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Uncertain Seasons in the El Niño Continent: Local and Global Views

Abstract

As global climate change shifts seasonal patterns, local and uncertain seasons of Australia have global relevance. Australia's literature tracks extreme local weather events, exploring 'slow catastrophes' and 'endurance.' Humanists can change public policy in times when stress is a state of life, by reflecting on the psyches of individuals, rather than the patterns of the state. 'Probable' futures, generated by mathematical models that predict nature and economics, have little to say about living with extreme weather. Hope is not easily modelled. The frameworks that enable hopeful futures are qualitatively different. They can explore the unimaginable by offering an 'interior apprehension.'

1. Time and Seasons

There are two distinct ways humans have talked about time, all over the world, and in most cultures. The first is the 'arrow' of time, a linear path from birth to death, the time within the individual. The other is the circular path through the seasons, the rhythm of the Earth. The seasons follow the Earth's movement around the Sun – and repeat annually. Seasons anchor nature writing and literary conversations about the environment. Western ideas of spring, summer, autumn, winter, with rebirth again at spring are based on temperate northern places, and have become reinforced through religious and cultural traditions – for example, the 'white' Christmas, of the winter solstice. The Christian Church adopted many of the pagan festivals when it proselytised in Europe. Important celebrations like the birth of Christ became associated with the turning of the year, the dawn of the new longer days, which had long been celebrated in pagan traditions. Christmas and snow are now closely associated even in places like Australia, where Christmas falls in the middle of summer. Christmas cards featuring fir trees covered in snow and European robins are exchanged. When Europeans brought Christian traditions from the north to the southern hemisphere, they elected to retain the calendar date – 25 December, rather than translating its seasonal meaning. Christians

in Australia followed the Gregorian calendar, rather than local nature, in the Church's seasons.

The seasons themselves – the warm and the cold, the sun and the snow – are the felt experience, the shared experiences of communities. They are an important basis for poetry and literature that celebrates local places, nature and how we feel about being on Earth. Yet seasons are not the same everywhere. Tropical places have close to 12 hours daylight every day. People who live in northern Australia sometimes complain that there are ‘no seasons,’ by which they mean there are no long dark nights, and long evenings as Europe defines them. Local Aboriginal people have seasons and annual calendars, but they are not so much marked by the cycle of the sun as by the coming of different plants and animals, or of winds or rains. March, for example, is ‘knock’em’ down season for the Jawoyn people of Kakadu – when the last cyclones of the summer come through and knock down the long grass that has been growing through the wet season. Jawoyn people identify six seasons, of different lengths. Whitefellas¹ who live in the north, typically speak of two seasons: wet and dry (wet is hot, dry is cooler). Christmas in Darwin is at the height of the wet season. It is hot and there are cyclones. Christmas Day 1974 was famous for the destruction wrought on the town by Cyclone Tracy killing at least 65 people and flattening 80% of the city's houses. Australia's north demands a different understanding of seasons, and Australia is the only ‘first world’ country to have a substantial portion (about a third) of its land mass in the tropics (Robin 2007, 124). The north has been separated from ‘the rest’ because it is exceptional, not just within Australia, but across western traditions.

Most Australians (all but 1%) live in the temperate south, where there is variation in day length, and even snow in winter in the mountains. Seasons seem to cycle in the European way. Australians live and work close to the southern coastlines, mostly in cities of a million or more people. Cosmopolitan Australians are used to ignoring silly seasonal mismatches and perhaps this leaves the impression that sometimes pretends southern seasons do not carry the heavy significance of those in the north. Even international academic journals, like the *Journal of Global Studies*, use “Fall” and “Spring” as volume descriptions, forgetting that these do not apply everywhere. A sense of what the Earth is doing where you are is the first step to a sense of place, of being grounded, of belonging where you live. Even in megacities like Melbourne or Sydney, nature is not far away: there are trees, parks, and the verge in the suburbs is called a “nature strip.” But the cosmopolitan world of work, of news and of the internet drains away a sense of local meanings, the sort that are crucial to literary sensibilities in writing the environment. In this paper, I want to explore the idea that Australia, the El Niño Continent, as it is sometimes called, might offer a different seasonal sensibility. The difference could be helpful to places beyond Australia, as planetary weather systems shift – but we all – Australians and visitors – need to learn to recognize

