



Solastalgia in J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World*:

Living in a Watery Earth No Longer Home ¹

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Abstract

James Graham Ballard (1930-2009) is known for his fictions of environmentally devastated landscapes caused by technological excess and non-ecological attitudes of humankind. In many of his fictional works, which are set in an ecologically disturbed world caused by such environmental disasters as storm, drought and crystallisation, Ballard handles the theme of (ir)reversibly negative physical transformations of the nonhuman environment and their physical and psychological effects on human beings. In his post-/apocalyptic novel *The Drowned World* (1962), which is set mainly in tropical London in the year 2145, Ballard portrays a heavily-flooded world in which rising temperatures have caused sea level rise, leading Earth into a submerged globe. Instead of dealing with the post-/apocalyptic concerns of how humans are destroyed or find a way to escape the catastrophe, Ballard is more interested in the effects of the apocalypse on human body, psyche and emotions as humans develop new relationships in negatively transformed environment. To reveal these effects in the novel, this article focuses on exploring the novel in terms of 'solastalgia', coined by the Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht in 2003. To this end, this study will display psychoterratic and somaterratic conditions of humankind through ecocritical reading of the novel.

Keywords: J. G. Ballard, *The Drowned World*, Solastalgia, Psychoterratic Disorder, Somaterratic Disorder, Ecocriticism

"The global nature of the chronic stressor of detrimental climate change is a novel solastalgic event for all cultures. I hope I am wrong, but solastalgia looks like it is here to stay for a while" (Albrecht, 2019, p. 40).

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Introduction

The influence of human beings' unecological attitude on human and nonhuman worlds becomes more intense as humans become more dominant in nature. Albrecht argued that humans have entered the "age of solastalgia", in which their emotional compass points to chronic distress at the loss of loved lands, places and homes because of anthropogenic "Earth murder" (2019, p. 10-11). Albrecht's solastalgia is about a kind of homesickness somebody feels at home. Home means physical environment – natural or built. The term 'solastalgia' is concerned with the place-based existential distress in physical, psychological and emotional contexts. Such existential distress is caused by environmental crises and climate changes, which affect not only nonhuman beings but also human beings as humans are inherently connected to their home environment. Although the concept of solastalgia has often been handled in social, psychological, medical and sometimes in artistic aspects, it has not much been applied to studies in literature.² Solastalgia can also be explored in literary works for a vivid understanding of the psychological effects of constantly increasing ecological crises on fictional human characters that reflect real-life human beings. With this aim in mind, this article is an attempt to show how the concept of solastalgia could be observed in the human survivors of the flood disaster in Ballard's *The Drowned World*. To this end, psychoterratic and somaterratic³ states of characters in the tropical and submerged London will be revealed through ecocritical reading by examining in the novel how humankind affects the nonhuman world physically and how nonhuman agencies have psychological impacts on human beings. In doing so, this article also aims to reveal that the feeling of homesickness in solastalgic terms creates a new sense of place and identity in the previously familiar yet now unfamiliar watery world in the novel.

Solastalgia: Homesickness at Environmentally Devastated Home

Albrecht coined the term 'solastalgia' as an alternative to 'nostalgia'. Nostalgia was coined by the Swiss trainee medical doctor, Johannes Hofer, in 1688 (Albrecht, 2019, p. 29). Translated into English as 'homesickness', nostalgia is derived from the Greek words 'nostos', which means "return to home or native land" and 'algos', which means "suffering, pain, or sickness" (Albrecht, 2019, p. 30). Nostalgia is associated with melancholia and yearning experienced by those who are away from their home and want to go back as they suffer from homesickness. The word 'nostalgia' in English language from the mid-eighteenth century was mainly about a sense of regret and yearning for periods or places in the past in which an individual was free from anxiety (Albrecht, 2019, p. 30). However, the modern use of the word has lost its relation to the spatial or geographical context, keeping only the temporal dimension that suggests longing for a positively perceived or experienced period in the past. Nostalgia was also considered to be "a serious, medically diagnosable psychosomatic disease, with the potential to cause death in those afflicted" until the middle of the twentieth century (Albrecht, 2006, p. 34). That is, the native people of a certain environment could suffer from mental and physical distress of nostalgia when they are removed from and dispossessed of their land and culture.

