now receive relatively high degrees of public attention, but site-specific environmental issues and localised manifestations of global problems typically receive less international attention (Salih 2012). To recognise interrelations between seemingly distant phenomena, people in geographically-distant locales need to share information about environmental issues in their respective sites – or, in catchphrase terms, to *think globally while acting locally*. This article stages a dialogue in which two poets – one from Kerala, India (Dominic) and one from Adelaide, Australia (Walker) – exchange poems about environmental problems manifest in our respective locales and nearby sites. We conducted our exchange via poetry because poetry provides modes of knowing attentive to details that often elude representation in conventional academic discourse (Musgrave 2014) [1]. The poems we exchanged comprise a mixture of nature poems (poems celebrating nature’s beauty); environmental poems (poems decrying environmental destruction and/or calling for environmental activism); and ecopoems (which also call for environmental activism, but in subtle and symbolic ways, via experimental deployments of language and space) (Arigo 2007).

Our process was loosely inspired by duoethnography, a research methodology in which two or more researchers of differing backgrounds and experiences generate knowledge by sharing perspectives on a given topic (Norris & Sawyer 2012). Duoethnographic articles are typically presented in play script format (Given 2008). However, in the process of writing up our work, we found that integrated commentaries could in this case better represent our key points. Duoethnography using poetry is precedented, though non-standard (Norris & Greenlaw 2012). Our use of poetry reflects methodological traditions of poetic inquiry (Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima 2009) and writing-as-research (Richardson 1997; Webb 2010). Our collaboration originally involved twelve poems: three place-based poems by Dominic, to which Walker wrote response-poems; and three of Walker’s poems, to which Dominic responded. Throughout this process, we exchanged thoughts and insights via email. This article shares four of the six poem pairings and commentaries.

Section one contains poems about extreme weather. The connected commentary considers interconnections between climate change, ongoing repercussions of British colonisation or invasion, and contemporary globalised capitalist economics. Section two presents poems about glaciers. These indicate additional connections with tourism, the media, nationalism, militarism, and government decisions. This raises Félix Guattari’s (1989) work on the ‘three ecologies’ (mental, social, and environmental) and their interdependencies. Section three subsequently considers the social ecology, specifically oppression and privilege based in gender and intersecting factors. The links between social oppression and environmental degradation are illustrated via a poem about mining paired with one that resists femicide. Feminist and ecofeminist theories from Mies and Shiva (1993), Crenshaw (1991), and Haraway (2016) steer our analysis. Then, in section four, poems about introduced trees prompt us to

wonder how we can ‘stay with the trouble’ (Haraway 2016) of ecosystems so overwhelmingly damaged by human actions. Heeding Haraway’s call for ‘response-ability’ (2), we observe poetry’s benefits. Our concluding section maps scope for ongoing work of this kind.

Extreme weather catastrophes, insufficient responses, and ongoing effects of invasion and colonisation

This section presents Dominic’s poem ‘Mullaperiyar Dam’, followed by Walker’s response, ‘El Niño’. Both poems discuss extreme weather related to climate change. Following the poems, our commentary discusses insufficiencies in official responses to catastrophes, then probes links between invasion or colonisation and ongoing crises of climate in India, Australia, and beyond.

‘Mullaperiyar Dam’ by KV Dominic

A dam aged hundred and sixteen,
built without cement but surkhi and lime,
blocking innocent frisky Periyar,
immersing millions of plants and trees,
fleeing thousands of animals and birds.
It postures now Janus-faced;
its old age worsened by frequent tremors,
head to foot bleeding in several parts,
makes millions tense and sleepless on one side.
Catastrophic fear culminated to
behavioural problems in children nearby;
daren’t go to school, neither parents dare to send;
anxiety, phobia, depression, insomnia!
If broken, forty millions in five districts affected.
People in unison clamour for new dam:
“Give them water and save our lives.”
Millions on other side object to new dam;
Disbelieve promise of water from other side.
Arid five districts made fertile using the water.
Political mafia beguiles innocent masses
People on both sides lived as one family
Alas! Anti-social forces injected
regional, racial venom in masses;
destroy farms, attack shops and buses.
Multitudes flee to their native villages
leaving whatever they have earned with sweat.
Borders are closed, police patrol,

Inter-state buses and trucks stop run;
fruits, vegetables and eggs are rotten;
thousands of farmers, labours and merchants
struggle for their daily lives.
Rulers of State and central governments
living in midst of pomp and luxury
heed not to the wails and moans of the masses.
Avarice for power obstructs their duties;
tests the patience of benevolent Nature
and leaves the masses preys to calamities.

