Lost Futures: Eritalgia, Sacrifice and Suffering at the New South Wales Coal Frontier

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Abstract

Embedded within large-scale resource extraction projects is a tension between the immobility of the resource and the mobility of the people who inhabit the surface over which the resource is found. The limited ability to negotiate the place of extraction, and the destruction of prior ecologies, can generate significant hardship to local populations and pose particular ethical dilemmas, as in the small village of Wollar located at the New South Wales coal frontier. Here, the supposed ethical imperatives of coal-based power and energy have dismantled and sacrificed communities as the coal mining industry has advanced and intensified its operations. Looking at both social and environmental ecologies, the paper analyses how imagined coal-centred futures, and progress, is phrased (or not phrased) as an ethical and political issue, and the consequences of that coal-based future, psychologically, emotionally, imaginally and cosmologically on those who live near the mines. What once carried a felt ambience of being home has, through technological and political deployment, become a *non-place* of transience, anonymity, and change. In this unbalanced political conflict, a natural environment and lived ecology are subject to developmentalist and technological ecologies in ethical-political dispute with a diminishing sense of home, and produce suffering because of unequal power relations which derive from the success of the destructive technologies. Searching for a language to capture the sense of sacrifice and suffering that happens in the shadow of large-scale mining, I propose a new concept: 'eritalgia'. Eritalgia expands the existing duad of nostalgia and solastalgia, capturing the sense of lost future self in place, emphasising the role of power and discursive hegemony in shaping experiences of and well-being in place.

Keywords: Coal, Extraction, Sacrifice Zone, Place, Displacement, Eritalgia.

Introduction

Subsequent to the move to open-cut mining and the intensification of coal mining in the coal-rich fields of the Australian eastern seaboard towards the end of the 1990s, a distinct ethical dilemma emerged at the coal frontier.[1] This dilemma is closely connected to technology and ecology; it relates to the ways in which technological advancements have enabled new conquests within rural and remote spaces, subsequently disrupting localised ecologies. As technology changed mining practice and facilitated an expansion of the industry, mining moved from sharing in the production of place, to producing, in Augé's (1995) sense, 'non-places'. As Augé (1995:

85) suggests, a non-place is where the purpose of place becomes one of facilitating movement, so much so that there is too little time to grasp it as a place. Transient, non-places become characterised by anonymity, furtiveness and change. Whilst most people will have a transitory engagement with mines—a feature that in itself creates the non-place character of the place—others relate to these places on an everyday basis, either through employment or residence. For some, the anonymous, mobile and dynamic character of the reborn (non-)place is unproblematic; it resonates with ontological and ethical notions of self and community in which mobility and movement are signs of hope, prosperity and advancement. For them, the mine as a (non-)place may convey a sense of consistency, a social logic and an ethical code, and as such, meaning may exist. For others, however, it creates a sense of disjuncture, disruption, and dissonance. It unsettles their notion and experience of time and place, displacing the meaning of landscapes, disrupting local economies, and dis-embedding localised notions of sociality and temporality. Thus, whilst extractive industries and their associated infrastructure are a symbol of prosperity and future advancement for some, for others these make visible disruption and loss.

In this paper, I will explore this contradiction and the ways in which it transforms into distinct zones of sacrifice where notions of home and futures are unsettled.[2] Throughout the discussion, I illustrate how a story of technological advancement, as it relates to coal, gains moral impetus from ideas of home and home making, and how it retains a central position in the affective economies (Ahmed, 2004) that coal mining are linked to, even formative of. I aim to illustrate how the interconnection between state discourses, planning frameworks and industry advancement has colonised ideas of home and place, and bestowed new notions of 'productivity' on previously agricultural farmland and bushland. In this process, a zone of sacrifice has been established in which notions and experiences of place as home have been altered and the inscription of past histories and imagined futures in contemporary landscapes have been challenged.[3] The extractive frontier, as a sacrifice zone, transforms landscape and place into commodities for exchange and de-valorises the hidden, quiet worlds of human and non-human multiplicity (Gómez-Barris, 2017: 5). It becomes a location of grievance and loss in which "the health and way of life of communities—often low-income or minority—[are] sacrificed for some other interest" (Holified and Day, 2017: 269). The sense of sacrifice and re-organisation of place that has happened in the shadow of extractivism is at the centre of this article.