² For example, some international medical journals such as *The Lancet* have discussed solastalgia; Jules Pretty wrote his travels to many regions in which the natural world and people are under pressure from development in his travel book *The Edge of Extinction* (2014); a traveling exhibition curated by the Lake Macquarie Art Gallery of New South Wales was called *Life in Your Hands: Art from Solastalgia* (2012); and an Estonian composer, Erkki-Sven Tüür, wrote a concerto named *Solastalgia* in late 2017 (Albrecht, 2019, p. 41, 46).

³ Albrecht explained that the psychoterratic is about the health relationship between the psyche and the biophysical environment (*terra* meaning the Earth), while the somaterratic deals with the health relationship between the body (*soma* meaning the body) and the biophysical environment (2019, p. 64). When ecological links between human and nonhuman worlds are broken, these health relationships are also broken, causing psychoterratic and somaterratic disorder in humans.

While Hofer (1688/1934) expressed that nostalgia is mostly experienced by people who are deliberately or involuntarily displaced from their home environment, Albrecht argued that dispossession could also happen without displacement (Albrecht, 2006, p. 35). According to Albrecht, people who are not displaced of their home can also suffer from place-related distress in the face of drastic environmental transformations. Therefore, indigenous people suffer from a physical and emotional breakdown of a healthy relationship between their psychic/physical identity and their radically transformed home environment. They lose their place identity and sense of solace or comfort that is normally obtained from their ecologically conscious relationship to their healthy environment. That is why solastalgia is “a form of homesickness one experiences when one is still at home”, but at a transformed one (Albrecht, 2006, p. 35).

Albrecht believed that there has not been an appropriate concept or term to describe this experience of environmentally-induced distress in people who are not removed from their home. The negative transformation of a loved and familiar place or a landscape causes negative emotion in indigenous people who are still at home. Suffering from solastalgia, those people still love their place or land, but they want to have positive elements of their place back as those positive elements provide them with a positive place identity and ecological sense of place before the transformation. Albrecht expressed that solastalgia describes the pain and illness engendered by the constant loss of solace from the present condition of one's physical environment in the face of its unwanted transformation (2019, p. 38). Derived from the Latin word ‘solacium’ or ‘solatium’, which means “solace” or “comfort”, and from the Greek word ‘algos’, the concept of solastalgia involves both solace and desolation (Albrecht, 2019, p. 30, 38). According to Albrecht, a person, or a landscape, might give solace, comfort and strength to other people. Solace or comfort is of great significance since people get distressed if they lack solace. People also feel distress if they seek solace, comfort or solitude in a loved and familiar place that is being devastated and that becomes unfamiliar. At this point, such devastation brings desolation, causing isolation and deprivation of solace or comfort (p. 38).

Both natural and artificial factors, such as drought, flood, fire, terrorism, war, mining and land clearing cause solastalgia (Albrecht, 2005, p. 46). Albrecht originally used solastalgia to delineate a condition of chronic distress experienced by survivors of mining and drought in Australia. He came up with the idea during his research on the drought-stricken coal mining communities of the Upper Hunter Valley in New South Wales, Australia. He reached the conclusion that the residents of the valley were not only suffering from survival in their ruined home environment but they were also suffering from a so-far unrecognized psychological condition (Khanna, interview, May 14, 2009). By examining the residents in the Upper Hunter Valley, who were feeling a nostalgic melancholia because of the disruption of their relationship with their home and the subsequent breakdown of emotional and psychic identity, Albrecht provided that there is a direct connection between the loss of ecological balance and physical and mental health of humans. He indicated that people in the Upper Hunter Valley lost the comfort or solace they felt in their pristine home that was now being devastated by forces beyond their control and suffered from place transformation enforced by the mining industry and from helplessness in the face of environmental desolation (Albrecht, 2019, p. 32). He also added that humans who were influenced by the dramatic changes in their environment suffered from “distress, feelings of bereavement, fear of a new disaster” and experienced “flashbacks, nightmares and uncontrollable emotion” (2006, p. 36). Therefore, humans' non-ecological relationship with the planet and their non-sustainable tendencies bring about solastalgia, breaking down the healthy connection between physical and mental health of human beings and the health of the biophysical environment. Albrecht also suggested that the “desire to be organically connected to living landscapes” helps to prevent solastalgia by maintaining one's home environment “in connection with other living things on this Earth” (p. 36). What Albrecht means is that an individual becomes physically and psychologically healthy as long as home

territory is healthy, and an individual becomes physically and psychologically unhealthy when home territory is unhealthy.