'El Niño' by Amelia Walker

Responding to 'Mullaperiyar Dam'

Rain. A magic word. It hurts
to say it, when there's been
too little of it.

The rivers, the creeks
flow dust.

We pray for rain,
dry lips furiously dancing

still Heaven pelts nought
but heat

while roos gather
to die round watering holes
where there's no water

just holes

gaping

holes

in the landscape

in the sky:

holes we carved

through our denial,
our desire

to be Gods:

holes we
made
and shaped
in images
of
our dry
hollow
a
h e t s
r

Reflections on ‘Mullaperiyar Dam’ and ‘El Niño’

Dominic’s ‘Mullaperiyar Dam’ and Walker’s ‘El Niño’ describe differing manifestations of global climate change. During our exchange, another climate-related catastrophe occurred – bushfires in Australia. In an email to Dominic, Walker wrote:

Multiple friends of mine have lost their homes to fire. People have lost their lives, as have animals of multiple species. I live beside the sea (a safe place where fires are concerned, though tides threaten). Yet even here, walking home today, the air was filled with smoke that choked my lungs and made my eyes water. Some nights ago I woke, smelling smoke. Briefly, I wondered, *Is my house burning down?* Then I remembered. *No. It’s just the world, burning ... to an end?* The smoke I breathed was carried on the wind from Kangaroo Island to mainland South Australia.

Dominic similarly observed additional issues of climate change:

Deaths of rivers and brooks and wells are visible in many parts of India and some places of Kerala. There are cases of even fountain wells dried even in monsoon and discarded. Many of the rivers in other States of India are just like you have pictured in your poem. There will be flowing water only for a very few months. I have seen videos of a river flowing sand or dust as visualised in ‘El Niño’. Lines full of holes and holes culminate to the hollow hearts where nothing can remain.

Beyond climate change, our dialogues revealed two additional connections of note between ‘Mullaperiyar Dam’ and ‘El Niño’: insufficiencies of official responses to catastrophes; and invasion or colonisation. Walker alludes to government failures through use of the word ‘denial’ in allusion to climate change deniers, making observable the Australian government’s

laxity around reducing carbon emissions (Jotzo 2019). Dominic's poem more explicitly protests government insufficiencies via the following lines:

Rulers of State and central governments

living in midst of pomp and luxury

heed not to the wails and moans of the masses.

To contextualise, Dominic explained the background of 'Mullaperiyar Dam':

The Mullaperiyar Dam is on the River Mullayar and its tributary, the Periyar, in the State of Kerala. It was constructed between 1887 and 1895 by the British Government to divert the water eastward to service the farmers in the Madras presidency which nowadays is known as Tamil Nadu. I composed my poem in 2011 during heavy monsoon when the entire people of Kerala were alarmed of its break and catastrophe.

Dominic's account describes how British interference with waterways to divert flow for farming historically contributed to problems ongoing in India today, more than seventy years after the Declaration of Indian Independence in 1947. In Australia – which remains under invasion through its official status as a constitutional monarchy in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people suffer extreme social, systemic, and other forms of violence – historic and ongoing interferences with waterways continue to cause salinity, erosion, and habitat destruction (Mochan & Gubana 2018). Issues of drought and fire in Australia are additionally exacerbated by unsustainable invader-introduced farming practices (Adler 2010) and lack of regard for long-established practices of burning to clear land and reduce fires (Fache & Moizo 2015). Overall, this first poetic exchange thus illustrated how issues of extreme weather and climate change in both our countries, in addition to being insufficiently-addressed by current day governments, occur at least in part as ongoing effects of invasion or colonisation in India and Australia.