In the first section of the article, I offer a description of how coal mining has expanded through the Hunter region in NSW and the displacement of the small village of Wollar in the Mid-Western Region. I illustrate how coal was central to the initial establishment of the Hunter Valley as a place, with coal central to the expansion of British settlement. I do not offer an account of the dispossession of the Wiradjuri people, the traditional owners of the land, but simply provide a brief overview of how coal forms part of the regional history of European settlement.[4] The article draws on data collected as part of an ongoing long-term ethnographic study of Wollar, which started in 2015.[5] The analysis is centred specifically on the three year period from 2015-2018 during which there was a heightened mobilisation and angst amongst the residents due to a proposal to expand the mine nearest to the village. I argue that Wollar became a non-place and its long-term residents displaced in place, homeless whilst still at home. This sense of displacement is not only a condition that has emerged from technologically induced ecological change but one that is closely tied to the affective economies surrounding coal mining (cf. Ramsay and Askland, 2020), and that fuels a sense of abandonment and dispossession. Thus, in the second part of the article, I explore the dominant ethical discourse of coal as it has been advanced by those in power, with the intention, in the subsequent sections, to illustrate how such 'ethical' scripts disempower, dispossess and displace through the sense of abandonment and temporal dissonance that they create. Seeking to advance a language to capture the sense of sacrifice and loss, I advance an analysis of dispossession and propose a new concept – 'eritalgia' – as a term to capture the sense of temporal disjuncture and a

form of displacement in place that emerges from the sense of lost future self in place.

Emplacement and encroachment: Coal river and the village at the end of the coal chain

Approximately 160km north of Sydney lies the city of Newcastle. The city, first named Coal River and later renamed after England's famous coal port, originated in 1804. Since then, coal has been central to the town and the Hunter Valley region, of which it is part. Coal is intimately tied to the economic and social life of the city, its politics, landscapes, scenery and sounds. Successive, expanding rings of coal mining have shaped the suburban layout and transformed Newcastle and the Hunter from a convict settlement dedicated to primitive mining and shipment of coal to a centre for international energy demands. Newcastle is the centre of the Hunter Valley Coal Chain, one of the largest coal supply chains in the world which spans over 450km and involves about 40 mines. It facilitates more than 20,000 train trips, loads 1,600 vessels per year, and exports more than 80 types of coking and thermal coal (Port Waratah Coal Services, 2018: np).

Initially, small in scale and underground, mining was a locally-based enterprise that contributed to the prosperity of local communities. Today, however, coal operations are no longer underground but large open-cut structures, with ownership of coal mines and exploration leases mainly held by multi-national corporations. Mining activity has exploded, growing from 11 million tonnes (Mt) of coal used for domestic electricity production and the manufacture of iron and steel by the end of the 1940s, to 260Mt at the height of the coal boom in 2014 (Connor, 2016: 104; Denniss et al., 2021: 3). Whilst production has peaked, the legacy of the boom remains in approvals and consideration of new projects, which could, according to Denniss, Campbell and Littleton (2021: 3), see 165Mt produced in 2030. In 2022, the mines in the Mid-Western region, Hunter Valley and Newcastle produced 173.8Mt

Figure 1. The Hunter Valley's lunar landscape © Hedda Haugen Askland

of raw coal (Coal Services, nd). The mines primarily produce for export, with the largest mines extending across thousands of hectares of land and each producing between 10 and 20 Mtpa (Connor, 2016: 104). Past and current production have changed the landscape of the region, leaving a lunar-like landscape hidden from the roads but visible from the air.

With the explosion of mining, relationships between industry and community changed (e.g. Albrecht, 2005; Askland, 2018; Askland and Bunn, 2018a, 2018b; Connor, 2016; McManus et al., 2014; Drinan, 2022), and coal has become highly contested. The environmental and social consequences of coal mining, including climate change and impacts on ground water, have seen opposition to mining transpire throughout the region. Yet, a different battle has unfolded at the coal frontier. Here, the expansion of mining interests has unsettled communities, disrupted temporal connections and dislocated visions of the future. It has left communities and their ecologies barren and exposed to impacts of noise, vibration, dust and light. The battle for these communities concerns questions of place and belonging. It is personal and intimate. It is about questions of home and the possibility of home as a site of belonging and of future-oriented projects.

Wollar: the sleeping village

The small village of Wollar, approximately 230km north-west of Newcastle, is the final remaining village on the west-going section of the Hunter Valley Coal Chain. It borders the Goulburn River National Park, approximately 50km northeast of the regional centre, Mudgee, and is situated within what is known as the Western Coalfields. Wollar is surrounded by three open cut coal mines, each owned by multi-national companies: Glencore's Ulan Coal Mines, Yancoal's Moolarben Coal and Peabody's Wilpinjong Coal Mine.

The colonial history of the area around Wollar can be traced back to 1822 when English explorer and pastoralist, William Lawson (1774-1850) made the first mention of the Goulburn River in his journal entry. Wollar grew up around a handful of settler families who worked the land. From the 1970s, the area became a destination for people seeking to escape city pressures and the capitalist project. Cheap property prices in a naturally beautiful, peaceful, and isolated area attracted individuals seeking to lead an alternative lifestyle. Young families settled and the community grew. By the 1980s, there were between 3-400 people living in the area, with 30 pupils and two permanent teachers at the local school. Most of the people living in Wollar made money through small to medium-sized agricultural businesses, lived off a pension, or formed part of the local rural economy (with some travelling to Mudgee for work).

