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“No More Boomerang”: Environment and Technology in Contemporary Aboriginal Australian Poetry

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Abstract: Based in oral traditions and song cycles, contemporary Aboriginal Australian poetry is full of allusions to the environment. Not merely a physical backdrop for human activities, the ancient Aboriginal landscape is a nexus of ecological, spiritual, material, and more-than-human overlays—and one which is increasingly compromised by modern technological impositions. In literary studies, while Aboriginal poetry has become the subject of critical interest, few studies have foregrounded the interconnections between environment and technology. Instead, scholarship tends to focus on the socio-political and cultural dimensions of the writing. How have contemporary Australian Aboriginal poets responded to the impacts of environmental change and degradation? How have poets addressed the effects of modern technology in ancestral environments, or country? This article will develop an ecocritical and technology-focused perspective on contemporary Aboriginal poetry through an analysis of the writings of three significant literary-activists: Jack Davis (1917–2000), Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1920–1993), and Lionel Fogarty (born 1958). Davis, Noonuccal, and Fogarty strive poetically to draw critical attention to the particular impacts of late modernist technologies on Aboriginal people and country. In developing a critique of invasive technologies that adversely affect the environment and culture, their poetry also invokes the Aboriginal technologies that sustained (and, in places, still sustain) people in reciprocal relation to country.

Keywords: poetry; Australia; Aboriginal people; technology; country; ecocriticism; Davis; Noonuccal; Fogarty

1. Introduction

Based in oral traditions and song poetry [1], much of which bears a more than forty-thousand-year-old lineage, contemporary Aboriginal Australian poetry is replete with references to the natural world: plants, animals, earth, sky, wind, water, creation beings, ancestors, and living communities of people [2]. In ancient Aboriginal worldviews, the environment is a dynamic, ever-shifting nexus of human and non-human actants ([3], pp. 106–22)—and one which modern technology increasingly impacts today [4]. Indigenous Australian epistemologies of the environment largely resist the Western categorical distinction between “human”, on the one hand, and “non-human”, on the other. Philosopher Mary Graham describes this condition in terms of relationality between beings: “The sacred web of connections includes not only kinship relations and relations to the land, but also relations to nature and all living things” ([5], Section “Custodial Ethic toward Land”). Mediated by typographical conventions but retaining traditional storytelling modes [6], Aboriginal poetry also preserves ecological knowledge, reflects environmental concerns, and lodges ecopolitical critiques of land-related issues, including the disintegration of biocultural heritage.

In Australian literary criticism, Aboriginal poetry has been the subject of scholarly studies and numerous collections [7–9], especially since the seminal anthology *Inside Black Australia* from 1988. Even so, Cooke ([6], p. 89) observes that research into the oral aspects of Aboriginal writing has been limited historically to the fields of musicology [10] and anthropology [11,12], rather than literary studies. What is more, weighted toward life writing and fiction, the collection *A Companion to Australian Aboriginal Literature*, edited by Belinda Wheeler and published in 2013, includes only one chapter devoted to traditional and contemporary poetry through Western critical discourse [6]. Hence, the relative scholarly underemphasis on Aboriginal poetry is broadly evident in Wheeler’s volume and elsewhere. The lacuna, the author argues, also includes ecocritical frameworks that could articulate the pronounced interconnections between environment, culture, and technology in much of the poetry—the subject and intended contribution of this article.

How have contemporary Australian Aboriginal poets responded to the cultural impacts of environmental change and degradation? How have poets addressed the intrusion of technology in ancestral environments or country? How might poets adopt or reject technology for the creative expression of their cultural concerns? Responding in detail to the first two questions but peripherally to the third, this article will develop an ecocritical and technology-based perspective on contemporary Aboriginal poetry through the work of three poet-activists: Jack Davis (1917–2000), Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1920–1993), and Lionel Fogarty (born 1958). The cultural perspectives presented by these poets implicate both colonial-era and high modernist technologies in the devastation of country and the disruption of traditional lifeways, including intertwined cultural, spiritual, and ecological practices. As a caveat, the examples from Davis, Noonuccal, and Fogarty are by no means intended to represent the full spectrum and ecocritical possibilities of contemporary Aboriginal poetry. For the sake of narrowing the scope, other prominent voices, such as Kevin Gilbert [13], Lisa Belleair [14], and Samuel Wagan Watson [15], will not figure into this discussion, but their poetry nevertheless offers significant material for ensuing studies through technologically-sensitive ecocritical frameworks.

The approach to Aboriginal poetry developed here will invariably draw attention to the nodes between ecocriticism, philosophy, and technology. It could be asserted that, since the beginnings of the

field over twenty-five years ago, ecocritical scholars tend to display an inherently skeptical and prevailingly negative perception of high modernist technology as one of the principal roots of environmental catastrophe ([16], pp. 51–54), climate change [17], the commoditization of nature ([18], pp. 22–24), and even anthropocentrism itself [19]. Jonathan Bordo traces the connection between trauma and the technological sublime, positing what he terms the “incommensurability” between nuclear arms and ecological peril that has become an integral—though, at the same time, a confounding and alienating—dimension of public discourse ([20], p. 174). On the whole, ecological critics and activists often regard technological over-advancement—and the process of technologization—as inescapably antagonistic to the long-term well-being of bioregions, ecosystems, and nonhuman life ([21], p. 41). However, contemporary Aboriginal poetry reminds us of the plurality of technology and the actual range of practices included within the term throughout history—from low impact, temporally extensive, and bioculturally sustainable technologies to the high impact, short-term, and ecologically damaging forms of late modernity (a term denoting the pervasiveness of global capitalist societies characterized by information exchange, also described by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman [22] as liquid modernity).

The analysis of poetry in this article reveals the implicit position taken by the poets that technology constitutes a continuum from pre-settlement to contemporary eras. An example of what I mean by a long-term, pre-settlement Aboriginal technology is the detoxification of the fruits of zamia cycads, such as the burrawang (*Macrozamia communis*), rendered nutritious through soaking, fermentation, grinding, and other practices. The pineapple-shaped fruit of the burrawang contains seeds that Aboriginal people processed and consumed. In contrast, British colonists referred to burrawang as “fool’s pineapple” for its toxic effects when eaten raw ([23], p. 50). A more prominent and widespread illustration can be found in the complex systems of fire applied by Aboriginal societies to regenerate the landscape and support the proliferation of vegetable and animal resources [24,25]. In *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, Bill Gammage argues that “knowing which plants welcome fire, and when and how much, was critical to managing land. Plants could then be burnt and not burnt in patterns, so that post-fire regeneration could situate and move grazing animals predictably by selectively locating the feed and shelter they prefer” ([24], p. 1). These examples, of food and fire, are precursors to what theorists today refer to as “sustainable technology” *vis-à-vis* solar, wind, geothermal, and other renewable energies [26].