Shrinking glaciers, integrated world capitalism, and the three ecologies

Through two poems about glaciers, this section extends our previous section's focus on climate change and its connections with invasion or colonisation. Again beginning with observance of insufficient official responses to catastrophes, we probe additional links with the military, the media, and ecotourism. This raises Félix Guattari's work on Integrated World Capitalism (IWC) and the 'three ecologies' (1989).

'Siachen Tragedy' by KV Dominic

Regarding the tragedy of 7th April 2012

Siachen glacier,
milky white grey hair of Himalaya.

Seventy kilometres long
and height ranging from
four thousand to six thousand metres
Twinkling by sun, moon and stars
Rarest beauty on earth for the heavens
Winter, winter, winter, forever and ever
Snowfall is thirty five feet
temperature minus fifty Celsius
Not a blade of grass grows
yet world's highest battlefield!
Thousands of soldiers of India and Pakistan
fight with Nature to secure their frontiers
Billions are spent for their outposts
Siachen glacier feeding several rivers
irrationally axed and dug
inviting vagaries of harmless Nature
Avalanche lodged on seventh April
buried hundred and twenty four soldiers
and eleven civilians under eighty feet snow
Isn't it high time the governments
stopped challenging benevolent Nature?

'Franz Josef Glacier, New Zealand, viewed 2016' by Amelia Walker
Responding to 'Siachen Tragedy'

It will take your breath away, friends said
and they were right yet so wrong,
for they'd told me of Josef's beauty,
the crystalline poetry of its slow
motion dance, swirling streaks
of silver, somehow flowing
while remaining still—a reminder
how brief and flickering, common
yet rare our lives are
like raindrops, like stars

But what I saw and choked on was grey
sludge pooling, stagnant yet draining
fast like bath water, oily, filthy
mascara when the party's over
streaking as tears down rock faces
burnt by a sun setting early and still
so hot, too hot—a reminder

how brief and flickering, common
yet rare our lives are
like raindrops, like stars
or grains
of an avalanche falling

Reflections on ‘Siachen Tragedy’ and ‘Franz Josef Glacier’

As earlier noted, our second poem pairing reinforced and extended themes of the first. ‘Siachen Tragedy’ describes an incident when lives were lost and devastation wreaked after the government decided to axe and drill into the Siachen glacier to aid military efforts. This action was undertaken with awareness of a significant avalanche risk due to glacial melt. 124 soldiers, 11 civilians, and an untallied number of beyond-human beings were killed. Drilling also seriously damaged the glacier itself as well as the surrounding landscape and connected ecosystems.

Governmental failure to heed warnings about the glacier’s fragility was in stark opposition to the Indian population’s expressed wishes. As Dominic recounted:

Regarding discussions going on in India regarding climate change, in the academic circles there is not even a college or university which doesn’t take it seriously and conduct seminars, workshops, and conferences among other activities around this serious issue. There are forums of nature lovers and environmentalists in every town and wherever there is environmental assault by way of deforestation, illegal mining, quarrying, conversion of paddy fields, ponds, lakes, brooks, marshes to dry lands for construction of buildings, these groups run there and protest against it and invite the attention of the governments and courts.

The military motivations behind the Siachen drilling reflect interrelations between nationalism and warfare. This extends and complexifies the points made in section one about invasion or colonisation – both of which bear their own interconnections with nationalism and warfare; however, the emergence of the latter two began signalling a greater, more complex web of forces, which we continued exploring through our dialogues on these poems.