As with so many of the small villages across the Hunter, Wollar's story is tied to coal mining. The first of the three operating mines, Ulan Coal, was established already in the 1920s (Glencore, 2023). Underground, located about 30km from the village, the mine and community coexisted peacefully. Mining was seen as an industry that offered local opportunities for employment and economic diversification. During the 1980s, however, technological ecologies started to change, and the main Ulan expanded its operations, establishing an open cut mine and constructing a coal preparation plant and rail loading facility, as well as augmenting their underground operations (Glencore, 2023). Simultaneously, exploration licences were established for the areas now known as Moolarben and Wilpinjong, with the two mines subsequently gaining extraction licences. Wilpinjong was approved first and on the 1 February 2006 it opened as the first 21st century green-field mine in NSW.

For the Wollar population, the approval and subsequent operation of the Wilpinjong mine turned out to be particularly detrimental. The mine obtained a 21-year operation license, from 2006 to 2027, and was given approval to extract 9.5Mtpa. It operates 24 hours per day, seven days per week, employing 505 people (Peabody, 2018). In contrast to many other mines in the region, which produce coal for overseas markets, the primary purpose of the Wilpinjong mine was to supply domestic coal to the local power station. Today, the Wilpinjong mine also produces high quality thermal coal for export (approximately 75% raw domestic thermal coal and 25% washed export thermal coal). Since the original approval, the mine has submitted, and had approved, six

modifications and one extension application, enhancing the rate of production, increasing train activity and expanding the footprint of the mine. The latest expansion proposal was approved by the NSW State Government in April 2017. This extension will prolong the mine's operations until 2033, expand the existing open cut pits over approximately 500 hectares and develop a new 300 hectares pit that will bring the mine boundary only 1.5km from the village itself. As of 2023, the local residents who remain in the area are mobilising for yet another fight as Peabody has been granted a new exploration licence that could open up a new coal field over grazing and cropping country, creeks and bushland no more than 500m from the village.

Based on their experience with Ulan, people in the village did not foresee the impacts the mine would have on their community and life. "We were naïve", Paul explained to me during one of our many conversations, referring to how the locals had trusted the company's narrative about environmental and social impacts being limited and manageable, and in light of promises of social benefits and economic growth. However, noise, dust, light, traffic and visual impacts soon started to mark everyday life with the locals feeling increasingly invisible and insignificant given the mine management's responses to their complaints. As Elizabeth told me when I saw her outside her house one Spring morning:

> "It was a bad night...And I have already had to call them; they are digging in Pit 3. They know that it gets noisy and they know the limit they have to stay under; yet, they don't stop until we call". She looks exhausted, gives me a faint smile. "At least they stop when we call. It takes a few hours for it all to quiet down, but at least they comply when we call and make them check their monitors." Elizabeth is angry; she is frustrated and sad. "I called today, but often I won't call", she tells me. "It just brings forward all the bad stuff, it marks my day and then I can't think about anything else. It shouldn't have to be like this!"

The constant delays in dealing with complaints and the seeming reluctance to address their concerns, not only in a proactive manner but also at the time of impact, make the locals confident that their wellbeing is secondary to that of the mine's operation and profits. Numerous times, the locals have commented on how "it is cheaper for the mine to buy out properties than shutting operation to manage impacts" (Lee), leaving those who are not offered acquisition, or who do not want to leave, exposed to the capitalist ethics. They are left with the sense that they are simply in the way, with continual contestation of their lived experiences of mine impacts. Indeed, in the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process conducted as per NSW Government requirements, the technical knowledge generated through modelling and scientific methods has been prioritised. The scientific knowledge regime has gained value as what generates measurements of "real impact", ethically displacing locals' experiences and perspectives through notions of "technological objectivity".[6] The lived experience is, subsequently, undermined, with local knowledge and experience of ecologies dismissed. The dispossession of the locals through this knowledge regime and their concerns and suffering are not considered in the assessment of social impact. Yet the impact mining has on people's sense of place, home, and self is significant. All the locals I have spoken with during my years of engagement with the community self-report variations of emotional distress, anxiety, sleeplessness, and depression.

The distress that the locals endure is further compounded by what is recognised within the EIA as "real" social impact. Since Wilpinjong opened, there has been a gradual loss of services, the local mechanics have moved away and the local shop—previously a centre for social activity—has been closed after offering only basic, expensive goods for a few years after it was purchased by Peabody. The local primary school and the two churches have been closed, the local fire brigade has been amalgamated with the bush fire brigade 50km away, and the village itself is desolated with the last pre-Wilpinjong local passing away in 2022. Today, none of the pre-mining population live in the village and less than 10% are left in the area, the majority of residents having been bought out by the mine or left because of its impact. Over the past few years, more and more houses in the village have been barricaded or demolished as

they fail to meet the standards of the mine and cannot be leased out as workers' accommodation.

As people have left, village life has changed and those who remain have become increasingly isolated. Life has become harder and people are aware of increasing risks and more concerned about their safety. Operating and maintaining farms is difficult and increasingly more expensive, with the shared rural economy dissipated due to the loss of community members. As is illustrated in the following vignette, those who remain have become confined, stranded.