its rhythms and to listen to its arrhythmia. Tony Hughes-d'Aeth argues in his magisterial *Like Nothing on this Earth: A Literary History of the Wheatbelt* that “literary writing” has the power “to suspend the casual (but far-reaching) presumptions of everyday language” (7). Literature offers something different from agriculture, economics, social history and ecology: it offers “the interior apprehension of how life feels to people” (3). Like Hughes-d'Aeth, I want to look to ‘witnesses’ of seasonal time in Australia, witnesses of seasons that go missing, that are unpredictable and changing, and use them to inform the planetary stories of dynamic variability and shifting weather patterns. Such witnesses are seldom city-dwellers. The best seasonal stories come from the ‘Inside Country’ (the nineteenth-century name for the pastoral lands inland from the major cities). Good stories come from further inland too: the desert heart of the continent provides a very different seasonal sensibility.

2. Uncertainty and Variability

Central to the idea of seasons in Australia is uncertainty. In a continental land-mass the size of the contiguous United States – about 25 times larger than present-day Poland – there are huge variations in weather, in ecology and in seasons, moving from north to south, or from the deserts at the centre to the coast. Melbourne University professor of zoology, Walter Baldwin Spencer (1860–1929) was the first to put names on the different ecological regions. In his 1896 map he called the tropical north, Torresian, the desert heart Eyrean and temperate south-east Bassian (after Torres, Eyre and Bass who were significant European explorers of each of regions). This map was not widely known beyond the scientific community, since it showed more than 70% of the country as Eyrean desert, something that boosters trying to get people to settle in remote areas did not want publicized. Another scientist, the geographer Griffith Taylor, was chastised by Western Australian leaders for being “unpatriotic” in speaking of deserts early in the twentieth century (Robin 2007, 124).

The old saying is that “climate is what you expect, weather is what you get” (Sherratt 1) There have been good historical reasons for those who wanted to portray Australia as a ‘land of opportunity,’ particularly for western agriculture, to be wary of explaining too much about Australia’s variable and uncertain climate. Even ideas like ‘average rainfall’ are a problem in a place where, for much of the country, rain might fall in winter or in summer, or not at all. Indeed, as I have been writing this paper, two months-worth of rain fell in just two hours in suburban Canberra. Such an ‘event’ skews the averages and hides the fact that Canberra had no other rain for the two months before this. In the twenty-first century, the Bureau of Meteorology and the Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics, the national policy advisors, now look at monthly rainfall patterns, recognizing that

even if the average annual rainfall arrives, it is not much use if it is all in a few days at the wrong time for the crops or the pasture. Very heavy falls, punctuated by long spaces create respectable ‘averages,’ but these are no use to farmers.

One of the challenges of thinking about Australia for the National Museum of Australia, where I have worked for many years, has been to speak about identity in ways that include the diverse people and places of this large land. In a landscape “where creeks run dry or ten feet high” (Friedel et al., 185), the *variability* is the story. Such weather patterns are not shared by all Australians, yet talking about the weather is both a local and a national pastime, and very much part of Australian identity. The Bureau of Meteorology is a national organization, known and loved by farmers and city-dwellers alike, but its advice has to be precise and local: its rain radar maps patterns in 128-kilometre circles, but can be focused closely enough to see if rain will fall on the match at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

Our little book, *Boom and Bust: Bird Stories for a Dry Country*, was a way of starting from Australia and looking out, rather than starting with a European model, and writing about exceptionalism. We wanted to find a way to talk about the national and the local together, about the ‘boom and bust’ rhythms of Australia’s ecosystems, that were different from the regimented seasonality of northern Europe. We decided to collect together stories about the birds that live in the Australian desert, gathering writers from many different traditions: Indigenous, ecological, archaeological and historical. Each writer began with the story of a bird and considered the question of how it lived, how it adapted to the vicissitudes of its environment. Writers drew on scientific studies, local Indigenous oral traditions and the tales of nature lovers who celebrated birds in literature and art. The collected short stories offer a ‘bird’s eye view,’ a counterpoint to the culture of 65,000 years of human settlement in Australia (Griffiths et al).

The environmental historian George Seddon argued that Australia “was a land that had a radically new technology imposed upon it, suddenly, twice” (10). First, the land was managed by fire for hunting, then came agriculture – industrial style. The fossil-fuel driven economy arrived with the British. There was no romantic pastoral tradition in Australia as in Europe, and very little romantic pastoral literature either. Agriculture and mining have irreversibly altered the environment. Birds and other animals, plants and people have all had to adapt to live with these changes. *Boom and Bust’s* bird stories interwove the natural and cultural histories of the birds, but they were chosen to showcase the ways in which people have understood natural history in this place through passion for birds. Seasonal literacy is a different thing for environments in the northern hemisphere, so it has taken settler Australians, particularly those with strong ties to other parts of the planet, a long time to recognize the local patterns and to develop poetry, place writings and music that fit the country.