Solastalgia in *The Drowned World*

Ballard's *The Drowned World* concordantly depicts extreme climate change and unwanted changes of landscapes and presents how these changes affect people living in near-future London. From this perspective, the novel can be considered as a memorial of human and nonhuman history and a warning for future generations about preservation of nature, showing at the same time the restorative role of literature in re-establishing humans' relationship to their climate, land and nature. The novel, as its title imports, portrays a post-/apocalyptic world in which rising temperatures have led to a flooded tropical Earth, and illustrates the effects of drastic environmental changes on human body and mind. The main character of the novel, Dr. Robert Kerans, is a 40-year-old biologist at a testing station working to survey the changes in his inundated region and to remap the submerged landscape constantly. In the flooded region, Colonel Riggs helps Kerans at the biological testing station and wanders on his patrol boat to pick up anybody still endeavouring to survive in the swamps and tropical jungle. Dr. Alan Bodkin, an assistant, helps Kerans with his work at the testing station, and Bodkin is the one who bravely speaks of the new psychological conditions overwhelming Kerans and other characters. Beatrice Dahl is Kerans' neighbour, who is a beautiful eccentric choosing to stay in London instead of going to the Camp Byrd in Northern Greenland for a safer life. Within this framework, the crux of this article lies in psychological and emotional turmoils of Kerans in the flooded world.

The novel begins with the portrayal of the transformed home environment to highlight the loss of ecological balance and to delineate reversion of flora, fauna, landscape and human psychology towards the Triassic period, with such references as "60-feet-high plants" and "a giant reptile indistinguishable from the Pelycosaur" (Ballard, 2010, p. 8), "a giant Anopheles mosquito, the size of a dragon-fly", "the somber green-black fronds of the gymnosperms, intruders from the Triassic past" and "a giant water spider" (p. 10), "colonies of wolf spiders", "terrifying jungles of the Paleocene" and gigantic iguanas and basilisks (p. 19), "[i]mpenetrable Matto Grossos" (p. 20), "freak botanical forms like from the Carboniferous period" (p. 23), and "orange-sized berries" (p. 25). The novel tells in a scientific discourse how extraordinary solar storms have destroyed the Van Allen Belts and allowed extreme solar radiation to raise Earth's temperature over a period of approximately seventy years, how higher levels of radioactivity have led to mutations of life forms, and how the overheat has melted the ice-caps leading to the rise of global water levels and has created land of lagoons all over the world. As a result, human beings all around the world have been forced to move to the Camp Byrd in Northern Greenland where life is more tolerable and safer, which have ultimately led to overpopulation in the region.

Rather than dealing with the post-/apocalyptic concerns of how humankind is destroyed or finds a way to escape the catastrophe, the novel depicts the effects of the disaster on physical, mental and emotional health of humans as Kerans, along with remaining survivors, develop new relationships in an ecologically imbalanced environment. Presenting a solastalgic response to climate change, the novel describes an emplaced, chronic and painful emotion of humans who are mostly referred as "psychopaths", and who suffer from "malnutrition and radiation sickness" and "manic-depressive personality" in the face of the flood disaster (Ballard, 2010, p. 12, 126). Such place-based existential distress creates a life-changing psychological shift, a change of mental landscape and loss of social interactions. Sense of place and identity is a central theme in the exploration of the novel in aspects of mental health risks of individuals and communities caused by the lagoons. Losses, fears, dreams and nightmares in this drowned world drain sense of place, identity and well-being of Kerans and other remaining survivors.

Loss of vital human relationships to biophysical environment results in feelings of grief, depression, anxiety, alienation, trauma, and homesickness without leaving one's familiar home territory. So Kerans and other survivors suffer from chronic distress of solastalgia as they have lost nature, their loved places, and their spiritual ecology by living within the limits of lagoons and of existing forms of life.