> Ann was sitting in the lounge, clutching her cup of coffee. We could hear Jim coughing from the bedroom. Ann had explained as I arrived that Jim was in a bad state and would not be able to meet me today. We were talking about the community's response to the latest expansion application.
> Ann's large, powerful figure seemed small as she reflected on the situation. 'How do you imagine your future', I asked her. 'I don't tend to think too much about [the future] these days', she explained. 'I just go day to day. I mean our future, when I dare think about it, is bleak. If we can't sell the property there's our retirement plans gone. Our health is not great. I've had a heart attack. Jim's got PTSD. He's broken his back, he's got a fractured pelvis. He's on that much medication if you shake him he'll rattle […] Our future is...I don't know, I really don't know what's going to happen in our future. Whether we're just going to walk off and leave it, which we can't afford to do, or whether we're just going to try and last it out and die out here. Who knows? It's all up in the air at the moment, because all our plans have been...Our retirement plans and everything have just been smashed.'

This vignette displays strong emotions and also triggers an emotional reaction. It should be read in the context of government-level decision-making on mining in the region. Despite submissions of concerns, complaints and protests, local and state governments have continued to rule in favour of the mine and the powerful corporations running it, leaving the locals with the feeling that nobody in power cares. Even so, the community has mobilised their responses to the mine's operational impacts and proposals for modifications and expansions through the Wollar Progress Association and their representatives on the mine's Coal Community Consultative (CCC) Committee. They have received occasional support from Lock the Gate (a national community action group with strong representation in the Hunter region) and the Environmental Defenders Office (EDO), as well as local green politicians and environmental groups. Most of the time, however, their struggle is one that has not gain the attention beyond the extractive zone and their fight is one of everyday resistance (cf. Fletcher, 2001) and stubborn refusal.

Whilst recognising the role of intermediaries and supporters (such as Lock the Gate, EDO and others) in bolstering community voices at critical points in the mines' development and operation, there is little relief offered to those living at the coal frontier. The sense of Wollar having become a sacrificed zone and those who call it their home as part of the sacrifice, is evident in the absent presences and the present absences of the village, as well as in the words of those who remain. "We are the sacrificial lambs," Lee once expressed as she was reflecting on how Wollar features within the region's visions of progress and development. "Maybe they can remove the steak knives from our backs when they've finished?" Tim stated, driving home the sense of being slaughtered for the sake of others' consumption. "We are treated as roadkill," Paul said, pointing to the many dead kangaroos, wallabies, and wombats along the country roads, heavily trafficked by mining vehicles, that have been left to rot and eaten by the crows. The feelings of unfairness and violation that the people of Wollar experience are, on the one hand, related to the desecration of an ethical code of distributional equity and, on the other, part of an ethical discourse used to justify the violation of their community, well-being, homes, and lives. These failures to recognise the ethical code and the overarching discourses undermine—or, more precisely, make invisible—their sacrifice and suffering. The experiences of the long-term residents in and around Wollar exemplify the way neo-liberal globalisation fuels processes of dispossession and displacement. It illustrates how physical and social landscapes become 'matters of concerns' or ecological spaces to be sacrificed in the pursuit for economic gain (Holifield and Day, 2017; Hedges and Sacco, 2012; Shade, 2015), and how this emerges through a

discursive space in which their sacrifice is framed, circulated and affirmed as a matter of necessity or prudence. This discourse of justification functions, as I will investigate below, like a technology that establishes points of adherence and coherence, exclusion and elimination.

It's an amazing thing: Scripts of magic and hope, prosperity and ethics

> "This can provide endless possibilities," the husky female voiceover narrates, "it can create light and jobs. Delivering six billion in wages for Australians, it produces steel and powers our homes, as well as our economy, injecting 40 billion dollars each year ... It's coal. Isn't it amazing what this little black rock can do?" (Minerals Council of Australia, 2015).

This story line was first presented on Australian television in 2015 as part of an eye-catching advertisement campaign launched by the Australian Minerals Council that sought to highlight the central role of Australian coal in providing jobs, steel and, not least, cheap electricity. The campaign gained significant negative responses and was widely mocked (e.g. A Rational Fear, 2015; Becker, 2015; Hudson, 2015; Ker, 2015; Miletic, 2015). Despite criticisms and claims that the promotion of coal not only ignored health and climate risks but could also be seen as a threat to the Australian democracy due to its entanglement with the politics of development and progress, the Federal and NSW governments remained silent. The silence forms part of the discursive pattern of these governments (cf. McManus and Connor, 2013), which emphasises the economic and social benefit of coal whilst downplaying its environmental and social impacts. Statistics that reinforce the importance of the industry due to its contribution to local, state and national economy are forwarded, with narratives focussing on employment, state royalties and regional economic growth. Today, coal continues to be hailed as a benefit to "all Australians through its contribution to exports, wages, investment and tax revenue" (Minerals Council of Australia, nd: 5). Coal, government and industry discourses proclaim, represents "Australia's comparative advantage" and, as a country, "Australia is fortunate to be richly endowed with a commodity that is indispensable to modern life" (Minerals Council of Australia, nd: 5).

