



Broken

Living Lexicon for the Environmental Humanities

Cameron Muir

Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University

Since World War II humans have released over 80,000 chemical compounds that no organism had previously encountered in the 3.5 billion year history of life on earth.¹ Only a fraction of these have been tested. It is a profound change, one that can't be undone easily and not within our lifetimes. It will persist in the geological record and in our genetic legacies. Earlier this year, researchers in *The Lancet Neurology* announced that we are in the midst of a "global, silent pandemic of neurodevelopmental toxicity."² That's your brain, and my brain, taking a hit—and it's worse for those who farm or who live in the world's most polluted places.

It's not just our pesticides and car fumes and flame retardants that are toxic. Fertilizer plants that produce the inputs necessary for industrial agriculture spew out acidic and radioactive tailings. The fertilizers themselves run off into rivers, estuaries and oceans creating vast "dead zones."³

I probably don't need to tell you all this. I don't need to tell you that the way we eat has played a leading role in plunging the earth into another mass extinction event. I don't need to tell you that we participate in an unfair food system—where millions starve in a world with enough—that we operate on the assumption that some lives are worth more than others. We know things are broken. The question is, how do we respond to the broken, as scholars, writers, artists? And what can the broken tell us?

Do we seek refuge in the privileged places like national parks and patiently tended gardens, do we just adapt, move on, put the uncomfortable behind us and throw all our efforts into what's left or what might be? We can see the

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¹ Mariann Lloyd-Smith and Bro Sheffield-Brotherton, "Children's Environmental Health: Intergenerational Equity in Action—a Civil Society Perspective," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1140, no. 1 (2008).

² Philippe Grandjean and Philip J. Landrigan, "Neurobehavioural Effects of Developmental Toxicity," *The Lancet Neurology* 13, no. 3 (2014).

³ Sarah Simpson, "Nitrogen Fertilizer: Agricultural Breakthrough—and Environmental Bane," *Scientific American* 20 March 2009. <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=nitrogen-fertilizer-anniversary>

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consequences of this thinking. We can see what happens, in the words of Deborah Rose and Thom van Dooren, to the “disregarded” and disliked.⁴

The Australian government tried to strip 74,000 hectares of Tasmania’s forests from the World Heritage register in June this year because parts are “disturbed” and there is “regrowth.”⁵ In New South Wales the restrictions on clearing of native vegetation don’t cover any trees that have grown since 1983—these are “regrowth.” According to this thinking broken places can never be loved, can never be cared for. They are permanently open to exploitation—they don’t matter, they are damaged, they don’t count. Eric Rolls, on the other hand, argued that the trees which arose from the destruction of overstocking and logging in the Pilliga Forest, New South Wales, were precious because they were new. They are differently valuable. Rolls called them “phoenix forests.”⁶

It is my affection for the river I grew up on in Western New South Wales that forced me to consider the broken. It is a river that suffers thermal pollution for 300 km down its course, it was too toxic to swim in some summers, and one day it might be too salinized to drink from. It feeds a wetland that regularly teemed with 30 different species of fish and birdlife so dense that they blackened the sky with their outstretched wings.

What if we gaze into the broken? And I don’t mean the nostalgia of “ruin porn.” I mean spend time with the broken. With what makes us uncomfortable. Allow it to disarrange us.⁷ To think long about the places we’d prefer to turn away from. Trebbe Johnson wrote in *Orion*, “You don’t abandon a friend when he gets sick.”⁸

In my explorations of the broken I’ve become wary of recent demands to end all narratives with an optimistic message. I agree on the importance of hope, but not all stories should conform to this narrative arc. Perhaps it is more inclusive to allow for a range of complex outcomes for different animals, plants, and ecosystems.

When we smooth out the wrinkles, when we leave people feeling comfortable, when we strive for the transcendental, we risk losing—writes Maria Tumarkin—the “friction-and-silence-laden spaces” created by telling and listening.⁹ “Narrative,” she says, “when fetishized, can become an evolved and brilliantly disguised way of shutting our ears to what hurts and scares us the most.”¹⁰

We risk supporting those whom Clive Hamilton has labelled “eco-pragmatists,” those who see climate change as an opportunity; who say if we just change our story, avoiding doom and gloom, “human technology and ingenuity” will triumph. Hamilton says the positive narratives we tell ourselves for emotional comfort can spur us in dark times, but they can become “dangerous delusions” when they continue to be held despite what the evidence tells

⁴ Deborah Bird Rose and Thom van Dooren, “Introduction,” *Australian Humanities Review* 50 (2011).

⁵ UNESCO Rejects Coalition’s Bid to Delist Tasmanian World Heritage Forest,” ABC News, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-06-24/unesco-rejects-bid-to-delist-world-heritage-forest/5538946>.

⁶ Tom Griffiths, “How Many Trees Make a Forest? Cultural Debates About Vegetation Change in Australia,” *Australian Journal of Botany* 50, no. 4 (2002): 382.

⁷ Trebbe Johnson, “Gaze Even Here,” *Orion* (2012).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Maria Tumarkin, “This Narrated Life,” *Griffith REVIEW* 44: Cultural Solutions (2014).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

us.¹¹ Gazing at the broken compels us to cast light on the "shadow places," to dramatise the "slow violence" of grinding ecological damage.¹²

I imagine a community of the broken. Terry Tempest Williams uses the metaphor of the mosaic as "a conversation between what is broken."¹³ It could, for example, unite the rural and urban. The toxic contamination at the DuPont and Orica factories in Sydney is a point of connection to the Pilliga Forest, where radioactive tailings have contaminated groundwater. It could stretch across borders, linking the Macquarie Marshes in New South Wales to the Aral Sea in Central Asia. And can the broken meet across class, gender and race? Could the conversation include all of us who are implicated in the creation of the broken, who are responsible for the shadow places, and who must now find ways to dwell with, even if not always within, them?

"Finding possibilities for living with the Great Acceleration," writes Libby Robin, "is the greatest human problem of our time."¹⁴ What if we treated the broken as not something to fear, or to feel threatened by, but as the places, people and relationships that need understanding? Not as symbols of defeat, but sites from which we can learn, that have a lot to tell us and teach us about ourselves and the rest of the living world. As we enter the Anthropocene—in which more and more is broken—it is perhaps the broken that is most in need of attention and care.

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¹¹ Clive Hamilton, "The New Environmentalism Will Lead Us to Disaster," *Scientific American*, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-new-environmentalism-will-lead-us-to-disaster>.

¹² Val Plumwood, "Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling," *Australian Humanities Review* 44 (2008); Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

¹³ Terry Tempest Williams, *Finding Beauty in a Broken World* 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008).

¹⁴ Libby Robin. "The End of the Environment: Apocalypse, the Anthropocene and the Future" (presentation, *Encountering the Anthropocene: The Role of Environmental Humanities and Social Sciences*, Sydney, 26–28 February, 2014).

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