2. Song Poetry: From Country to Technology

An appreciation of the conjoined ecological and technological dimensions of Aboriginal poetry involves an understanding of the nuances of the term country. For non-Aboriginal people, the term generally denotes either nation—a region delineated by geopolitical boundaries—or undifferentiated landscape, as in the expression “spending the day in the country” ([27], p. 7). However, in an Aboriginal sense, country does not neatly align to Anglo-European concepts of nature, wilderness, environment, or pastoral countryside. Instead, the signifier is “multi-dimensional”, consisting inclusively of “people, animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air”, as well as the sea, shoreline, and sky ([27], p. 8). The term comprises ancestral homelands, family origins, totemic systems, and other enduring cultural and ecological associations.

As a living being involving reciprocal obligations, country is a place of belonging, where Dreaming—or creation—narratives center around the actions of ancestral entities in the form of plants, animals, winds, fire, stars, and the moon ([10], p. 95). Recognizing its life-sustaining qualities, Deborah Bird Rose characterizes country as a “nourishing terrain”, a sentient and conscious landscape that “gives and receives life” ([27], p. 7). In relation to her anthropological fieldwork with Aboriginal communities, Rose further elaborates that “country expects its people to maintain its integrity [...] to take care of country is to be responsible for that country. And country has an obligation in return—to nourish and sustain its people” ([3], p. 109). Aboriginal people visit, respect, sing and speak to, feel sorry and long for, and dream and worry about country, in the same way that another human individual or family member would be treated ([27], p. 7).

The contingent relationship between country and song is fundamental to recognize in the context of poetry. Engendering cultural connections to the land and between human communities, traditional Aboriginal verse—or song poetry—underlies contemporary Aboriginal writing ([6], p. 92). Song poetry can be described as a “spoken text but also a musical assemblage of various human and nonhuman actors” ([6], p. 92) and is characterized by metricality in which sung word patterns serve as rhythmic units ([10], p. 94). The expressions “singing country” and “singing up country” refers to *in situ* performances of song poetry. Based on extensive research with Yanyuwa families of the Borroloola settlement in the Northern Territory, John Bradley explains that *kujika* denotes a way of knowing in which singing becomes a mechanism to sustain country and kinship relations ([1], p. xiii). *Kujika* is a “most precious repository of knowledge” involving *wandayarra* or following the song paths overland and through the sea ([1], p. xiii).

Country and song poetry are crucibles for Aboriginal cultural knowledge. Indigenous technological practices also involve environmental and cultural understandings, particularly of country. Thus, a crucial dimension of my ecocritical triangulation of Aboriginal poetry and country is technology. A principal theme within the poetry of Davis, Noonuccal, and Fogarty is the friction between technology (historicized and conceptualized broadly), country, and traditional lifeways. However, their poetry intimates that not all technologies result in the same environmental and cultural impacts. Since the eighteenth-century European colonization of Australia and, specifically, the arrival of the First Fleet of British vessels at Botany Bay in 1788, diverse technological forms have impacted Aboriginal communities across Australia in myriad ways—both for better and worse. Modern developments—mining operations, tourism infrastructures, and networks of roads, railways, flight paths, and shipping lanes—bear a legacy of fragmenting Indigenous cultural practices, siphoning away resources, and channeling economic benefits from communities to the dominant settler society typically located in urban centers like Sydney, Melbourne, and Perth [28]. In Australia, while the exploitation of mineral resources has been essential to the economy, particularly during the Global Financial Crisis since 2008, the capital derived from country has not been proportionately returned to communities to improve the destitute conditions facing many rural Aboriginal people today. The uneven allocation of land-derived resources underscores the social inequities of technology [29]. In contrast, other technological introductions to country have enhanced traditional practices, such as the hunting of game using cars and communication between family groups through mobile telephony ([30], pp. 117–24).

For environmentalists, including some Indigenous people, technology refers prevailingly to that of “late capitalism”, a neo-Marxist term denoting capitalism since the end of World War II, marked by high-tech developments and the prevalence of speculative financial capital. In the general view of activists, these forms—mining, damming, monocropping, land clearing, factory farming, and genetic engineering—clash, to greater or lesser extents, with land conservation values and sustainability. Notably in relation to climate change, environmental discourse implicates technology in ecological catastrophe and problematizes the Enlightenment-based ideal of progress through scientific development and the extraction of resources [17]. Many Indigenous rights movements have been galvanized by their opposition to proposed or actual alterations of land, air, and water triggered by technology. A significant historical example from the United States is the Cherokee people’s vehement resistance to the Tellico Reservoir and the flooding of the Little Tennessee Valley—places considered sacred and, thus, central to cultural identity. The construction of a reservoir destroyed irreplaceable heritage and erased the Cherokee archaeological sites of Chota, Tanasi, Toqua, and others ([31], p. 4). A current instance of Aboriginal Australian activism against the destruction of the sacred sites of country (albeit urbanized in this instance) is the proposed extension of Roe Highway in the city of Perth, Western Australia, across the North Lake and Bibra Lake areas. The Nyoongar people of the metropolitan Perth area regard the lakes as significant songline, or Dreaming, sites and dwelling places of the Creation serpent known as the Waugal—a history that vastly predates British colonization since 1829 [32].

In examining Aboriginal views of technology as expressed in poetry, it is crucial to conceptualize technology not as a monolithic concept, singularly denoting the dams, highways, computers, and nuclear reactors of late modernity, but as a plurality of practices intrinsic to all cultures and eras. In this regard, philosopher Alan Drengson understands technology as “the systematic organization of techniques and skills, so as to produce some product, by means of reorganizing a raw material or some other appropriate medium” ([33], p. 30). Importantly for Drengson, technology is not limited to technological products or techniques but comprises four aspects: “technical knowledge and skill; organizational structure; cultural purposes and values; and resource use, raw materials and the environment” ([33], p. 32).