Over email, Walker confessed prior ignorance regarding the Siachen tragedy, thereby raising how the mainstream media often downplays issues and/or fails to convey stories about problems emerging across dispersed locations. Another confession from Walker was guilt for having travelled by plane to New Zealand for a recreational trip including viewing the Franz Josef glacier described in her response poem. Paradoxically, seeing the glacier contributed to Walker’s later decision to cease all non-essential air travel. This raises the problems of ecotourism, of which Franz Josef makes an illustrative example. The official ‘Franz Josef Glacier Guides’ website acknowledges ‘[t]here’s no denying that Franz Josef Glacier looks very different to how it did two years ago’, paying heed to environmentalism by declaring it ‘important to educate people on how a glacier works and get some discussion going on what is happening to this changing landscape, and why’ (Franz Josef Glacier Guides 2015). Yet the

same website encourages people to travel to see the glacier, and even sells ‘scenic flights’ for the dedicated purpose of viewing it close up:

Whether it’s climate change or the natural cycle of the glacier, the important thing is that people are talking about what is happening to this precious environment. *Don’t you think you should come and see it for yourself?* (Franz Josef Glacier Guides 2015, emphasis added)

This reflects what Eijgelaar, Thaper, and Peeters (2010) signal as a serious ‘issue in tourism’s adaptation to climate change and emissions reduction demands’:

Operators increasingly take tourists to destinations threatened by climate change, with Antarctica and other polar regions as favourites and cruise ship and aircraft as main transport modes. The selling point is to see a destination before it disappears, a form of last chance tourism. This has been claimed to increase the environmental awareness of tourists and make them ‘ambassadors’ for conservation and the visited destination. (Eijgelaar, Thaper & Peeters 2010: 337)

The study by Eijgelaar, Thaper, and Peeters revealed, however, that these ‘ecotourism’ adventures do not encourage behavioural change to extents capable of counteracting the environmental impact of the travel itself (2010: 337). Wood raises similar issues, additionally noting economic challenges and dilemmas of equity considering ecotourism’s potential to generate ‘significant economic development returns for traditional people who have been left with few opportunities to move up the ladder in the globalized economy’ (2007: 172). Wood’s use of Ecuador as an example illustrates connections between ecotourism and invasion or colonisation (2007: 172-173), which strengthens the point made in this section’s first section and demonstrates how the contributions of globalised capitalism to environmental problems are not just additional to those of invasion or colonisation: the two are wickedly interconnected with one another and a host of other forces including but exceeding the military, the media, and tourism, as discussed in this section so far.

The intertwined forces described above reflect what Félix Guattari termed ‘Integrated World Capitalism’ (IWC) – a post-industrial ‘acceleration of techno-scientific mutations and of considerable demographic growth’ involving ‘continuous development of machinic labour, multiplied by the information revolution’ and contributing to ‘[u]nemployment, oppressive marginalization, loneliness, boredom, anxiety, and neurosis’ atop environmental and multiple other problems (1989: 18). In the 1980s, Guattari was already writing of a dystopian present in which:

men like Donald Trump are permitted to proliferate freely, like another species of algae, taking over entire districts of New York and Atlantic City; he ‘redevelops’ by raising rents, thereby driving out tens of thousands of poor families, most of whom are condemned to homelessness. (1989: 28)

In Guattari's terms, these represent problems of the 'social ecology', which is interdependent with the 'environmental ecology', and a third 'mental ecology'. Guattari characterised the mental ecology via Gregory Bateson's remark that 'there is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds' (Bateson qtd. in Guattari 1989: 17). The mental ecology thus represents collective knowledge and thinking, which entails multifarious power-laden games of language, communication, research, and the arts as practices through which ideas are shared, developed, contested, and hegemonically deemed valid or otherwise. This includes poetry as a mode of knowing that draws on social and cultural materials of language, history, politics, and more (Webb 2010; Musgrave 2014).

Recognition of the role poetry can play in linking the three ecologies enhanced our appreciation of the knowledge-making entailed in our poetic exchange processes. Guattari's three ecologies enabled us to understand how and why exchanging poems about environmental issues led us to discussion of social factors such as invasion or colonisation, the military, the media, and more. Taking up Guattari's call to dismantle IWC via strategies that 'target the modes of production of subjectivity, that is, of knowledge, culture, sensibility, and sociability' (1989: 33), our third exchange turned explicitly towards problems of the social ecology – specifically oppression and privilege based on gender and intersecting factors – to consider how these likewise relate to environmental crises of our times.