In the “Introduction” to *Boom and Bust*, we began with Dorothea MacKellar’s 1904 poem, “My Country.” Recognising that the wide brown land’s contrasting

“beauty and terror” is not everyone’s ideal place, and that droughts and flooding rains are a challenge for more than just humans in Australia, we focused on the successful adaptations to uncertainty that birds have made, and how humans might observe what they do as they await “the drumming of an army, / the steady soaking rain” (MacKellar):

The time between rains, ruled by ‘pitiless blue skies’ is a time for holding the nerve, of ecological stretch. Irregular rains are at the core of a creative ecological pulse [...] [yet] it has been difficult for European Australian with the expectation of regular cyclical seasons to find a sense of permanence, to be at home in a place where drought and plenty stalk each other in unpredictable ways. (Robin et al., 2–3)

Another poet, A. D. Hope (1907–2000), foundation Professor of English literature at the Australian National University, was born and bred in the Canberra region out on the harsh treeless plains of the Monaro. His poem “Australia” was much less positive than MacKellar’s, but nonetheless, he called on European Australians to “turn gladly home / from the lush jungle of modern thought to find / the Arabian desert of the human mind / Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come [...]” Yet both poems are grappling with the idea of being ‘at home’ in Australia and not in England, after long periods abroad. MacKellar wrote her paean, *My Country*, as a homesick young woman stuck far away in England. These poems were written decades before the longer ‘deep time’ history of Australia was uncovered. The new shared dreamings of Indigenous peoples and scientists (Griffiths 2018) and the renewed conversations about reconciliation have transformed people’s feelings about the country. No longer the “mongrel country” of Henry Lawson and unsuccessful farming (Robin 2013), Australia now has a far longer human cultural heritage than Europe. There is no longer a reason to start with Europe as the norm, and to find fault with the rhythms of this much older land.

3. Expectations and Hope

Climate change is closely allied with seasonal change. Uncertainty and variability can be frightening: they suggest a loss of control. From Australian deserts we can learn much about water’s uncertainty and its very local nature – dry or ten feet high? – this depends on where the storm lands. Stories about climate change need to be nuanced to the local. They are profoundly historical. It turns out that seasons are too – they do not go around in perpetuity any more. They are shifting quite rapidly.

In the hot “Greenhouse Summer” of 1988 (it was winter in Australia, of course), climate scientist James Hansen described the Greenhouse Effect to Ronald Reagan, outgoing President of the United States, about the increases in carbon, methane and other gases in Earth’s atmosphere. These blanketing gases bring warming to the planet on average, but the story was more about “unpleasant

surprises in the greenhouse,” in Wally Broecker’s memorable words (123). Climate change is here, and will affect the future increasingly, probably exponentially. But its effects are uneven. In cold places, where warming climate might seem attractive, the scientists follow Hunter Lovins, co-founder of the Rocky Mountain Institute, and speak rather of climate ‘weirding,’ with more acute storm and disaster events, rather than an increase in average temperature.

We can’t afford to “reduce the future to climate,” as Mike Hulme, a geographer and prominent climate change scientist has argued (2011, 245). The future is cultural as well as physical, and the changes wrought by global warming will cause psychological effects as well as physical ones. Environmental changes demand adaptation by humans, and feeling overwhelmed by the problem will obstruct adaptation. Science tends to seek out large-scale, ‘universal’ solutions to problems. It is the humanities that can offer particular and local responses, that enable people to feel their way through a situation (Robin 2018). History and literature enable imagination, and foster hope and resilience. In the final sections of this paper I explore the global and the local together through literature (fiction and non-fiction), to unpack how ‘universal’ science haunts culture, place and identity, and sometimes can *limit* the future. I am interested in how literature and creative writing can make big ideas personal, and can record the way local places work in an era of global processes.