For Don Ihde, technology amplifies human (and presumably other tool-bearing animals’) relation to and modifications of their environments. While it is a somewhat obvious argument that technologies of the late twentieth century underlie the current environmental crisis (*i.e.*, climate change, species loss, urban pollution, food allocation, energy use), Ihde observes that cultures throughout history employed relatively simple “lo-technologies” to transform the environment in highly deleterious ways, resulting in desertification, deforestation, erosion, and overgrazing. Although hi-tech forms magnify and accelerate processes of anthropogenic change, technology itself is always culturally dependent. Meanwhile, the obvious beneficial effects of technology, such as immunization practices, underscore that modern technologies have “greater amplifactory and magnifactional powers” than their ancient equivalents ([16], p. 53). The analysis of the consequences of technology, for Ihde, therefore, should consider: “(a) the nature of the various technologies involved; (b) the relation or range of relations to the humans who use (and design or modify or even discard) them; and (c) the cultural context into which ensembles fit and take shape” ([16], p. 54).

Drengson, Ihde, and other philosophers of technology agree that technology is more than its late modernist incarnations and has been located in cultural values throughout history. Ihde references

environmentally catastrophic examples from ancient cultures, as well as the positive and negative consequences of modern technology. What appears largely missing from their positions, however, is a strong enunciation of the beneficial, sustainable, and generative aspects of traditional technologies, specifically those developed and applied by Aboriginal Australian people over millennia. In conjunction with the seasonal movements of Indigenous hunter-gatherers, many “lo-technologies” have enabled people to occupy environmental niches for considerably long time periods without dramatically and permanently exhausting the resources of country [30].

3. Jack Davis’ Critique of Modern Technologies

Born in 1917 in Perth to parents from the Pilbara region of Western Australia, Jack Davis was a poet, playwright, and Aboriginal rights advocate. His family, including ten brothers and sisters, lived in the rural communities of Lake Clifton, Waroona, and Yarloop outside Perth where Davis developed an attachment to the natural world in his early years. “Much of our childhood was spent in the bush and I learnt to love the wildlife that existed around our home. The path to school passed through a patch of scrub and jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*) forest” ([34], p. 13). During family moves, as recounted in his memoir *A Boy’s Life*, he would explore “each side of the road for bush tucker such as wild berries and prickly pear fruit [...] bush tucker was important because it helped augment the family larder” ([35], pp. 7, 10). The environment—“lofty redgum and jarrah trees [...] a new bird’s nest, swooping magpies and bush animal or reptile tracks across the path through the bush”—figured appreciably into his upbringing in the 1920s and 1930s and subsequently into his creative writing throughout his life ([35], p. 11).

Davis also relates how his parents told the children traditional Nyoongar stories, such as the Dreaming of *karda*—the racehorse goanna (*Varanus gouldii*) whose tail is said to bear the yellow stripes of burns caused by the boomerang of a jealous lover ([35], pp. 20–21). Stories of whispering trees ([35], p. 25) and carnivorous fungi that iridesce ([35], p. 27) as well as firsthand experiences of using balga (*Xanthorrhoea preissii*) foliage for camping ([35], p. 76) fostered Davis’ knowledge of the immediate environment and nurtured his imagination with the animistic beliefs of Aboriginal heritage. A mounting respect and awe for the natural world is evident in childhood recollections of a massive jarrah tree as “a real wonder of nature. It took 32 of my boyish steps to circle its sprawling girth. Years of storms had trimmed the growth of its branches, but it reared sixty metres into the blue of the sky” ([35], p. 82). These memories and their poignant cultural registers would later feature in Davis’ poetry while also invigorating his campaigning for Aboriginal rights.

Davis’ most distinguished works are the poetry collections *Jagardoo: Poems from Aboriginal Australia* (1977) [36], *The First-born and Other Poems* (1983) [37], and *Black Life* (1992) [38] and the plays *Kullark* (1984) [39] and *No Sugar* (1986) [40], all of which address the challenges of maintaining Aboriginal cultural identity and ensuring basic human rights in modern Australian society. For instance, by offering an Aboriginal outlook on Western Australian settlement, *Kullark* attempts to refute and counterweigh the entrenched misconceptions of European colonial history that sought to nullify Nyoongar presence. The play dramatizes key events such as the murder of Yagan (1795–1833), the Nyoongar freedom fighter who led campaigns against British settlement in Western Australia but was later decapitated, his body shipped to England and displayed as an exotic curiosity at museums up

to the 1960s [41]. *Kullark* also involves depictions of the Waugal, or Rainbow Serpent of the Nyoongar, as a symbol of Aboriginal cultural rebirth and the deep indigenous history that precedes European arrival ([34], p. 195).

In addition to his poetic and dramatic writings, Davis became the director of the Aboriginal Advancement Council (AAC) of Western Australia and served as the manager of an Aboriginal community center in Perth in the 1960s and 1970s. The AAC lobbied for the Australian referendum of 1967 (known officially as the Constitution Alteration), forging the path to greater land rights, economic support, and cultural heritage protection for all Aboriginal people. During this time, Davis became active politically in Western Australia as an organizer of, and participant in, public protests and street marches: “Our banners were conspicuous, our views well publicized, and I believe that the firm and consistent pressure we placed upon the government, church bodies and the public conscience brought about a change in attitude” ([34], p. 159). His activism also included time as a committee member of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Studies and the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council, as well as editor of one of the first Aboriginally focused and run magazines *Identity*, launched in the 1970s ([42], p. 191). However, while Davis composed a number of poems in response to socio-political events impacting Aboriginal lives, his work on the whole reflects a range of themes, including health, family, and environment. Critic Adam Shoemaker observes that less than one-third of the poems in Davis’ *Jagardoo* speak to issues of racism, oppression, and dispossession ([42], p. 191). Therefore, in arguing that Davis is not only a political writer but also an environmental poet, I aim to extend ecocritical approaches to the analysis of his work.