Gender and intersecting axes of injustice in the social ecology

This section presents a poem about mining followed by one that resists femicide. The subsequent commentary considers how problems of oppression and privilege in the social ecology interconnect with human exploitation of the environment. This entails a turn towards feminist and ecofeminist critiques in articulation with the 'three ecologies' (Guattari 1989).

'Ten by Ten' by Amelia Walker

Regarding Port Pirie's failed campaign to reduce local children's blood lead levels to below 10 micrograms per decilitre by the year 2010

At five am, the Pirie sky already nine shades of Krishna.
Down the main street, palm trees bling
like cashed-up bogans in their forty-watt sapphires
– a Caribbean Christmas in a mining town winter.

A remembered slogan teases, snickers: ten by ten
– ten micrograms of blood-borne lead by the year twenty ten,
a promise, bright as the smiles of politicians and company reps,
broken. By how much? Silence. This is a ghost town

where people still live. And laugh. Drily.
What was once a church now dishes up fish and chips.

If lost, glance up: McDonalds' golden arches glow
at all hours, wings on a mercury vapour angel.

I tread lightly round the toes of dozing grey giants
as they snore their slow, sweet poisons.
Sweet because, after all, mining saved us from recession
– the papers say so daily.

For every empire there's an army, for every victory, blood.
But Brave New Worlds grow old fast. So breathe
what air you can, while you can. Breathe deep, city girl.
This town paid for your education.

'Celebration of Girl-Child's Birth' by KV Dominic

Based on The Mathrubhumi report, 5 June 2013 – World Environment Day

The greatest celebration of girl-child's birth
the highest model to the entire world
The slaughterhouse world where thousands
of female foetus are killed everyday
Piplantri villagers in Indian State Rajasthan
angels on earth creating a paradise
A girl-child's birth celebration to the entire village
Earth, sky, trees, flowers, rivers, birds, flies
welcome the newcomer dancing
Hundred and eleven saplings
brought by women to newborn's house
They are to be planted in the village
and nurtured throughout their lives
The villagers collect twenty one thousand rupees
donate to newborn's father
Adding his own ten thousand
deposits in child's account
a fixed deposit for twenty years
The child shall get maximum education
Not married before maturity
The noble practice started in 2007
The village head Shyam Sundar Palival
started this exemplary project
A memorial of his departed girl child
The village is now blessed with
two lakh fifty thousand robust trees
Fruit trees and herbal trees

Their leaves and fruits yield
great income to the villagers

Reflections on ‘Ten by Ten’ and ‘Celebration of Girl-Child’s Birth’

Issues of gender emerged in our poetic exchange when Dominic presented ‘Celebration of Girl-Child’s Birth’ in response to Walker’s ‘Ten by Ten’, a poem about mining’s effects on air quality. In an email to Dominic, Walker related:

I initially couldn’t perceive the relationships between ‘Celebration of Girl-Child’s Birth’ and ‘Ten by Ten’, but following close re-reading, I recognised the link via the word ‘girl’ in my poem’s closing cadence, which caused me to reconsider my own poem in terms of privilege as an implicit yet crucial theme. When I visited Port Pirie I was an outsider not personally affected by the long-term breathing of lead-filled air. When the poem recognises that the education of the ‘city girl’ speaker is ‘paid for’ by Port Pirie, it recognises the horrible fact of the Australian economy’s reliance on mining: those of us privileged to be in urban regions reap spoils of mining’s toll on human health and happiness elsewhere.

Dominic affirmed this link, explaining how:

The common thread between Walker’s poem ‘Ten by Ten’ and my poem ‘Celebration of Girl-Child’s Birth’ is that both come under ecofeminism. Ecofeminism sees parallels between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women, parallels that are understood in the context of patriarchy.