Although the Australian Government is party to the 2015 Paris agreement (UN, nd) and has committed to reduce emissions by 43% from 2005 levels by 2030 (Australian Government, 2023), coal retains its discursive power and, in parallel with plans to move towards renewable energy and mine closure, applications for new and modified coal mines are forwarded and approved (Askland, 2022; Denniss et al., 2021). The coal script outlined above is, thus, important as is present a conviction of necessity for commodification. In this script, coal becomes the source to future well-being and prosperity for *all* Australians, making the question of extraction an ethical question of national significance, shifting the scale and locus of sacrifice from that of the coal frontier to the greater public good as measured by economic variables. The issue for government in this instance can become a matter of technological management and innovation rather than a readjustment of economic priorities and reorganisation of territory for ecological preservation and restoration.

Emotional ecologies: Becoming isolated, insignificant and invisible

Industry and government scripts entail a distinct ethical component speaking to the promotion of human welfare and security, which functions as a technology that establishes boundaries of belonging. These scripts sketch future scenarios of well-being and prosperity that are closely intertwined with commitments to distinct technologies and ecologies. As Marshall (2016) contends, these imaginings evoke, or are based in, ontologies that posit particular notions of being and meaning. They are influenced by theories and myths, as well as by the power relations underpinning, social groups.[7] Through the scripts, imaginings become enacted and the future becomes present. This future is, however, exclusive; it comes with a sacrifice.

In the case study considered here, this sacrifice is the lives and imaginings of the local people at the coal frontier who are written out of the collective "We".[8] The order that the ethics of

the script generates forms a framing in which the local residents, their lives and imaginings, become invisible. This, then, clearly illustrates how ethics form part of politics, social struggles and group rivalries and that ethical actions are intertwined with group identification, group conflict and power relations. Ethics is, as such, not only technical or functional in establishing modes of control (over current and future ecologies) but also highly emotional. The scripts generate emotional responses that symbolise *adherence* and *coherence* as well as suppressing the recognition of dispossession in some others. I use the words 'adherence' and 'coherence' in line with Ahmed (2004), who explains how "emotions *do things*, they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachment" (Ahmed, 2004: 119, emphasis in original).

Returning to Wollar, my observation is that the local residents at the coal frontier experience a distinct sense of dispossession and displacement, which relates to temporal and affective dimensions as much as to the social disruption and material dispossession that have happened over the past 15 years. During the first year of my fieldwork, what stood out was the intensely felt emotions that people conveyed when speaking about their future and what was happening to their village. The experience of mining and the impact of the mine were not exclusively related to tangible, material measures that could be observed in the present, but rather to an intangible absence that spoke to a dismantlement of temporal constructs shaping experiences of 'home'.

> I just don't know what to do; where can I go? This cannot be bought…it's my life. I planted these golden gums and watched them grow…how can I leave? (Damien)

> You put yourself on hold, like I've done, right after my parents passed away in Sydney and I inherited some money, I would have done that house up, painted it and used that money, but now I'm too scared to. I haven't even dug new gardens. You put yourself on hold for all this time. (Elizabeth)

What stands out in these quotes is the sense that there is no future nor a present; there is no longer a "sense of possibility" (Hage, 1997) embedded in Wollar as a place. As the mines have come closer, the local people have lost the authority over their own destiny or the space of security, familiarity and community; that is, their home. The intense emotions of loss, sadness, anger and destitution articulated by the local residents are also strongly connected to a sense of lost future, of ethical violation and unfairness, of being silenced and invisible, of being excluded and minimised.

The remaining local residents of Wollar convey a sense of homelessness although, still living in their houses, this experience is not material but affective. This is, of course, closely intertwined with the destruction of their local community and loss of social services, as well as with environmental impacts related to noise, dust, combustion, traffic, light pollution and so on. It is, however, the sense of invisibility, of being forgotten—or, perhaps more correctly put, not mattering—that is at the core of their suffering. The dominant script writes them out of the collective ethos and, regardless of how loud they scream, there seems to be no one listening. There is a sense of abandonment resonating in their stories; an abandonment that leads to an ordinary form of suffering. The sacrifice at the coal frontier emerges through a process of slow violence (Nixon, 2011); it is not catastrophic and crisis-laden but, rather, in the words of Povinelli (2011: 13), it is a 'quasi-event', a form of suffering, enduring and experiencing that is "ordinary, chronic, and cruddy". Removed from the sacrifice zone and the lived experience at the coal frontier, the uneventfulness of the suffering and its status as a quasi-event allow for its endurance as it "never quite achieve the status of having occurred or taken place" (Povinelli, 2011: 13).

The sense of abandonment and desperation that the residents felt is illustrated in a distinct event that took place on 12 April 2017, at the peak of the assessment process of the latest expansion of the Wilpinjong mine. On this day, as a last effort to get the attention of the decision makers and to make themselves visible, the local residents of Wollar staged a direct action outside the Wilpinjong mine. The decision to move to direct action

and the protest outside the mine can be seen as an effort by the local residents to break out of the state of destitution by generating an event within the quasi-event. At the break of dawn, about 30 local residents and their supporters gathered in front of the main gate, hindering the mine workers leaving and entering the mine at the change of shift (Maguire and Askland, 2017).