Some of Davis’ poetry examines the devastating impact of modern technology on Nyoongar culture in the heavily forested Southwest corner of the state. This is a region of abundant forest resources, consisting primarily of the large eucalypts, or gum trees, known as *jarrah*, *marri*, *karri*, *tingle*, and *tuart*. In the Southwest, the infrastructure of the logging industry—axes, chainsaws, diesel trucks, and timber mills—sits at the center of a history of jeopardizing the conservation of Aboriginal heritage, traditional livelihood, and forest protection [43]. The poem “Forest Giant” from *Black Life* epitomizes these tensions ([38], p. 63). The fifteen-line poem elegizes an ancient gum tree—much like the “old forest giant” Davis recounts in his memoir ([35], p. 85)—that has survived the onslaught of land clearing, symbolized in the poem by the colonial, non-motorized implements of axes and saws. The poet addresses the forest giant directly, as a person, in the opening line, and subsequently characterizes the old tree in active terms through his use of the gerunds *standing* and *reaching*. Davis’ diction attributes corporeality—embodied presence—to the giant: “You have stood there for centuries/arms gaunt reaching for the sky” ([38], p. 63, ll. 1–2). For an Aboriginal storyteller like Davis, the entire forest, including the soil, is an animate system constituted by symbiotic physiological interactions between living beings. Highlighting the ecological interactions between trees and the soil, Davis stays in the mode of direct address—a technique used by other Aboriginal Australian poets to underscore the principal role, within Indigenous epistemologies, of dialogic relations, as well as the possibility of speaking, of dialogue, between beings: “your roots in cadence/with the heart beat of the soil” ([38], p. 63, ll. 3–4). Davis’ “ecological” poetics imply his awareness of the material and energetic flows between abiotic (e.g., soil, rocks, air) elements and biotic (e.g., humans, birds, trees) inhabitants of the land in the context of Nyoongar (Southwest of Western Australia) cosmology. Just as the tree has a

body so too does the soil have a heart—a turn-of-phrase that is not intended by the writer as a symbolic flourish or metaphysical abstraction, but as a spiritual and ecological reality.

However, the relatively harmonious, even Romantic, biotic portrait educed by Davis in the poem's first four lines shifts abruptly in ensuing lines toward forlorn reflection on the forest giant as a lone survivor—a living relic and stark reminder—of the anthropogenic ravages carried out in the name of industrial capitalism. Davis insinuates that the forest's recent history of Anglo-European exploitation intersects with the colonial history of Aboriginal abuse, suffering, discrimination, and incarceration since the arrival of the First Fleet. Thus, environmental and cultural histories intertwine: "High on the hill, you missed/the faller's axe and saw/But they destroyed the others/down the slope/and on the valley floor/Now you and I/bleed in sorrow and in silence/for what once had been" ([38], p. 63, ll. 5–12). By virtue of its physical inaccessibility, the forest giant became an ecological refugee—a survivor gesturing, in its corporeal presence, defiantly against the technological authority that erased its human and nonhuman kin: "the others". Set against the rendering of historical desolation, interspecies empathy and solidarity emerges between the poet and the sentient tree, both bleeding, both silent (and *silenced*), both mourning their losses. The three concluding lines amplify the portrait of injustice by likening deforestation to one of the most invasive and nefarious acts that can be committed against the human body. The neo-colonial, techno-industrial, state-sponsored apparatus perpetrates the crime while the land itself remains sanctified: "while the rapists still/stride across/and desecrate the land" ([38], p. 63, ll. 13–15).

Davis' poem "Forest Giant" embodies the traditional Nyoongar (especially the Wilman, Wardandi, Bibbulmun, Kaneang, and Minang groups') view of forests as animate and ancestral places. Cliff Humphries, a Nyoongar man born in 1910, eloquently articulates the cultural resonance of forests that is palpable in the poem. People would ask forest spirits for food or healing and were thus in active dialogue with the arboreal environment, not as a mere resource but an intelligent fellow being. "Before the coming of the Wadjalla [white people], our forests played an important part in our spiritual well-being, identity and survival. The spirits of our dead were placed inside both dead and living trees [...] The destruction of these very sacred places will destroy links to our ancestors which in turn will eliminate our capacity to remain spiritually healthy" ([44], p. 71). Although not referring expressly to forests, Mary Graham explicates the relationship of the land to the Dreaming. The sacrosanct view of the natural world, as espoused by Aboriginal people for millennia, is often at odds with the techno-capitalist, materialist paradigm of land use propounded by settler culture. This tension has permeated Aboriginal-settler relations since "first contact", Graham states, "the land is a sacred entity, not property or real estate; it is the great mother of all humanity [...] all meaning comes from land" ([5], Section "A Brief Description of the Two Axioms").

The disjunction between Aboriginal cultural meaning, land use and perception, and colonialist technology resurfaces in the poem "Lost" from *The First-born* ([37], p. 29). This twenty-line lyric poem employs a melodic ABAB rhyme scheme arranged around five quatrains. The harmonious rhetorical structure parallels the poet's idyllic rumination on nature in the first, third, and fourth quatrains, which is then subverted abruptly by a volta—or dramatic turn—in the final stanza. The second quatrain foreshadows the volta's shift to the dread, loss, and desolation precipitated by modern technological interference. In order to heighten the emotional registers of Aboriginal cultural disintegration, Davis makes use of the literary technique anaphora, in which phrases are repeated at the

beginning of lines, for instance, “I have watched the changing weather” (first line of third quatrain) and “I have watched a thin moon rinse a valley in its new light” (first line of fourth quatrain) ([37], p. 29, ll. 9, 13).

“Lost” begins with an image of a plant—in its growth, the expression of *poiesis* (making) and *physis* (nature), and, in its use, the basis of traditional Aboriginal sustenance. The opening quatrain conveys, through the dynamism of nature imprinted in the poet’s memory, a resounding tenor of hopefulness, rejuvenation, and ecological equilibrium: “I have seen the plant grow,/Seed burst and the blanket of earth/Slip back to show/The white-green stem of new birth” ([37], p. 29, ll. 1–4). The buoyant Romanticism begins to deteriorate in the second quatrain with an allusion to the ringbarking (or girdling) of wandoo (*Eucalyptus wandoo*), a medium-sized gum tree endemic to the Southwest region of WA. Ringbarking entails stripping bark from the circumference of the tree trunk, leading to slow decline and death. Western Australian settlers used this practice widely to clear land for pasture [45]. The dead wandoo appears to long for its afterlife, “As if she begged a rendezvous/With dead friends in the sky” ([37], p. 29, ll. 7–8).