To characterise the ecofeminist movement, Dominic noted the significant early contributions of Mies and Shiva:

...everywhere, women were the first to protest against environmental destruction. As activists in the ecology movements, it became clear to us that science and technology were not gender neutral; and in common with many other women, we began to see that the relationship of exploitative dominance between man and nature (shaped by reductionist modern science since the 16th century) and the exploitative and oppressive relationship between men and women and prevails in most patriarchal societies, even modern industrial ones, were closely connected. (1993: 1)

Gender’s connections with environmental crisis are also strongly evident in the works of Anna Tsing (2015), Eileen Crist (2019), and Donna Haraway (2016), to name but a few. In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene*, Haraway observes feminism’s pivotal role in ‘unraveling the supposed natural necessity of ties between sex and gender, race and sex, race and nation, class and race, gender and morphology, sex and reproduction, and reproduction and composing persons’, pitching the new goal of ‘multispecies ecojustice’ as one requiring feminists to ‘exercise leadership in imagination, theory, and action to unravel the ties of both genealogy and kin, and kin and species’ (2016: 102). Gender’s links with the environmental

were also a concern for Guattari, who connected species extinction with that of ‘the words, phrases, and gestures of human solidarity’, observing a ‘stifling cloak of silence ... thrown over the emancipatory struggles of women, and of the new proletariat: the unemployed, the “marginalised”, immigrants’ (1989: 29).

Notable in Haraway’s (2016), Tsing’s (2015), and Guattari’s (1989) approaches is the additional link of feminism and environmentalism with factors of race, class, and more. This aligns with intersectional feminism (Crenshaw 1991; Carbado et al 2013), which pitches that issues of oppression and privilege are ineffectually addressed via ‘single axis’ approaches – for instance, examining only race, class, or gender in isolation. Meaningful change requires a ‘multi-axis’ approach of recognising how different but related factors operate together. Initially arising in the USA in response to insufficiencies of the (white-dominated) feminist movement and the (male-dominated) racial rights movement, intersectionality now typically includes considerations of sexuality, ability, nationality, spirituality, age, and more (Carbado et al 2013: 304-306). It has in recent years been taken up by Indian academics to consider interrelations between gender and caste (Dey & Orton 2016; Pal 2018; Gupta 2019). Notwithstanding the distinct histories and objectives of intersectionality and the other approaches this article has raised, we believe an intersectional approach can significantly enrich analysis of the three ecologies and the IWC’s pernicious effects. The question that remains, however, is how to move from recognition and analysis of problems towards some mode of active response. This is the move our next section makes.

Introduced species, and staying with the trouble of anthropogenically-transformed ecosystems

Via two poems about pine trees, this final of our four poetic exchanges raises the question of how we may respond to a world so phenomenally damaged by human actions. Turning to Haraway for advice on ‘staying with the trouble’, we consider notions of ‘response-ability’ and ‘making kin’ (2016: 1-2), and poetry’s role in facilitating these things.

‘Wagamon’ by KV Dominic

Wagamon,
Kerala’s beautiful bonnet;
a spectrum of
spectacular scenes
carved all around it.

Steepish street
runs like anaconda;
sky-high precipice
on the right side;
hell-down caves

on the other side.
Miles long canvas
black and high;
green patches
here and there:
God with His brush!

A series of cataracts;
thin, thick, tall, short;
some like white paint
oozed from His brush;
others like curtains
slowly falling.
Eternal curtains,
eternal falling;
reminding us
the curtain of life.

Mounds after mounds;
green spongy eggs
placed in His large tray;
dawn to dusk
kissed by the sun;
the moon and the stars
embrace at night;
descending clouds
cleanse the dirt
treaded by humans.
Lying helpless
people speak to Him;
pray to Him
to ease their minds;
none will doubt here
the therapeutic
power of Nature.

Pine valleys of Wagamon,
an exotic wild beauty.
Tall and thick pine trees
support firmament
from falling.
God has spread
a fantastic carpet
knitted by

dry pine leaves;
lying relaxed,
people draft requests,
and angles descend
through the pine trees
and take these requests
to His office.
The sun is always gentle;
always seems an evening;
nocturnal music
of crickets,
resounding hymns of angels,
and semi darkness
lift our minds
to an eternal
abode of repose.