Staying in a penthouse suite at the Ritz, "in splendid isolation on the west shore", which relishes "the subtle atmosphere of melancholy that surrounded these last vestiges of a level of civilisation now virtually vanished forever" (Ballard, 2010, p. 9-10), Kerans is the one who is the most conscious of the fact that negative changes in the biophysical environment impinge upon the physical and mental health of its human and nonhuman inhabitants:

This growing isolation and self-containment, exhibited by the other members of the unit and from which only the buoyant Riggs seemed immune, reminded Kerans of the slackening metabolism and biological withdrawal of all animal forms about to undergo a major metamorphosis. Sometimes he wondered what zone of transit he himself was entering, sure that his own withdrawal was symptomatic not of a dormant schizophrenia, but of a careful preparation for a radically new environment, with its own internal landscape and logic, where old categories of thought would merely be an encumbrance. (Ballard, 2010, p. 14)

Although Kerans appears to have been adapted to climate change by residing in a penthouse suite at the Ritz Hotel with sunproof curtains, heavy sunglasses, air-conditioning and a well-stocked bar, and by keeping his social relations with Colonel Riggs, Dr. Bodkin and Beatrice as if living his usual days, he is also acutely aware of his beard having "been turned white by the radio-fluorine in the water", of his "bleached crew-cut hair and deep amber tan", of his "chronic lack of appetite, and the new malarial" that have "shrunk the dry leathery skin under his cheekbones", of growing impact of his dreams of a supreme and primeval sun, and of his desire to get away from the community so as to yield to his changing inner world, which are all symptoms of somaterratic and psychoterratic disorder (Ballard, 2010, p. 11). Kerans's dreams throughout the novel are psychoterratic syndromes as they reveal "archaeopsychic" past of humankind, which has been activated by the return to the Triassic period because of environmental and climate changes. Archaeopsychic memories remind Kerans of prehuman existence derived from the cellular genetic pattern of a time before the mechanisation took control:

These are the oldest memories on Earth, the time-codes carried in every chromosome and gene. [...] Just as psychoanalysis reconstructs the original traumatic situation in order to release the repressed material, so we are now being plunged back into the archaeopsychic past, uncovering the ancient taboos and drives that have been dormant for epochs. The brief span of an individual life is misleading. Each one of us is as old as the entire biological kingdom, and our bloodstreams are tributaries of the great sea of its total memory. The uterine odyssey of the growing fetus recapitulates the entire evolutionary past, and its central nervous system is coded time scale, each nexus of neurons and each spinal level marking a symbolic station, a unit of neuron time. (Ballard, 2010, p. 47)

This quotation suggests that Kerans and all the survivors have no control over their outer or inner worlds in the face of ecological crises. Humans that destroy their own home environment are destroyed by natural calamities in return, struggling against their psyche in order to overcome the psychological impulse of loss as a result. Kerans's psyche attempts to adapt for survival by remembering the archaeopsychic past and thus by reverting to its primitive order:

Is it only the external landscape which is altering? How often recently most of us have had the feeling of déjà vu, of having seen all this before, in fact of remembering these swamps and lagoons all too well. [...] Everywhere in nature one sees evidence of innate releasing mechanisms literally millions of years old, which have lain dormant through thousands of generations but retained their power undiminished. [...] we all carry within us a submerged memory [...] (Ballard, 2010, p. 46-47)

However, this adaptation process gradually degenerates Kerans's identity even though he establishes a new sense of unity and reorients his personality in the transformed and desolated world.