4. Hyperniño as Crisis

Kim Stanley Robinson’s climate-change thriller, *Forty Signs of Rain* (2004), builds its tension through the foreboding Hyperniño, a massive storm that promises to lash the cliffs of California, eroding the foundations of homes, tipping them into the maw of the Pacific:

The Hyperniño [...] was the fourth in the series of pineapple express storms that had tracked along this course of the jet stream [...] all roiled, torn, downdraughted and compressed, its rain squeezed out of it the moment it slammed into [...] the sea-cliffs of [San Diego County]. (Robinson 297)

The United States view of El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) is all about storms. It is the Apocalypse manifest in the rise of the “beast of the sea” with seven heads and ten horns (*Revelations* 13:1). *Forty Signs of Rain* is a key book in the new genre of climate fiction – or cli-fi.

NASA – the National Aeronautics and Space Administration – is an independent authority of the United States government. These rocket scientists, because they run a space program, shape the world’s perception of itself beyond the USA. Robinson closely follows the climate science of NASA (where he worked for some years). His portrait of the Hyperniño is fictional, but framed by NASA’s

modelling. This major ‘global’ science organization draws its data from the United States (including Alaska and Hawai’i) and strategic places (such as Guam and the Philippines). Much of what is written about the global science of the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) phenomenon carries the NASA bias. Not just fictional works, but even histories like Brian Fagan’s *Floods Famines and Emperors*, a history of El Niño and the ‘fate of Civilizations,’ omit Australia altogether: yet ENSO is a major driver of life in the Australian continent, far more so than in north America. NASA’s “global science” and Fagan’s “global civilizations” treat El Niño as both global and yet curiously American.

Australia’s relationship with El Niño is mediated differently. Our science comes from the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM), rather than NASA. BoM justifies its scientific work through its relevance to agriculture in this country. Farmers need to know on a fine scale whether they are in for a long drought. BoM modelling has become very sophisticated and locally attuned over many years, and people know about it and rely on it. In the USA and Europe, farmers do not talk about El Niño over the fence or in the ‘pub.’ (The ‘pub’ – the public bar – is the classic test of what ‘everyone knows’ for Australian politicians). Farmers are not so conversant with climate science in places where public science is less attuned to the needs of the agricultural sector. Development worker, Jessica Barnes, noticed this difference when she worked with scientists in the modelling unit of the Egyptian water ministry, and visited local Egyptian farmers. The scientists all discussed climate change regularly, but, she wrote, “in 16 months of fieldwork in rural Egypt I never heard a *farmer* talk about changing rainfall patterns” (42; emphasis mine). By contrast, “El Niño” (dubiously pronounced) and “ENSO” are household words, at least in regional Australia. They equate not with storms but with drought.

If El Niño science is not ‘rocket science,’ it can be familiar – part of the daily weather report. Its local character demands more precise science. In 2015, BoM was delighted to show that their model was significantly better than NASA’s in predicting the month in which El Niño drought would begin and how Australia would be affected by it. It was not the view from space but rather the view from many places on the land that supported the model’s predictions. These are the predictions essential to Australian farmers who need to plan when (or whether) to sow crops.

The crisis of climate change is a catastrophe on a global scale, just unfolding, yet it plays out differently, depending on how one conceives the ‘crisis.’ This is a “slow catastrophe” (Jones), unfolding over periods longer than it is possible for humans to maintain ‘crisis mode’ of response: crisis management is not designed for intergenerational action. Rob Nixon has described “slow violence” as the cruelty to the poor of the planet that unfolds over long periods, too slowly to catch media interest, so ignored by the west. The environmentalism and protest movements of the poor, therefore, must work in different ways and on longer scales, Nixon argues. They are not managing a crisis, but a catastrophe.

The Australian droughts extend for too long for crisis management strategies too. A water shortage over two or three months can be called a ‘drought’ in England, where water managers plan with regular rain. The Millennium Drought in south-eastern Australia (where most of the agricultural crops are grown) ran from 2001–2009. Australian droughts have names – the Federation Drought (1895–1902), and the process of “running out” of water may take place over a decade or more of stress (Morgan). New writing in history, drawing on farm diaries over decades and oral history interviews, is capturing ways of understanding the human toll of droughts, of the repeated failure of annual expectations for rain over many years. The words they choose: “slow catastrophes” (Jones) and “endurance” (Anderson) reflect the psychological states of the individuals, not the patterns of the state. This is the important difference that scholars of the humanities can make to public policy and to understanding stress that is not treatable in the emergency ward of a hospital: it is not crisis management, it is a state of life. Droughts are getting worse, more widespread and are affecting cities. Cape Town, in South Africa, is running out of water as I write.