‘Kuitpo Forest’ by Amelia Walker

Responding to ‘Wagamon’

Pine forest, you pull me
in and apart. Your needles
so soft, your scent so
cool yet it burns

sharp,
it taints breath, knowing
what you are, what price
is daily paid for this
beauty I suck

wandering
your shade that shields
my chalk skin from the raw
sky’s glare. You and I, we
should not be

here. Yet
we know no other home
having grown here, born,
broken if not bred,
hazardous

parts
of a problem older, vaster
than your roots, my mind
can stretch, over-
spilling time

and hazed horizons

Reflections on ‘Wagamon’ and ‘Kuitpo Forest’

Recalling section one’s points about unsustainable farming practices as ongoing legacies of invasion or colonisation, Dominic’s ‘Wagamon’ and Walker’s ‘Kuitpo Forest’ raise forest farming – particularly pine plantations – as another example of this. Yet it is a complex example, for these trees are no longer grown simply for agriculture and their potential beauty sits in tension with the environmental damage they effect. While ‘Wagamon’ is in the first instance a celebration of a forest’s splendour, ‘Kuitpo Forest’ describes a contradictory ‘pull’ towards the forest’s beauty and sense of being pulled apart by knowledge that this landscape displaces a long-established ecosystem, contributing to extinction, reduced biodiversity, and more. As Dominic reflected:

The harm done by the trees in sucking all water from the earth and making it unsustainable for other lives. There are many problems with introduced species in Kerala and India too. Eighty-four species of terrestrial plants are introduced in Kerala, all of which call for urgent attention in terms of control and management. Their spread is aided by international trade and tourism especially import of goods and items such as seeds, grains, fruits, pets etc. At the new place, they escape the predator pressure which checked their population in the native range and thrive out competing and displacing native species.

Dominic’s points correspond with Walker’s account of Australian national parks:

Many are filled with introduced species (feral plants include blackberries and Salvation Jane; animals include rabbits and foxes, which drive out endangered native fauna). Our hills are etched, too, with open cuts of mining quarries – legacies of British invasion. Problematically, some introduced plants and animals may superficially appear beautiful: Kuitpo’s introduced pines occupy space on which endangered Australian native pine trees might otherwise grow. The introduced trees suck unsustainable quantities of water from the land. They do not provide the habitats our endangered native animals need.

Dominic elucidated additional examples of problematic introduced species in India:

Pine, Eucalyptus, Acacia, etc. are the pulpwood trees introduced into Kerala State and planted in large scale by the government. As in Australia, they all do more harm than service, ultimately drinking all underground water.

Another big problem is *Salvinia auriculata* (water hyacinth): a species of plant known by the common name eared water moss. It is native to the Americas from Mexico south to Argentina and Chile. It causes all sorts of problems in the waters where it grows. It can completely take over a water body, denying oxygen needed for fish to survive. Its roots are large and bulbous, so it gets entangled in the Chinese nets used in Kerala to fish. It also disrupts the passage of boats, causing accidents. Kerala is a land of several lakes and all these lakes which were beautified with lotus plants and flowers are now encroached by this moss and one can't distinguish land from lake since all water surfaces are conquered by these weeds.

Reflecting the current scenario as one initiated by the British and exacerbated by contemporary economics, Dominic also described how:

India is one among the top ten rubber producing countries and Kerala State is the leading rubber plantation State in India. Most of the High ranges and Middle ranges of Kerala State are growing rubber. Rubber was introduced to the country by the British. Years back people used to plant coconut, the State tree, in their fields and lived on it. Today, people plant rubber trees instead as it gives a daily income. But unfortunately the price of rubber has come very low in the country now due to the impact of globalisation and many of the rubber farmers struggle to survive. Coconut is found all over Kerala and the name of the State is from coconut. 'Kera' means coconut. 'Keralam' means place of coconut.