Robert Macfarlane stated that “[s]olastalgia speaks of a modern uncanny, in which a familiar place is rendered unrecognizable by climate change or corporate action: the home becomes suddenly unhomely around its inhabitants” (2016, para. 3). The more unrecognizable a familiar place becomes as “buried phantoms”, the more hostile and unhomely it becomes to its survivors (Ballard, 2010, p. 48). Confused about reality and dream because of the hostility of his home, Kerans acts on what his archaeopsychic self demands while his inner self leads the way towards suicide:

Just as the distinction between the latent and manifest contents of the dream had ceased to be valid, so had any division between the real and the super-real in the external world. Phantoms slid imperceptibly from nightmare to reality and back again, the terrestrial and psychic landscapes were now indistinguishable, as they had been at Hiroshima and Auschwitz, Golgotha and Comorrah. (Ballard, 2010, p. 80)

As suggested at the very beginning of the article, the novel features solastalgia as a somaterratic and psychoterratic disorder basically with Kerans's changing physical features and increasingly primitive dreams. The length and severity of the flood due to anthropogenic climate change have deep psychoterratic implications. It is actually this strong psychological force that leads Kerans into isolation and lack of solace along with negative environmental changes.

The impact of Kerans's primitive dreams increases when he dives into “the aqua incognita” for the sunken London planetarium (Ballard, 2010, p. 86). The deeper Kerans dives into the lagoon, the deeper he goes down in his unconscious. The submerged planetarium reminds him of the womb with its calmingly warm water. Kerans imagines that he sees a star map of the ancient world in the cracks of the dome of the womb-like structure. It distresses him so much that he ties off his air-pipe deliberately or unconsciously, nearly committing suicide:

Had he unconsciously locked the air-pipe, knowing that the tension in the cable would suffocate him, or had it been a complete accident [...] Was the drowned world itself, and the mysterious quest for the south which had possessed Hardman, no more than an impulse to suicide, an unconscious acceptance of the logic of his own devolutionary descent, the ultimate neuronc synthesis of the archaeopsychic zero? (Ballard, 2010, p. 122-123)

For Kerans, the lagoon he dives into becomes “the pool of Thanatos”, which is also the title of the ninth chapter of the novel (p. 105). Thanatos is the personification of Death in Greek mythology (Hamilton, 1942, p. 28). Thanatos is also significant in that it is associated with the death drive in Freudian psychoanalysis. Thanatos, or death drive, is “a counterbalancing tendency for sustaining life”, which is Eros, or life drive (Kli, 2018, p. 67). According to Freud (1920/1955, 1930/1961), death drive may be revealed either actively through negativity, aggression, destruction and self-harm, or passively through mental dullness, inertia and a

general denial of life. Within this framework, death drive in Kerans could be interpreted as an unconscious escape from necessity and pain of living in a much loved but desolated home. He suffers from solastalgia as he recognizes that he cannot re-enter lost places though he is still located in his home territory.

The pool of Thanatos also creates some dynamism for life drive. Overtaken by his phantasmagoric dreams, Kerans reverses the process of his birth in a way by losing his identity in the warm lagoon, which represents the amniotic fluid on the one hand and the primordial ocean from which all forms of life emerged on the other hand. Although Kerans is not spatially displaced, he is temporally displaced in the lagoon because “[t]ime does not exist here now” (Ballard, 2010, p. 143). Kerans then steals a compass from the submerged planetarium since he is enthralled with the idea of heading south, for which he loses his control and yields to the archaeopsychic past. Archaeopsychic memories are activated by the vivid resemblance of this neo-Triassic world to the ancient one. Therefore, the pool of Thanatos represents both death drive and life drive in Kerans. While he unconsciously thinks of suicide in the pool of Thanatos so as to escape from necessity and pain of living in a much loved but desolated home, he also seeks to recover his mental and emotional compass by stealing the compass and trying to find his way to the place he once knew home.

Although Kerans is stricken with psychoterratic disorder, he neither laments the past nor feels nostalgic. He rather seeks to develop a deeper connection with the disrupted ecosystem, of which he is an inseparable part, and to see himself in the deep process of planetary evolution as a human being. As Ballard himself stated in an interview, Kerans “is looking for the source of things, the source of himself, moving down his spinal column, realizing that the closer he gets to the source the less there is of him” (Rønnov-Jessen, interview, 1984). That is why Kerans’s quest for absolute identity becomes self-defeating. When Strangman, a corpse-white pirate leader of a group of grotesque and dangerous black plunderers, dams the lagoon and pumps out Leicester Square, Kerans’s life becomes more and more nightmarish along with greater madness. Although Kerans knows in the beginning that “the lagoon was nothing more than a garbage-filled swamp” (Ballard, 2010, p. 13), he develops a new kind of place attachment with the lagoon over time and strives to keep his connection with the lagoon “in an insane Eden” (p. 58). When water is pumped out of the city, his personal tie with his much-loved but flooded place is broken once again. The solace the lagoon gives to him is interrupted once again. He consequently experiences double solastalgia due to the loss of solace from the present condition of his physical environment after its unwanted transformation – first with flooding of his home environment and then with draining of the lagoon:

