# Thinking with Leaves: Poetic Resonances with Nocturnal Creatures

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## Thinking with Leaves

Paling with time,
Thinning out
Leaves between pages
Like trees on the plateau

Generations of gliders
Inhabiting hollows
Forests enduring ice ages
But not the dozers and blazes

And the slow violence of neglect
Soon to fade into the memory
Of a lifetime,
A speck of dust in the face of evolution

Ghosts of extinction
Haunting dead coupes
Lineages broken
Renewal suppressed

Pale blue Peppermint Gum
Pressed flat, yet edgy
Delicate in its eternal shape
Once treat to ringtails

Thick leathery structure of
Errinundra Shining Gum, endemic to place
Glands inscribed forever
Hollow homes no more

ECOZON@ | Vol 17, No 2

Blackwood, once shelter from fire
For long-footed friends
Reduced to long yellow veins
In soft green blend

Sassafras, shattered
And pale, a mere impression
Of its once vibrant presence
And explosion of fragrance

A whiff of a memory pulls me back
on a track dug by potoroos
And the scratching of lyrebirds
Just as I grasp it, it escapes

Such is the legacy of double death
As time undoes life
But while shadows of shimmer remain
We can't help but knot ties

Figure: Leaves tell stories, of the history and ecology of forests and the creatures inhabiting them. Errinundra Shining Gum (*Eucalyptus denticulata*) as shown by one of my interlocutors © Lena Schlegel, 2022, all rights reserved.

ECOZON@ | Vol 17, No 2

**Author's Statement**

What is it that makes me look up as a glider spreads its patagium and glides silently over my head? I couldn't say. It's not that I have spotted its white fluffy fur in the canopy, nor has there been an audible sound. In the nocturnal forest, where my primary sense of sight offers little guidance, I have to take other cues—a spatial sense, perhaps, a thermal one, an intuition. To approach worlds organised around different perceptual priorities, we must learn to pay attention to "minor gestures" (Manning), attuning to pre-conscious affects and the diversity of sensations in our more-than-human world. This is among the perils faced by the protagonists of my poem: their sensory lives are difficult to grasp through privileged forms of human experience. Many forest-dwelling animals are nocturnal, their habitats far removed from human settlements. Every child knows and loves koalas, yet few Australians have ever encountered a greater glider, a potoroo, or a quoll. Beyond the physical destruction of their habitats, many species must therefore navigate an invisibility that is in itself constitutive of violence (Nixon). This marginalisation is both due to a system of extraction that would render old growth forests dispensable, and the elusive, often nocturnal lives of their inhabitants. But how might we strengthen our connection to species who tend to go unnoticed even as their worlds unravel?

Thinking poetically with leaves reminiscent of my fieldwork in southeast Australia's dwindling forests, I explore the potential of poetry as a resonant method for multisensory research (Paiva). Like the withering leaves, each verse offers a glimpse into the lives and lifeways of animals reliant on them as logging machines and wildfires carve through their habitat. In the collaborative research article accompanying this poem (Hey et al. 226-248), six researchers from different disciplines and with diverse research interests came together to explore how to recursively relive and (re)write multispecies encounters and more-than-human worlds through a process we call "sensoriographic." Together, we grapple with the challenges of immersing in, recording, and storying sensory encounters with other species and their worlds. It is through this sensoriographic attunement that we can begin to imagine how the plight of nocturnal forest creatures resonates with the wider theme of this special issue.

Amid wildfires, logging, and climate change, we might think of southeast Australia's struggling forests in terms of what Sunaura Taylor calls "injured" or "disabled" ecologies (Taylor). The compound impact of these disturbances creates ecological "misfits" (Garland-Thomson), both within forest ecologies and toward the embodied beings inhabiting them. For instance, the endangered Southern Greater Glider (Petauroides volans) is uniquely adapted to life in eastern Australia's cool, wet temperate forests. They rely on hollow-bearing trees for shelter, and forage exclusively on eucalyptus leaves in the canopy of the night. While logging and wildfires eat away at their den trees, increased nighttime temperatures leave them dehydrated, exhausted, and ultimately, unable to forage (Wagner et al.). The loss of old growth

ECOZON@ | Vol 17, No 2

forests and the changing climate therefore create misfits for their species-specific, embodied ways of being.

Ecological misfits also arise from disrupted temporalities. Victoria's iconic Mountain (Eucalyptus regnans) and Alpine Ash forests (Eucalyptus delegatensis) are collapsing due to squeezed intervals between disturbances (Lindenmayer and Sato). As obligate seeders, these majestic trees require at least 30 years to reach maturity and replenish seed banks in the soil—a regenerative cycle increasingly disrupted by overlogging and shortened fire intervals. This undoing of generative ecological relations over time is what Deborah Bird Rose calls "double death," a spiral of loss that breaks with the "ethical time" sustained by multispecies relations, such as ecological sequences, genealogies, and synchronicities (Rose, "Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time"). By extinguishing the ethical time of ash forests, we imperil their generative capacities and those of the creatures reliant on them. If we look to eco-crip theories, we might respond to such ecological desynchronisation in terms of "multispecies crip time" (Day), resisting the accelerated, homogenising temporalities of capitalist production that turn forests into savannahs, and old growth into plantations.

All is not lost while there is still "shimmer" (Rose, *Shimmer: Flying Fox Exuberance in Worlds of Peril*) in the world, and my fieldwork also revealed many brave allies engaged in protesting, surveying, advocating, regenerating, community-building, and art-making for forests and their creatures. It is in the tensions between loss and hope, and the challenges posed by sensoriographic research, that we might ponder ethical responses to ecological collapse and extinction. Poetry offers a way of attuning to, and expressing resonance within such multispecies, multisensory encounters (Paiva). And so, the final verse of the poem invites us to stay with the troubles of injured landscapes and dishevelled creatures, of resisting abandonment and indifference, and committing to the work of care, repair, and resistance.

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