Climate change is uneven. It is both global and highly localized: it is, in Desmond Tutu’s words, the greatest human rights challenge today. The nations and economies that have benefited from the carbon revolution are seldom the places at the leading edge of suffering. In planetary terms, the Poles are losing ice and the Pacific is at the forefront of sea-level rises. These are the places where much of the global scientific effort – and increasingly, the justice research – is focused. Science is a planetary lens through which to understand climate change. Yet responses to crisis are always local and nuanced culturally. Injustice and climate disasters happen to people in specific places, and the “slow violence” of a decade-long famine is often more fatal (yet less newsworthy) than a storm event. The humanities – including history, literature, museums and art – can provide complementary understandings of how humans live with the rapidly changing planetary conditions in specific places; how they feel, how they apprehend and sense disaster.

Australia is a global hot spot for climate change, because of its fragile agricultural economy, old soils and isolated ecosystems. Already it leads the world in mammalian extinctions in the past century. There is little doubt that heat stress is going to be one of the big killers as summers get increasingly angry, and temperature charts acquire new colours – deep purple – to deal with longer and hotter heat waves. The work of Australia’s small and, since 2014 crowd-funded, Climate Council is crucial to nuancing global scientific understandings for local audiences. Meanwhile science (particularly climate science) has been systematically cut from the Antarctic division, the CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology. These public science organizations have made major contributions to international science as well as accessible communications for the public, and that is a problem for conservative ideologues with major investments in fossil-fuel industries, who have successfully lobbied for their de-funding.

We undoubtedly need more science in this country, but contributions from the humanities and the Arts also help with imagining new futures. Like the examples from history, literature can tackle the problem obliquely, in ways that help individuals come to terms with something so big as to be ‘unimaginable’ by offering that “interior apprehension” (Hughes-d’Aeth) that is so hard to talk about (Hulme 2009). Australian literature engages with a truly local appreciation of a global phenomenon. Here the Hyperniño is not a single storm or disaster event, but rather a long, drawn-out, painful, slow catastrophe. A Hyperniño is a decade-long drought that disfigures peoples’ lives, eroding hope, and haunting generations. Longer times and bigger places are the frames for Australian literature, so Australians write a different sort of cli-fi. For example, James Bradley’s impressive 2015 novel *Clade*, is a disaster-tale across three generations: it takes its story beyond Australia, but recognizes that the time-frame of a single human life is not long enough for such a tale to play out.

5. Eco-Fiction as Long Story

Sometimes Australian literature is more eco-fiction than cli-fi: here a main character is the place, the bush, the land, the Outback. It is a place bigger than the eye can take in, unfolding over more than one human generation. In films too, the Australian Outback is a character, as critics recently commented in relation to Ivan Sen’s thrillers *Mystery Road* (2013) and *Goldstone* (2016). These films feature the Australian Outback at its most expansive through the eyes of Aboriginal detective, Jay Swan, played by Aaron Pederson, who like most Aboriginal people juggles the complexity of living in both the mainstream and the traditional worlds. Sometimes there is more than one world in a single place: histories are multi-layered in the Australian story.

By contrast Kim Stanley Robinson’s cli-fi screams ‘Catastrophe is Imminent.’ Robinson sticks very closely to his NASA sources (he works closely with NASA). Geeks and modellers are characters with direct voices in his stories. Nordic nations like Denmark are more psychological, focusing more on effects than causes. The ‘dead of winter’ environment shapes a foggy, grey noir-thriller: tension builds in the small and intense domesticity, a distorted riff on the *hyggelig* – or “cosy” – Danish world. Australia’s new thrillers are environmentally rich, too, but we can find *dead* in any season, and even without seasons. As seasonality twists and transforms with climate change, psychological and physical tensions are added to the old tropes of the Bush and the Outback. Australian action stories are slow-burning, red. The cruelties of intensifying El Niño droughts, and global warming have pushed Australian eco-lit towards writing slow violence. Eco-lit is a genre akin to cli-fi, but with less apocalypse and more tragedy, less action and more psychological trauma. In this literature, the slow-burning emotions fuelled

by El Niño droughts breed a cruel and tortuous violence born of long-endurance and repressed frustration. In a land that is red and vast, people eventually get angry – really angry – and they *see red*.