After his first surprise at seeing the drained lagoon he began to sink rapidly into a state of dulled inertia, from which he tried helplessly to rouse himself. Dimly he realised that the lagoon had represented a complex of neuronc needs that were impossible to satisfy by any other means. This blunting lethargy deepened, unbroken by the violence around him, and more and more he felt like a man marooned in a time sea, hemmed in by a mass of dissonant realities millions of years apart. (Ballard, 2010, p. 141)

Kerans does not want the lagoon to disappear because he has adapted to living in his submerged home territory. The flood disaster, oppressive sense of overheat and swarming gigantic vegetation overtake his identity and self-control. What Kerans experiences is solastalgia, rather double solastalgia, since it happens when “there is the direct experience of negative transformation or desolation of the physical environment (home) by forces that undermine a personal and community sense of identity, belonging and control” (Albrecht, 2006, p. 35). Kerans’s sense of place and identity, his physical and mental health, and his general welfare are

all challenged twice by undesirable environmental changes though he tries to adapt to negative environmental changes and desolation.

The negative double transformation of a much-loved place is so influential an experience for Kerans that embrace of death is seen as the only form of relief. He is shot above the ankle while trying to dynamite the dam that drains the lagoon. He also experiences emotional death as he no longer has any reaction to the loss of nature, death or the end. As he has lost his emotional compass to reconnect with human and nonhuman worlds, he does not want to work things out and ends up growing insanity and self-annihilation. Damming the lagoon and drying the streets mean a new disaster to Kerans because he has “total beach syndrome” as Strangman says to him (Ballard, 2010, p. 99). As the sudden return to earth disconcerts him, making the external world around him become unrecognisable and unbearable once again because he believes that dry streets are “obscene and hideous” and “dead and finished”, he dynamites the dam letting water in again and preventing Strangman from “resurrecting a corpse” (p. 174). After re-flooding the lagoon, he heads south, walking 150 miles into the tropical jungle with a bullet wound in his leg as “a second Adam searching for the forgotten paradises of the reborn Sun” (p. 192). The novel ends with the high possibility that Kerans will die in his quest of burning dreams blazing in the south.

Conclusion

Ballard's *The Drowned World* is consequently concerned with the biopsychic unity of humans and their archaeopsychic memory in the ecosystem, by depicting Kerans's archaic drive of following the burning sun to the south. The novel reveals the connection between ecological balance and humans' physical, psychological and emotional health by examining what Kerans undergoes during the global flood disaster. Using the Albrechtian term of solastalgia, this article analyses the novel under the ecocritical lens to show how climate-induced transformations in the biophysical environment influence mental health and well-being of Kerans and other survivors. People in the novel affect and are affected by the biophysical environment around them, which is why any changes to the surrounding environment may damage its ecosystem and its countless functions of life support. Negative transformations of ecosystems challenge Kerans's identity, sense of place, physical and mental health, belonging and control, which end up with despair, mournfulness, and somaterratic and psychoterratic disorder upon his recognition that the place which he has lived in, has known and loved is physically damaged and transformed forever. Although Kerans suffers from solastalgia, he develops a new sense of place and identity in the flooded world. Focusing on the psychological and emotional turmoils of Kerans, this article shows that Kerans establishes new relationships in an ecologically imbalanced environment in order to respond to his solastalgia. Whether he succeeds in finding “the forgotten paradises of the reborn Sun” (Ballard, 2010, p. 192) in the south to overcome solastalgia and to start all over is not known since the novel ends with the possibility that Kerans will die on his way to the south. The novel conveys the message that the sky, land, water, plants and animals all that sustain humans' well-being will go against humankind when humans give up ecological consciousness. Therefore, the respectful and ecological interrelatedness between human and nonhuman beings provides a great opportunity for the prevention of solastalgia.

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