The third and fourth quatrains resume meditation on the weather, clouds, emus, the moon, tiger snakes, dugites, and other lizards, but the volta of the fifth quatrain brings these evocations to a rather abrupt halt: “All I hear now are machine-made sounds./Lost is the life that quickened me./Telephone, paper-clip, convention abounds. Your civilization has sickened me!” ([37], p. 29, ll. 17–20). The flowing open-endedness of commas, semi-colons, colons, and unpunctuated line endings in the first four quatrains is replaced by the definitiveness of the three periods, followed by the exclamation point, of the concluding stanza’s lines. For Davis, the “sickness” of Western technology can be read in the distortion of the soundscape. Indeed, the adverse affects of technology on natural sounds—birds singing, reptiles moving, water soughing, leaves fluttering—has been the subject of numerous studies in environmental acoustics [46]. For Davis, these ecologically-resonate sights, sounds, and memories comprise a heritage endangered by the brash intrusions of modern technology in ancestral places, such as forests.

4. Oodgeroo Noonuccal and the Displacement of Aboriginal Technologies

Born in 1920 on North Stradbroke Island in south-east Queensland, Oodgeroo Noonuccal (or Oodgeroo of the Noonuccal, born Kathleen Ruska and known formerly as Kath Walker) was the first Aboriginal Australian woman to publish a book of poetry, *We Are Going*, and later became a prominent activist, spokesperson, and educator. Her father, Edward Ruska, belonged to the Noonuccal—the indigenous people of Minjerribah (North Stradbroke Island). His campaigning for improved conditions, including increased wages, for local Aboriginal laborers left a strong and enduring impression on his daughter. Often in connection with poet Judith Wright (1915–2000), with whom she shared a long friendship, Noonuccal dedicated herself to land-related rights more overtly than we see in Jack Davis’ principally socio-political activism rooted in Perth. The cross-cultural friendship between Wright and Noonuccal began in 1963, shortly before Wright recommended the publication of Noonuccal’s first poetry collection [47]. Both women benefitted considerably from their association, with Noonuccal fostered in her literary development and Wright gaining personal knowledge of Aboriginal culture that would “challenge her own white-settler privilege [and enable

her] to posit an ecological alternative to what she sees, in more general terms, as a destructively technocratic world” ([48], pp. 93–94).

The appearance of *We Are Going* coincided with the birth of the Aboriginal civil rights movement marked by successions of protests across Australia in the build up to the 1967 referendum ([42], pp. 181–82; [49], p. 61). Although initially receiving a mixed reception by (predominantly non-Aboriginal) literary critics, the book would go on to catalyze the positive perception of Aboriginal cultures by white Australians as it circulated throughout literary and activist networks, especially those connected to union movements ([49], p. 64). However, Noonuccal’s activism predated this patently political era in Australian history. In the 1940s, she embraced the Communist Party for its rejection of the “White Australia” policies that privileged immigrants from English-speaking countries (and white Australian society more broadly) and encoded racist attitudes to others, not only Aboriginal people ([50], p. 148). Although she ran unsuccessfully for political office in Queensland in 1969 and 1983, she went on to join the struggle for land rights and protested the 1988 Australian Bicentenary—marking 200 years since the arrival of the First Fleet—by changing her name from the Europeanized Kath Walker to her ancestral appellation, Oodgeroo Noonuccal ([50], p. 149). She also was a founding member of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) and served as an Executive Member of the Queensland chapter of the Aboriginal Advancement League, established in 1957 and the oldest organization of its kind in Australia ([47], p. 5). In her later years, Noonuccal devoted herself less to direct political engagements and, instead, returned to her country—Minjerribah—to dedicate time to the development of environmental and cultural education programs while also touring internationally as a writer and spokesperson.

As a core feature of her later activism in the 1970s, Noonuccal founded the Noonuccal-Nughie Education and Cultural Centre at Moongalba (meaning “sitting down place” in the local Aboriginal language) on North Stradbroke Island. Wright describes Moongalba as a refuge within modern Australian techno-industrial society, “away from the hostile and critical eyes of white people, in a place Aborigines can feel is their own. The far-off lights of Brisbane are muted by the trees, and people can be themselves” ([51], p. 7). Focusing on coastal Queensland, Wright and Noonuccal held in common a concern for environmental protection and the respectful, judicious use of natural resources. Moongalba came to epitomize these concerns as well as Wright and Noonuccal’s endorsement of a form of “pragmatic idealism” marked by the dedication to enlisting public engagement in achieving conservation aims ([48], p. 88). Noonuccal’s charisma—her rare constellation of leadership, educational focus, and “performative” ability [52]—contributed significantly to their shared vision. Moongalba concretized their ecocultural “idealism” by providing a place for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences alike to experience culture and nature directly, outside of the urbanized strictures of the metropole.

After the success of *We Are Going*, Noonuccal produced several other poetry collections, including *The Dawn is at Hand* (1992) [53] and *My People* (2008) [54]—both originally published in 1970—as well the illustrated children’s books *Stradbroke Dreamtime* (1972) [55], *The Rainbow Serpent* (1988) [56], and others. Her later work, corresponding to her return to Minjerribah, consists principally of prose about her country and its cultural stories ([57], p. 92). Literary critics have argued that Noonuccal’s early poetic style capitalizes on the “ironic resources of elegy” in subverting “white assumptions of Aboriginal confusion and defeatism” ([48], p. 94). Devised and delivered as

performance with traditional oral underpinnings, her poetry embodies what Huggan and Tiffin term “*counter-mimicry* [italics in original]” or “an ironic version, which is also an inversion, of the white ventriloquism of Aboriginal loss” ([48], p. 95). The performativity of Noonuccal’s verse sets the pastoral elegy convention in juxtaposition to Aboriginal Australian orality, consequently exposing the cultural impacts of Anglo-European colonization. As Brewster observes, “storytelling and song are oral modes and traces of orality inform the different genres Noonuccal used” ([57], p. 93). The tension between traditions (Aboriginal and settler, oral and written, elegiac pastoral and ironic counter-defeatist) plays out in the eponymous poem “We Are Going” in which “Notice of estate agent reads: ‘Rubbish May Be Tipped Here’./Now it half covers the traces of the old bora ring./They sit and are confused, they cannot say their thoughts:/‘We are strangers here now, but the white tribe are the strangers’” ([47], p. 25, ll. 6–9).