In Janette Turner Hospital's 1996 masterly novel, *Oyster*, set somewhere in the northern Lake Eyre basin, there is fog, but it is dry not damp. It is certainly not Danish grey. There is no imaginative control in a world where there is no horizon, just a shimmer. The local humour is dry too. The miasma has a name:

If rain had come things might have turned out differently [...]. [Instead there was] mephitic fog, moistureless and invisible, that came and went like an exhalation of the arid earth itself. [...] Old Fuckatoo we called it. [...] Old Fuckatoo is roosting again. (3–4)

[...] Pete tells Miss Rover “We could all go under to the drought, every last one of us. I mean, all these carcasses [...] you must have noticed. The smell of death hangs over us. Or we could all be washed away in flash floods. She’s a tough old bitch, is the land. We respect her and that is why we give her no quarter.” (393–393)

The same themes of the land being a force over generations as well as a person of sorts, to be reckoned with daily, permeate the 2016 novel, *The Dry*. In it, debut novelist Jane Harper figures El Niño a strong and ever-present character, wreaking havoc on Victoria's Mallee country:

The drought had left the flies spoiled for choice that summer. They sought out unblinking eyes and sticky wounds as the farmers of Kiewarra levelled their rifles at skinny livestock. No rain meant no feed. And no feed made for difficult decisions, as the tiny town shimmered under day after day of burning blue sky.

“It’ll break,” the farmers said as the months ticked over into a second year. They repeated the words out loud to each other like a mantra, and under their breath to themselves like a prayer.

But the weathermen in Melbourne disagreed. Besuited and sympathetic in air-conditioned studios, they made a passing reference most nights at six. Officially the worst conditions in a century. The weather pattern had a name, the pronunciation of which was never quite settled. *El Niño*. (*The Dry*, 1)

The sinister, the shimmering, the people whose imagination can no longer grasp what is meant by nature, the Bush, the Outback – these are the literary tropes of the El Niño Continent. Without revealing Harper's tensely constructed plot, by page 318, *The Dry* has turned the Bush from an imagined national cliché to an unimaginable metaphor of life out of control in the Anthropocene. The Bush in a post-Holocene, El Niño drought is a “no-analogue” force to be reckoned with, to borrow from the rhetoric of Earth Systems science (Steffen et al. 94).

Climate and weather – what you expect and what you get – and the mismatch between them, is the big story in a place where seasons are no longer annual,

and seasonal affective disorders may be about too much light, rather than too much darkness. In the El Niño continent, Australia, ENSO spells drought, a slow, drawn-out end. Drought in Australian history and literature offers a parable for living with long slow violence, now increasingly exacerbated by climate change. When the El Niño phenomenon is ‘put in its place’ – and framed on variable timescales – the complex global ‘event’ has very different local manifestations. There are psychological implications for imagining a final apocalypse through the slow lens of geological time, rather than through instant rituals of ‘disaster management.’ In Australia, the poetic equivalent for a Hyperniño is not the sea beasts and galloping horses of Revelations, but T. S. Eliot’s *Hollow Men* (1925), where the world ends “not with a bang, but a whimper.” It has already begun, but the ‘end game’ will take time. Life on Earth will adapt, but human life is certain not to survive as ‘business as usual.’ Survival and adaptation will require imagination, perhaps even more than more new technologies.

Hope is as hard to find in the dark pages of cli-fi and eco-lit as in the pages of the IPCC’s successive reports on the state of the planet since 1988. Yet hope begins with, if not a sense of control, at least a sense of being able to *make a difference* to future possibilities. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai places hope at the crux of injustice: the poor have less control over their future than the rich. Being poor may result in losing one’s future, or having it severely compromised. Appadurai writes of a “cultural future” that includes “imagination, anticipation and aspiration” (286). It is not merely mathematically extrapolated from the present. ‘Probable’ futures, generated by mathematical models that predict nature and economics, have little to say about living in future worlds. Hope is not something easily modelled. The frameworks that enable hopeful futures are qualitatively different. The future is not just a technical or neutral space: it is “shot through with affect and sensation” (286). History and other humanities may enable other, complementary ways of making sense of living with rapid environmental change.

Understanding the El Niño cycles of our ‘opal-hearted land’ demands science, but it also demands practical learning. Over the *long durée*, the land is both wilful and lavish; eventually we come to terms with the ‘far horizons’ and the inseparability of ‘the beauty and the terror.’ Understanding environmental change in the Anthropocene demands the longer-term perspectives of histories at many scales: human, evolutionary and geological. Living in the El Niño continent with the slow violence of Australian droughts, and the sudden shocks of when they break, we may learn some ways to live alongside slowly unfolding catastrophes like climate change.

Notes

- 1 This is the English word that Aboriginal people use to describe non-Aboriginal people.

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