Collectively, our four poetic exchanges led us to agree with Haraway: environmental problems being so long-entrenched, it superficially seems 'the game is over' (2016: 3). Haraway, however, resists surrender, insisting on hope via creative strategies of 'staying with the trouble'. Warning against approaches that address trouble by 'clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations' – which placates via comforting illusions that allow problems to continue (1) – Haraway pitches 'staying with the trouble' as 'response-ability' through:

learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or Edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as moral critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings. (1)

Haraway emphasises the role the creative arts and literature – especially storytelling, but also poetry – can play in staying present and facilitating 'response-ability' to issues (10, 156). This argument is compatible with the one we raised earlier about poetry as a means to link the 'three ecologies' described by Guattari and thus to redress the problems IWC wreaks on human and beyond-human wellbeing at social and mental as well as environment levels (1989). Exchanging and discussing poems has demonstrated for us in lived, experiential ways how poetry can enhance appreciation for issues in their complexities. For instance, poetry as 'response-ability' prompted Walker's turn away from air travel, as discussed earlier: this is a small shift, but we believe that small shifts add up to bigger ones. Through our exchange, we have also experienced poetry's capacities for 'making kin' (Haraway 2016: 1); that is, strengthening solidarity between those seeking to create change, even across significant

geographical and cultural distances, so we can work and learn together. The next and final section of this article summarises the insights we have gained overall and provides our thoughts on future directions for ongoing work of this kind.

Concluding thoughts

Via four poem pairings and accompanying commentaries, this article has explored environmental crises manifest in India, Australia, and beyond. A persistent theme has been of interconnections between environmental and socio-political issues. These issues include but exceed colonisation or invasion; ideologies of nationalism and militarism; intersecting inequalities of gender, race, class, caste, and more; problems of the media; paradoxes of ecotourism; governmental failures; and the economic pressures of globalised capitalism or IWC. Overall, this process has brought us to agree with Guattari (1989) that redress to environmental crises requires attention to interconnections between the social, mental, and environmental ecologies. The long-standing and entrenched nature of current problems across all three ecologies has prompted our turn to Haraway's work on 'staying with the trouble'.

The writings of both Guattari (1989) and Haraway (2016) indicate the role writing and sharing poetry can play as, one, a process of knowing that works on both the mental and social – and thereby, the environmental – ecologies; and two, a mode for 'response-ability' that encourages pausing to notice and think about fine details and complexities of the interconnecting ecologies of which we are part, which provides a way of becoming 'present' not only to our surrounds but to ourselves as 'moral critters' and the impacts our actions create. That said, we acknowledge that poetry on its own is not enough. Redress to environmental crisis requires social, cultural, political, economic, and behavioural changes on global as well as local, interpersonal and individual levels. It also requires considered dialogues about what sorts of changes are required, and how to continue adapting behaviours responsive to new challenges as they arise or come to notice. Poetry can facilitate these kinds of dialogues; it can provide a means of noticing and of probing problems in their complexities; it can forge and sustain ties of solidarity between people across distances; it can provide a means for 'making kin' (Haraway 2016: 1).

Our own lived experiences of this poetic exchange have powerfully demonstrated the above benefits to us. We therefore advocate the value of further exchanges of this kind, in and beyond contexts of research, and through arts practices including but exceeding poetry, for other creative arts practices bear their own distinct and complimentary ways of knowing. Future inquiries of this kind could consider links between sites and issues beyond those we have considered and/or could interweave dialogues involving greater numbers of voices. While our process involved exchanging poems, writing in response to one another, and email correspondence, there are multiple additional processes via which such exchanges might occur – for instance, writing collaboratively, prompt-based writing, and more. We hope this kind of work can continue and that our contribution provides ideas and encouragement for writers and researchers seeking to explore similar challenges and possibilities.

Notes

1. We recognise that many literary and artistic practices beyond poetry can similarly facilitate thinking and knowing. We work in poetry because we are poets. We encourage those who create via other mediums to consider staging similar exchanges.

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