



# Lived experiences of environmental change: Solastalgia, power and place

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of *solastalgia* has been developed by environmental philosopher Albrecht to understand the psychological trauma, also referred to as place-based distress, experienced because of environmental change. In this article, we explore ways to further this concept. The article draws on ethnographic fieldwork in a village in the mid-western region of New South Wales (NSW), Australia, which is surrounded by three large open-cut coal mines. Over the past decade, the mines, in particular the Peabody-owned Wilpinjong mine closest to the village, have had a significant impact on biophysical, social and temporal landscapes in the area. We argue that whilst solastalgia may help explore the relationship between the environmental and human distress triggered in these circumstances, the sense of displacement and loss that emerge are entangled with questions of power and dispossession beyond the biophysical realm. Underpinned by a phenomenological framework of analysis, we contend that place-based distress should be understood as an ontological trauma, as the fabrics of place, belonging and the social relations embedded within disrupt the ongoing sense of being associated with home. These include the means to not only link to the past, but also to imagine the future.

## 1. Introduction

The landscape of the Hunter Valley in New South Wales (NSW), Australia, is marked by modernization and technology. Bushland has been cleared, towns built, roads constructed. These imprints of modernity are not dissimilar to those of settled landscapes throughout the world. In contrast to other modern landscapes, however, the Hunter Valley is also marked by large open cuts, infrastructure and machinery that serve as distinct reminders of the dependence on natural resources for modern lives to be sustained. More than 64 per cent of the Upper Hunter Valley is dedicated to coal mining (Connor 2016: 104)—either through past extractive practice, current mining operations or exploration licenses. At present, there are 42 operating open-cut and 15 underground mines in the area, which extract more than 200 million tons of coal per annum (mtpa) (Connor, 2016: 104). The Hunter Valley coal is used for local power generation, though most is transported by train to the world's largest coal port, Newcastle, and shipped to sea-borne destinations, including Japan, the Republic of Korea, China and Taiwan.

Coal mining is central to the Hunter Valley and it has a long history in the region. For over 100 years, mining has coexisted with other land uses. The mines have often been seen as a positive part of the community, providing work, supporting local businesses and developing

regional areas. Up until the 1970s, underground coal mining was the norm and, although it produced problems of subsidence and long-term consequences of climate change and pollution, it had largely a low visual impact compared to contemporary mining operations in the area. The intensification of coal mining and the move to open-cut technology did, however, change the narrative of coal and, as the destruction of open-cut coal mining and anthropogenic climate change have become increasingly visible, more questions are raised (Connor, 2016: 117–123). Within local communities at the coalface, there is growing skepticism towards mining as the pinnacle for future prosperity and growing concerns over the costs of large-scale open-cut mines. Facing the direct threat to livelihoods, resistance has been mobilized and new allegiances made (Askland et al., 2016; Colvin et al., 2015; Shervell et al., 2017). Individuals and collectives are becoming more vocal about the negative impacts of mining and the destruction that they witness, often advocating more rigorous, theoretically driven analysis of social impact and the adoption of theoretical concepts, such as *solastalgia* (Albrecht, 2005), to understand place-based distress.

In this article, we discuss the notion of solastalgia and place-based distress as it is articulated by residents in the small village of Wollar situated in the Western Coalfields of NSW. As a concept, solastalgia has been well received in the literature, most notably in research on mental health and place/environment. Little effort has, however, been made to

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bring the concept further into anthropological literature on the topic of environmental distress. It is the intention here to engage critically with the concept, and to develop the notion further for a greater understanding of the phenomenological basis of place-based distress.

The article is based on ongoing ethnographic research with current and former residents of Wollar.<sup>1</sup> The fieldwork was initiated in April 2015, shortly after the local residents had been notified about an application for expansion of the mine closes to the village. Fieldwork has been ongoing for the past two years, with the chief investigator (Askland) regularly visiting the village and its surrounds. The project is a qualitative ethnographic field study, which is based on participant observation in the village and surrounding area. It combines the traditional anthropological “village approach” with multi-sited anthropological research, using participant observation, semi-structured interviews and textual analysis across a wide variety of contexts. To date, 20 current and former residents have participated in semi-structured interviews lasting between 1.5 and 3 hours, with additional information obtained through observation, written submissions and statements, informal conversations and everyday engagement. In the first section of the article, we provide an outline of the ethnographic field, the village of Wollar. The disruption and distress embedded in this narrative will subsequently be explored through an analysis of, first, the concept of solastalgia, and, second, the notions of place, home and ontological anxiety.

### 1.1. The sleeping village

Wollar is a historic village that borders the Goulburn River National Park, approximately 54 km northeast of the regional centre, Mudgee. 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. It is assumed that Wollar was not part of an official exploration but rather became settled by gradual penetration of pastoralists and their workers (Wollar Centenary Publications Committee, 1985). Prior to white settlement, the area was home to the Wiradjuri people, and many sacred sites and artefacts remain in the area (for further information about the Wiradjuri, see for example: Macdonald, 1998; Read, 1983, 1984).