In the same way, the poem “Aboriginal Charter of Rights” from *We Are Going*, for Anne Brewster, constitutes an “energetic and rousing manifesto whose iambic tetrameter invokes the marching rhythm of protest rallies” ([57], p. 94). However, Noonuccal’s general shunning of linguistic experimentation in favor of traditional rhyme patterns, simple line structures, and accessible diction (often incorporating bureaucratic terminology) facilitates rapport between poet and audience. In this light, the critic Mudrooroo proposes the term *poetemics*—hybridizing poetry and polemics—to underscore that message (over traditional aesthetic concerns) is essential to appreciating her work [58]. For Mudrooroo, the broad characterization of Noonuccal’s early writing as “protest poetry” neglects the centrality of her imperative to convey political, cultural, and environmental meaning: “In such verse there may be a deliberate repudiation of aesthetic concerns in order to produce an alienation effect” ([58], p. 58). I argue that, because a dimension of this “alienation effect” is the dispossession of Aboriginal people from country, an ecocritical framework can offer insight into the environmental discourses surrounding Noonuccal’s poetry. In particular, the depiction of spiritual bonds to country in poetry constitutes a riposte to the techno-industrial paradigm that disrupts cultural relations to land and impinges upon long-standing “lo-technological” paradigms.

The melodic poem “No More Boomerang” from *The Dawn is at Hand* enunciates these kinds of ecocultural themes and sharply critiques (while also ventriloquizing) the marginalization of Aboriginal technologies by their modern analogues ([59], pp. 162, 165–66). Noonuccal pits numerous technologies (boomerangs, spears, firesticks, message sticks, *gunya* or a kind of shelter, *woomera* or a spear thrower, *waddy* or a hunting club) against their mechanized and culturally catastrophic equivalents (electricity, bungalows, television, cinema, atomic energy, and the infrastructure of Western settler society more broadly). The poem comprises thirteen quatrains, each based on an ABCB rhyme scheme with short lines of four to six syllables. Like Davis, Noonuccal implements anaphoric repetition for dramatic impact. While the singsong tenor of the poem belies an undercurrent of pathos, we are left wondering if Noonuccal’s counter-mimicry, in fact, seeks to affirm the endurance of Aboriginal technologies and the eventual self-destruction of their environmentally dubious substitutes. The first two quatrains read, “No more boomerang/No more spear;/Now all civilized—/Colour bar and beer./No more corroboree,/Gay dance and din./Now we got movies,/And pay to go in” ([53], p. 54, ll. 1–8). Here, passive consumption of Western goods (beer, television, movies) displaces active engagement with cultural technologies and practices (boomerangs, spears, corroborees). Monetized structures

implicated with industrial capitalism supersede social systems based on forms of exchange—whether convivial or otherwise.

The poem continues with “No more firesticks/That made the whites scoff./Now all electric,/And no better off” ([53], p. 54, ll. 29–32). Noonuccal alludes to firestick burning and firestick farming, terms devised in the 1960s by the archaeologist Rhys Jones to account for the active management of ecosystems by Aboriginal communities through burning intended to encourage more desirable species of flora and fauna [60]. More recent ethnoecological studies call into question the actual extent of environmental impacts triggered by Aboriginal fire regimes, challenging the idea that intensive burning precipitated the decline of late Pleistocene fauna around 11,000 years ago [61]. In contrast, the system of patch-mosaic firing (local-scale, temporally distributed burns), in conjunction with small-game hunting, appears to have fostered the maintenance of biodiversity over time. Despite the purposefulness of the practice, some commentators during the colonial history of Australia regarded firestick practices as indiscriminate and disorganized. For instance, in the 1790s, the naturalist Archibald Menzies “scoffs” (to re-invoke Noonuccal’s verb) in his journal about the “busy capricious disposition of the natives who are fond of kindling frequent fires round their huts”, as quoted in Hallam’s study ([25], p. 17). Additionally in this quatrain, Noonuccal underscores an issue of environmental and social justice. The electrical systems (for heating, lighting, cooking, *etc.*) that have largely supplanted the firestick have not been distributed equitably. Astonishingly, access to adequate water, sewerage, and electricity services remains a concern for some indigenous communities in the twenty-first century, despite the considerable national revenue derived from country through the resources sector ([62], p. 13).

“No More Boomerang” concludes with the following quatrain: “Lay down the woomera,/Lay down the waddy./Now we got atom-bomb,/End *everybody* (italics in original)” ([53], p. 56, ll. 49–52). The performative use of the verb *got* involves a semantic nuance in which the possession of technology (*i.e.*, nuclear energy) is coterminous with the usurpation of freedom, the jeopardization of health, and the potential disintegration of the future for humans and country. This accretion (and acceleration) of meaning at the poem’s end is evident graphically in the italicization of *every* in the final line. In other words, “got atom-bomb” connotes authoritative control over all Australians’ lives through modern fear-inducing technological behemoths, such as nuclear armaments. Noonuccal’s perception of nuclear technology as perilous and unruly subtly inverts (and mocks) the opinions of Menzies and others who considered burning practices as lacking rational application or, worse yet, who altogether denied Aboriginal people as bearers of technology in the first place. Mudrooroo notes the absence of similes, metaphors, and other Western poetic conventions in “No More Boomerang”. Instead, “the poem proceeds by invoking oppositions between the old ways of life the Aboriginal people and the newly-arrived civilised ways [...] her style is proverbial, or aphoristic instead of image-based” ([58], p. 61).

The elegiac “Then and Now” from *We Are Going* is another instance of Noonuccal’s thematization of displaced Aboriginal technologies and practices. Consisting of three stanzas but eschewing a predictable rhyme scheme, the poem has a more overtly urban setting than “No More Boomerang”. The opening stanza establishes an opposition between the cultural reverie of the poet-flâneur and the alienation induced by “rushing car,/By grinding tram and hissing train” ([47], p. 18, ll. 3–4). The modifier *teeming*, used to characterize the urban environs, is deliberately ambiguous and contradictory. While the Aboriginal poet experiences isolation, the place teems—but with what?