Facing potential criminal charges for their peaceful protest, including up to seven years in jail, the local residents hoped that the act would attract the attention of politicians and the public to the desperate situation they found themselves in. As Bruce, one of the local Wollarians, said: "I don't really want to do this but I have to. It's my home", with his fellow community member, Bev, stating: "we are here to say enough is enough. We have lost our rights!" The protest was a political protest — an ethical struggle — aiming to show how deeply they felt about the issues and the injustice they experience. The protest was triggered by the sense of having no voice, of not being listened to. It was a last effort to jolt the dominant script and illustrate how they are a group of people whose lives have become annulled.

Making this argument, I draw on scholarship on emotions and, more specifically, the notion of "emotional geographies", which speaks to the question of to what extent "the human world is constructed and lived through the emotions'" (Anderson and Smith, 2001: 7). Emotions are, Anderson and Smith contend, "an intensely political issue" (Anderson and Smith, 2001: 7) and, as such, arguably ethical (Ahmed, 2004). They are part of how we comprehend and make sense of the world, representing a powerful force in establishing relationships to both the human and nonhuman entities that create the world in which we live (Duffy et al., 2021). McManus, Albrecht and Graham (2014) argue that in order to understand the impact of mining, concepts that incorporate the emotional bond that people have with their environment, with the implications of mining on this bond, are required. This could incorporate identity and home, with both home and identity being concepts that relate to

Figure 2. Protesters outside the gate of the Wilpinjong Mine, April 2017 © Hedda Haugen Askland

the affective dimension of place (Askland, 2018; Pearson, 2017). This argument is completely absent in the discourse about coal outlined earlier, which takes a rationalist, technocratic approach to benefit and impact based upon an understanding of 'place' as material and a matter of the present. This reduces place to its biophysical form and ignores how place is a mosaic of biophysical, social and ontological characteristics that exist in and through relationships between self and other (human and non-human) and that comes into existence through lived experienced of being, or situatedness (Casey, 1997, 2018) in the world (Vanclay, 2004; Askland, 2018). It transforms place into a non-place where the movement of workers and minerals take precedence over the affective domain and alternative ecologies, ontologies and logics, subsequently stripping nature of all context and value beyond it being the source of a distinct resource. This is an ethical proposition that disregards not only emotions but also the *meaning* of place, which is central to people's attachment to and identification with place, and intertwined with people's personal and collective identities (Askland, 2018; Farrugia et al., 2018; Pearson, 2017). Indeed, it hides a central part of resource conflicts, which is, as Cheng et al. (2003: 98) contend, "as much about a contest over place meanings as it is a competition over the allocation and distribution of scarce resources amongst interest groups" and disregards the lived experience of a place, or the impacts on people and their identities and lives.

To understand the devastation that has engulfed Wollar, it is necessary to look beyond the material manifestation of displacement and resettlement. Whilst the depopulation of the area and the loss of services, increased cost of living and heightened isolation are central to people's sense of dispossession, another measure of impact lingers in their narratives. This relates to the threat that the mines have had on Wollar as a place and its transformation to what, for them, is increasingly experienced as a non-place. I have made the argument elsewhere (Askland, 2018), that the people of Wollar have become displaced in place. I contend that displacement is not limited to movement of people across socio-spatial boundaries but is an existential experience that can occur through ruptures in place. These ruptures may relate to the bio-physical, social or ontological dimensions of place and will be related to temporal experiences of a place, as a 'Significant Other'. The sense of displacement manifests in statements such as:

> I don't have a life here but I am living. Life has become a living hell. Everything has changed […] yet I'm stuck, I can't get out of here! (Paul).

Rather than being triggered by their own mobility, locals, such as Paul, have become stranded in a non-place, brought to life by the mobility of others and the movement of coal. The sense of strandedness that they articulate goes hand in hand with experiences of fragmentation, loss and discontinuity; it refers to an experience of powerlessness against an all-encompassing and external moral imperative.

Making this argument, I draw on work that has emerged from human geography and emotional geographies; more specifically, Professor Glenn Albrecht's notion of 'solastalgia' and his theory about 'psychoterratic' distress. Albrecht calls this sense of distress, solastalgia (lat: *solus* and *desolare* – abandonment and loneliness; *algia* – longing, sickness, suffering, pain). Solastalgia refers to a sense of homesickness one feels while still at one's home. It derives from the notion of 'nostalgia' (lat: *nostos* – return to home or native land; *algia* – longing), where one feels a longing or melancholy towards past places, which are no longer accessible. Importantly, places (of past and present) can be sources of solace, or comfort. It is when these places become inaccessible—either through movement in space and time, or through environmental transformation—that nostalgic and solastalgic distress can emerge. Central to a sense of self and home is the sense of being part of an ecology, as this relates to biophysical, social, ontological—and, by inference of the argument presented above—ethical variables.