Wollar as a village grew up around a handful of families who settled in the area. In contrast to the fertile agricultural areas of the Liverpool Plains and the nearby Bylong Valley, land in Wollar is characterised as marginal and, besides sustenance agriculture, productive activity has focussed on cattle. The social and economic character of Wollar is distinguished from the more fertile productive areas to the north, which are characterised by large, broadacre farms. From the mid-1970s, some of the large landholdings (20,000ac) in the area were subdivided into smaller “lifestyle” blocks (25ac). Subsistence lots at affordable prices in a remote and secluded area attracted so-called “treechangers” (Connell and McManus, 2016) and hippies seeking an escape from the pressures of city life and an alternative lifestyle. Young families settled in the area and the community grew. By the 1980s, there were between 300 and 400 people living in or around the village, with 30 pupils and two permanent teachers at the local school. Most of the people made money by small to medium sized agricultural businesses, were living on a pension, or formed part of the local rural economy, with some travelling to Mudgee for work. The community—referred to by locals as those

who live(d) in the area and form(ed) part of the rural fabric and village economy—is spoken about in nostalgic terms as a close-knit rural community with the local store being the centre of social activity, cricket games and bush dances.

The narrative of the village has changed over the past ten years from one focusing on agriculture and alternative lifestyles, to one marked by the presence of multinational extractive industries and open-cut coal mining. Wollar is today surrounded by three open-cut coalmines: Ulan (Glencore), Moolarben (Yancoal) and Wilpinjong (Peabody Energy). The latter, operated by Peabody Energy—the world’s largest privately-owned coal company—was approved on 1 February 2006. It obtained a 21-year operation license, from 2006 to 2027, and was given approval to extract 9.5mtpa. In contrast to many other mines in the Hunter Valley, which produce coal for overseas markets, the primary purpose of the Wilpinjong mine was to supply domestic coal to Bayswater Power Station in the Upper Hunter. The mine today also produces high quality thermal coal for export (approximately 75% raw domestic thermal coal and 25% washed export thermal coal).

The Wilpinjong Mine sits on what used to be small holdings where Wollarians lived and worked. These small blocks were the first to be purchased by Excel Coal; the company that obtained the exploration license for the area in 2003. After purchasing the mine from Excel in 2006, Peabody started acquiring properties to establish a noise and buffer zone between private land and the mining operations. The company today owns more than 90% of the area surrounding the mine (Peabody Energy, 2012: 42). This aggressive purchasing of private property and agricultural land have led to a gradual decline of the population, and less than 10% of the pre-Wilpinjong population remain in the area. The decline has meant a gradual loss of services, the churches have been closed, and the fire brigade has been amalgamated with Cooks Gap Fire Brigade, which is located 50 km away. Moreover, as the community has become dispersed, it has become more difficult and expensive to live, operate and maintain farms. Prior to the arrival of the mine, a shared economy existed by which veterinary and mechanical expenses would be shared and practical assistance could be sought from neighbours and others in the village. There used to be a veterinary clinic once a month and a ‘one-stop-shop’ offering mechanic repairs, driveway services, bottle shop, general mixed business, hardware, stock feeds, garden requirements, veterinary products and fencing material. Now, if locals need equipment or repairs, or if animals need to be checked, they have to travel to Mudgee, or if large animals are sick or heavy machinery needs repair, they have to cover all costs out of pocket, including veterinary and mechanic travel fees.

Since it was first opened, Peabody has had six modification applications and one new extension application approved. This includes applications for: increased blasts to two per day (2007); increased production up to 12mtpa (2010) and 12.5mtpa (2012) with subsequent increased train activity (2012); increased size of the mine (2014); and increased extraction rate to 16mtpa Run-of-Mine (RoM) coal and expansion of mine (2014). Each modification has placed increased pressures on the people in Wollar, with more machinery, increased noise, dust and vibration. In addition, the company lodged yet another application for further exploration in late 2017, with environmental and social impact assessments yet to be conducted at the time of writing.

In contrast to the modification and the exploration license applications, the latest expansion application, approved by the State Government in April 2017, has been particularly concerning for the people who remain in the area. The proposal is for incremental expansion of the existing open cut pits over approximately 500 ha, as well as the development of a new 300 ha in the valley closest to the village. Wilpinjong Extension Project will expand the operations at Wilpinjong to 2033, and the mine boundary will be located only 1.5 km from the village itself. The expansion has been described by locals and their supporters, such as local resident Lee and environmental activist Simon, as the “community’s death sentence” (excerpt from fieldnotes, 10 April 2017). Even the proponent and the NSW Department of Planning and

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