Mechanical sounds? The progeny of colonizers? Dreams that adumbrate country that once was? The unsettling relationship between Dreaming/dreaming and the urban edifice intensifies in the second stanza. “I have seen corroborree/Where that factory belches smoke;/Here where they have memorial park/One time lubras dug for yams” ([47], p. 18, ll. 7–10). In her use of *lubra*, an Aboriginal term appropriated by imperialist society to denigrate Aboriginal woman, Noonuccal restores language to its original meaning by purging the negative colonialist connotations of the term.

It is well-known that women traditionally gathered “yams”—a variety of plants with starchy underground tubers—as an indispensable economic complement to hunting large game ([30], p. 106). In reference to Western Australia, Sylvia Hallam argues that “gathering yams (*Dioscorea*) was anything but a random process, whether in northern Australia or further south; it was certainly not a matter of digging out a root here and there, but of regularly returning to extensively used tracts” ([25], p. 12). For Noonuccal, the harvesting of yams constitutes an economy and technology displaced by “Offices now, neon lights now,/Bank and shop and advertisement now,/Traffic and trade of the busy town” ([47], p. 18, ll. 15–17). The third stanza begins with an unusual instance of anaphoric intertextuality in the line “No more woomera, no more boomerang” ([47], p. 18, l. 18), mirroring the poem “No More Boomerang”, discussed previously in this section. Furthermore, the “clocks hurrying crowds to toil” ([47], p. 18, l. 21) stand in for the disjunction between Aboriginal and Western temporalities. Rather than a linear phenomenon progressing from past to present to future and measured by a mechanical instrument, time is a circular pattern reflecting the rhythms of country and community [63].

5. Lionel Fogarty’s Anti-Pastoral Realism

Born in 1958, poet and activist Lionel Fogarty is of Murri ancestry—the Aboriginal group whose country roughly encompasses present-day Queensland. His grandfather, Roy Fogarty, was of the Yoogum Yoogum tribe of the Beaudesert area on the Queensland and New South Wales border [64]. He also traces his heritage to the Kujjela and Wakka Wakka tribes of the Murri. Fogarty grew up at Barambah Mission, now Cherbourg Aboriginal Reserve, about 150 miles north of Brisbane in Queensland. Established in 1901 and coming under government management by 1905, Barambah originated in the Queensland *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* of 1897, which aimed to improve living conditions for Aboriginal people through the creation of reserves [65]. However, the strictly controlled “apartheid system” of the mission drove Fogarty to seek refuge in the local environment and through cultural and family relations: “The only thing on my mind was to run away and go down the bush, go fishing or hunting, just get away completely” [66]. Early experiences of sanctuary in the bush around Barambah provoked his development of a distinctive poetic style and subject matter, which also draw from the orality of Murri culture: “Stories that were told around the fire or stories that were told when I used to go hunting with my grandfathers and grandmothers and aunties and uncles, these were of significance to me” [66]. In this interview with Australian literary critic Philip Mead, Fogarty continues, “my poetry was going down to the township of Mergon and in the park areas there or in the outskirts of Mergon, or even in Cherbourg, just sitting down with young folks as well as old folks and just listening to their gossip, rumours, yarns, storytelling—that was poetry to me” [66].

Fogarty's verse is notable for hybridizing the orality of song traditions and the configurations of literary modernism, thereby enlarging the boundaries of Australian poetry and the English language ([6], p. 90; [67], p. 191). In extensively injecting Aboriginal dialects and vernacular, his poetry disrupts standard English and deviates markedly from Davis and Noonuccal's use of "correct English accessible to everyone to tell of the genocidal destruction which has befallen the Aboriginal people" ([68], p. 47). Colin Johnson (later known as Mudrooroo) extols Fogarty's poetry as "seizing the language of the invader and turning it into an anti-language of experience" that defies accepted grammatical structures and meanings ([68], p. 49). The flattened rhythms, abrupt transitions, and linguistic density of Fogarty's verse align him, in a Western context, with experimental and modernist poetics and, to some extent, with the avant garde Language poets of the late 1960s and 1970s in the United States. However, like Davis and Noonuccal before him, Fogarty is very much a poet-activist, speaking on behalf of Aboriginal people and resisting the language of colonization while translating oral traditions to the written medium. Poet and critic John Kinsella observes that Fogarty "has effectively managed to confront the persistent attacks by imperialist language, and (still) colonial culture/s, on his people's voice, by preserving its identity" ([67], p. 191).

While Fogarty's activism, indigeneity, and poetics are undoubtedly essential to his standing as one of the leading Aboriginal writers today, this article investigates the environmental dimensions of his poetry and, in particular, his dramatization of anthropogenic ecological change induced by technological mechanisms and impacts. "Weather Comes" from *New and Selected Poems* develops an apocalyptic view of ecosystemic collapse where once-familiar country turns alien. With no stanza structure, minimal punctuation, and deliberate grammatical inversions (including run-on sentences), the elegiac poem depicts ecological loss as a chain of assaults on the senses and on nonhuman life. In the first two lines of the following quotation, Fogarty employs the dramatic technique known as epistrophe, involving repetitions of phrases at the ends of lines: "Trees grow old no more/Fruits grow wilder no more/Raw uncleaned smelling/air goes in the plants soils" ([69], p. 38, ll. 11–14). In the manner of the "anti-pastoral", as critic Terry Gifford understands it, ([70], pp. 116–45), Fogarty narrates the life of an abused and fragmented landscape no longer supporting the essential physiological processes of flora and fauna. Symbiotic interrelation between people and plants is inferred through the smell of noxious air and its permeation of both skin and soil. The perverse registers of the anti-pastoral setting persist as "Ochres shows colours unseen./Sand dirt mud soot all look/different, touch different,/smell funny./We can't hardly believe this/was once our dreamtime home" ([69], p. 38, ll. 15–20). Resonant of the alienation of Noonuccal's "Then and Now", the poem communicates the trauma of sensory disorientation for Aboriginal people, in which the very materiality of earth becomes strange, "unseen", and "funny". In short, home becomes *unheimlich*—unhomely and uncanny—to borrow Freud's terminology, an effect considered at length in Ken Gelder and Jane Margaret Jacobs' *Uncanny Australia* in relation to traditional Aboriginal views of sacredness and the emergence of postcolonial identities in Australia [71].