Expanding on Albrecht's work, I go beyond the dyad nostalgia-solastalgia, which incorporates the future as a temporal reality shaping the present, by introducing a third concept: 'eritalgia' (lat: *erit* – he/she/it will be; third person singular future active verb; *algia* – pain, sickness). I have discussed elsewhere with colleague, Matthew Bunn (Askland

and Bunn, 2018a), how the concept of solastalgia as presented by Albrecht emphasises the environment through the notion of ecosystem health and how this underestimates the deep relational and ontological dimension of place. As we argue, whilst "Albrecht draws a line to the relationship between environment and social condition, the role of both sociality and temporality in relation to place and place-based distress remain relatively under-explored in his work" (Askland and Bunn, 2018a: 19). It is not only the ecological damage that a mine brings that can lead to distress but also the sense of temporal rupture, the feeling of deception and betrayal (Askland and Bunn, 2018a: 19-21). I seek to capture this temporal dimension with the expansion of the dyad of -algia, bringing in the future as a dominant figure in experiences of environmental distress and (in)justice.

Eritalgia can be explained as the distress endured in response to lived experiences of significant environmental change that distorts, disrupts or displaces an individual's sense of a future self in place. It points to the dis-ease that emerges when the connection between lived realities and an imagined future self (in place) is broken. This break can be triggered by changes in, or challenges to, the biophysical, social or ontological components of place; it is a break marked by ego's (as individual or group) loss of authority, authorship and voice in the intimate spheres of home as bounded in the imagining of future connection to place. The three concepts—nostalgia, solastalgia and eritalgia—are nested and have a cumulative character where the severity of dis-ease builds as the temporal dimensions are reduced. Each of them points to a loss of regenerative potential, in which time becomes increasingly compartmentalised and the ability to reproduce the embodied experience of time—as past, present and future—is (at least temporarily) felt as lost. Each of the three concepts present a distinct sense of loss: nostalgia points to the loss of past home, or homelessness; solastalgia is tied to loss of agency, or powerlessness; and, eritalgia embodies the loss of hope, or hopelessness.

Displaced in place: Dispossession, muting and an ethics of benevolence

Loss of place can manifest within biophysical, social and ontological realms. In the case of Wollar, it is evident how the physicality of space has changed (e.g. mine void; water flows; noise; built environment etc.); the sociality of space has changed (people moving away; increased community tension; changing modes of interaction; politicisation of space and relations etc.); and the meaning of the place has change (the purpose bestowed upon the landscape; the scripts of the place; the contest between capitalist and environmentalist discourses as it is embedded in the landscape). The local residents express a deep sense of distress related to this loss of place, and its transformation into non-place. People commonly speak about sleeplessness, anxiety and stress, as well as future-oriented angst: "It is a nightmare whichever way you go; if we go or not, we are between a rock and a hard place" (Alistair); "we are the victims of a silent war" (Lee); "life has become a living hell" (Paul).

The dis-ease they articulate reflects nostalgic longings with references to 'the golden era' when the community thrived. Melancholic allusions are often made to the one-stop-shop-mechanic-post-office-bottle store that used to be a centre for social activities, cricket matches and bush dances, and to a time when the community was vibrant and cohesive. Similarly, they articulate a sense of solastalgic distress, where the present depletion of community, destruction of social networks, loss of friends and neighbours, dilapidation of houses, changing sounds and disrupted nights represent environmental changes that create unease. Expressing a deep level of eritalgia, residents often point to the inability to imagine their future self in place. As Elizabeth stated during one of our many conversations: "There is nobody left, there is nothing here. There is no future".

Wollar has become a non-place; a place marked by transience, anonymity and inconspicuousness. Ghost-like and depleted it, on the one hand, stands out as having been frozen in time—as its residents and the village have become stranded in a time of the past, stripped of its regenerative potential and future—yet, on the other hand, it

is this very character that facilitates movement (of coal, energy and capital). This movement is, however, embedded in an ethics, and facilitated by a technology, that is exogamous to the long-term local residents and their notions of place. There is no space for their conception of place within this non-place. Co-existence, here, is a false myth. The only way the mine can operate is by displacing those in its way through resettlement (*physical movement*, which may take place either through mine acquisition or individual landholders making the decision to leave), or through muting local voices (*discursive movement*). The two are intertwined. Through the mine's acquisition of properties and subsequent resettlement of local residents, the few who remain have become displaced in place. Even if they want to leave, they cannot move (e.g. Askland and Bunn, 2018b). The mine has become the primary landowner in the area, and the locals' assets have become worthless as the only possible buyer is the mine. The mine is under no legal obligation to buy them out as those who remain are not within the acquisition zone and not recognised as negatively affected. By imposing an ethics of benevolence and necessity that places the boundaries of adherence and coherence beyond the coal face, or that turns the area into a non-place, the mine's operations are endorsed, promoted, even celebrated, by those in power. This can, however, only be done by muting the scripts and voices of those at the coal frontier through discursive relocation of "the local" to a place where the ethics of benevolence resonates. Scripted out of a collective future and stranded in an eritalgic space (where the individual no longer has a sense of future self in place), the locals have become displaced in place.