Not only is the ground underfoot rendered unfamiliar in the poem, so too is the sky overhead: "The sky turns strangler and/clouds hide behind smoked/pollutions" ([69], p. 38, ll. 21–23). For Aboriginal societies, stories of the sky and knowledge of astronomy are culturally salient; and many creation beings have some affinity with the heavens [72]. It comes as no surprise, then, that the turning of the sky to strangler has far-reaching metaphysical consequences in which the life-giving firmament

mutates into a death-dealing monster. As the poem progresses, the escalating effects of pollution come to disrupt the seasonal rhythms of country, the terrene basis of subsistence livelihoods: “Our respects for seasons for/hunting and gathering is/untogether mixed up” ([69], p. 38, ll. 32–34). By the poem’s end, ecosystemic decline through the polluting impacts of technology is a febrile condition that penetrates human bodies and the earth body similarly: “Feelings of/heat rushes sweat all over bodies/hurting/Feelings of cold shivers blood/veins frozen./The weather is changed” ([69], p. 38, ll. 34–39). Interestingly, rather than the line structure “the weather has changed”, Fogarty’s passive declarative “the weather is changed” implies the strong hand of late modernist technological infrastructure in the perturbation of ecology and country. In voicing the impacts of pollution on the homelands of Aboriginal people, Fogarty constructs the industrialized landscape as a dystopian nightmare. At the same time, he invites readers to consider the particular effects of climate change on Indigenous people worldwide who depend on their environments for physical, cultural, and spiritual needs [73].

“Ringbarking—The Contract Killers” from *Kargun* (1980) [69] is evocative of Davis’ “Forest Giant”, discussed previously in this article, both poems using direct address to a tree for narrative function and ethical inflection. Embodying an animist understanding of vegetal life, the tree is percipient and performative—“this singing tree”—and moreover has the capacity to engage in verbal intercourse with humans. The poem constitutes a dialogue between poet and tree, as both consider the carrying out of ringbarking by an underpaid Aboriginal worker: “The Murri shot some poison/from his back pack he carried/to slowly kill a plant/around the Sister Tree” ([69], p. 138, ll. 13–16). Although itself spared from direct poisoning, the sentient tree reproaches the Murri worker (presumably Fogarty himself, who was briefly employed as a ringbarker) for targeting its relatives and communicates an ecological lesson to the naive human speaker: ““That’s where you’re wrong/for if you kill me, or the grass/the pain is the same”” ([69], p. 138, ll. 31–33). Here, the pain is held in common between forms of vegetal life, regardless of the human categorizations that posit some as weeds to eradicate and others as kin to preserve. The worker goes on to explain his precarious social (and financial) status to the tree, as an Aboriginal person trying to make a living for his family. He declares to the tree that “we are both in the same position./Lined up for POISONING” ([69], p. 138, ll. 46–47), aligning the fate and well-being of Aboriginal society to the natural world, to country. The poem resolves epiphanously with the narrator rejecting the modern implements of the forest industry and insensitive approaches (“I will not cut you again/except to give you strength”) in favor of Aboriginal practices that used technology with care and required listening to the nonhuman world before inescapably causing pain ([69], p. 138, ll. 55–56).

6. Conclusions: Environments and Technologies in Aboriginal Poetry

In addition to concretizing themes of indigeneity, activism, and community in Aboriginal Australia, these poetic excerpts from Fogarty, Noonuccal, and Davis also foreground the collision between traditional and modern technologies. Whereas traditional “lo-technological” manifestations (for example, as related to land management, food procurement, and housing construction) largely support continuity and well-being, modern ones—applied without due restraint or proper consideration—tend to result in disintegration of both culture and country. Additionally, in their poetry, technology is not homogenous

but has manifested in different ways through time, in various environments, and with myriad societal consequences. Re-invoking Don Ihde's contention, technology is culturally dependent and always brings about the modification of an environment as a resource base. Nevertheless, it is important to conceptualize technology as a plurality and a continuum spanning pre-industrial societies and hypermodern contexts alike. Their poetry reminds us of this, while affirming that the transformation of country through the technology of the colonizers and its associated effects is a serious concern shared by Aboriginal people today.

What can Aboriginal poetry—as opposed to fiction and other forms of creative writing—enable in relation to technologically-induced change and environmental degradation? The work of Fogarty, Noonuccal, and Davis is characterized by the hybridization of Western and Indigenous traditions—of print-based typography and the orality of song poetry. The personal, focused, and often condensed style of the contemporary Aboriginal lyric becomes a potent vessel for conveying ecological concerns and for public recitation. Indeed, many poet-activists, such as Noonuccal, read their poetry publicly in order to animate their audiences' spirits, lift their hearts, and inform their minds about the issues facing Aboriginal people in Australia today. Despite their obvious stylistic differences—Davis' elegy, Oodgeroo's irony, and Fogarty's radicalism—the three writers employ poetry as a mechanism to express their concern for country. In adopting poetry for this purpose, the writers also bring ancient culture and contemporary context persuasively to the fore.

In concluding, this article does not mean to suggest that Fogarty, Noonuccal, and Davis reject Western technology altogether and, instead, embrace a version of neo-Luddism or an isolationist pre-modern idyllism. In fact, writers like Fogarty have acknowledged their indebtedness to Western forms of writing and technology, including the Internet, for making possible the hybridic literary positions they occupy [6]. Their common position, as this article has shown, is more nuanced than mere technology-hating or technology-bashing. To the contrary, the three poets endeavor to coalesce critical attention around the particular impacts of late modernist technologies on Aboriginal people and country in Australia. Such impacts might not register in the minds, hearts, and bodies of Anglo-European individuals exerting a utilitarianist framework on the natural world—for whom a tree is not a sentient being but a resource to be managed or exploited, or an imposition to be cleared. Such impacts might also not register for settler society that lacks the temporally deep ancestral bonds to country found in Indigenous cultures. In addition to its socio-political aspects, their poetry is an invitation to reconsider old—and courageously imagine new—forms of technology with fewer deleterious and heart-breaking consequences for country and culture. Their poetry brings into focus the Aboriginal technologies that sustained (and, in places, still sustain) people in reciprocal relation to country, for past millennia and for many more years to come [74]. Thinking critically about technologies and their complex relationships to culture and country, as these poems enable us to do, is key both to the contemporary sustainability movement and to ecocritical thinking today.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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