Conclusion

According to Jansen (2009a: 57), for a place to be home, a sense of hope is required. Hope is connected to the ability to imagine a positive future where dreams and realities compound as one. The sense of homelessness observed at the coal face relates to the loss of hope and the dismantlement of future imaginings. This sense of homelessness is not related to material loss of home, as people remain in place, and continue to dwell in the site they have been calling home. Rather, the sense of homelessness or displacement is related to the dissonance created in temporal constructs, by which the individuals have lost the authority to define or imagine their future self in place. This is what I call 'eritalgia'. Eritalgia is an experience of temporal dissonance caused by the sense of lost authorship of one's own future in place; it is caused by a 'temporal highjacking' and a silencing of concerns by those in positions of power. Corporate and governmental political, discursive and material practice make destitute alternative futures in place. This sense of homelessness and lack of hope for the future connects with experiences of displacement, disempowerment and dispossession. It relates not only to the dispossession of sociality and place through extractive activities but also to the sense of discursive hegemony in which alternative futures are muted.

I have shown through sharing Wollarian concerns and putting them in relation to corporate and institutional scripts on coal futures, that social disruption and depletion, ecological dissonance and dominant scripts founded on a humanist ethics that draws up boundaries of adherence and coherence that effect a sense of displacement—an existential condition in place—that has come to mark the lives of the people in Wollar. Home, infused with a sense of hope, is a place that is seen to go elsewhere. For the people of Wollar, futures have become blurred and the alignment between self and place disjointed. Stranded, they have become displaced in place. There are lessons embedded in this story about the relationship between regions, between the poor and the non-poor, communities and the state, that speak to experiences beyond the coal frontier. The process of "slow letting die" (Povinelli, 2011) and the politics of abandonment that this story accounts is one that holds relevance for the general debate about extractivism and one that requires urgent attention as the world embarks on a new extractive boom under the heading of a just transition and green capitalism.

The new imagined futures that will drive the transition to lower-carbon energy sources are not necessarily all encompassing and inclusive, despite the discourse of "leaving no one behind" (UN, 2023: np; see also, for example, Carley and

Konisky, 2020; Canelas and Carvalho, 2023). Rather, these imagined futures could equally entail a potential sacrifice of those at the green extractive frontier and the conceptual triad of nostalgia, solastalgia and eritalgia discussed in this paper offer conceptual tools which draw attention to the sacrifices that are occurring when imagined futures conflict.

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Notes

1 I adopt an approach to 'frontier' similar to that of Domingues and Sauer (2022: 1), assuming it as "a conceptual category for capturing the complexity of actors, actions and articulations in disputes over land, nature and territories, that are subject of appropriation by different political projects."

2 I adopt a notion of home that is intimately tied to lived experiences of temporality – as the space in which past and future self come together in present everyday practice, hope and longing. Home is not simply about property or dwelling, nor is it solely about being within a space that offers security, familiarity, wealth or freedom. Home, as I approach it here, refers to a sense of belonging and an embodied object of longing in which the self attains a sense of harmony between, and autonomy over, material elements, ontological constructs and temporal imaginings. Home is a space bound by hope and future-oriented dispositions (Jovanović, 2018); it is the place where individuals have the power to invest in a dimension of future (Jansen, 2009a, 2009b), envisage the possibilities of place, and control and relate to those possibilities.

3 The term 'sacrifice zones' attains key attributes and dimensions of place and place relations by which landscapes change and negative impacts of large scale extractive projects, other infrastructure, and development projects are emphasised. I apply the term in this paper both as it indicates the analytical conversation with the growing scholarship on the topic (e.g. Cottle, 2013; de Souza, 2020; Gómez-Barris, 2017; Holifield and Day, 2017; Lerner, 2010; Scott and Smith, 2017; Shade, 2015), and as a reference to experiences articulated by the research participants, and the key argument of the article.

4 For further information about the dispossession of the Wiradjuri, please see: Brayshaw, 1987; Macdonald, 1998; Read, 1969, 1984.

5 The is approved by the University of Newcastle's Human Research Ethics Committee, approval number: H-2015-0279.

6 For a discussion about knowledge regimes and extractive industries, see, for example: Espig, 2018; Eriksen and Schober, 2017; Threadgold et al., 2018.

7 I use 'myth' in line with Connor and Marshall (2016: 5), who use the term as a reference to world-views. In line with them, I see myths as dominant stories circulating within social groups, which speak to the nature of being.

8 It could be argued that another, linked, sacrifice is the imagining of those outside the dominant 'cultural complex' (Marshall, 2016) whose perspectives, from within the dominant complex, are seen as a challenge to the moral order of being. This is, however, beyond the scope of this article and further analysis about the alignment between egos and institutions of the non-dominant cultural complex must be reserved for another publication.