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ARTICLE

The ~~Anthropocene~~ Obscene: Poetic inquiry and evocative evidence of inequality

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Abstract

Poetic inquiry is used to highlight contrasting lived experiences of vulnerability and worsening socio-ecological outcomes among Australia's fastest growing coastal communities. Our approach interweaves multiple participant voices across local and national scales to juxtapose the contrasts of inequality, enmesh social and ecological experiences, and ask reflexive questions of audiences. We offer an evocative portrayal of inequality to the growing body of work demonstrating that unequal and intensifying vulnerabilities are *created* and sustained through complicated, non-adaptive and hierarchical social systems. We demonstrate that poetic inquiry can interrogate complex system phenomena and broad concepts, such as the Anthropocene, to distil critical and systemic issues while retaining undeniable connections with the deeply personal implications of socio-ecological change. Hence, poetic inquiry can serve analytical *and* descriptive purposes towards an emotional and political aesthetic providing a compelling reorientation from more conventional modes of inquiry and representation. In this study, the misuse of power and privilege in the Anthropocene is reduced and revealed as the *Obscene*.

KEYWORDS

adaptive capacity, Anthropocene, climate change, inequality, poetic inquiry, vulnerability

1 | INTRODUCTION

The Anthropocene has become a widely used term across multiple disciplines since first proposed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). While highlighting the significant impact of humans, the term is ambiguous about the implications for human capacity and planetary sustainability (e.g., Haraway et al., 2016). A recent article by Franciszek Chwałczyk recorded over 80 alternative 'cenes', all attempting to elucidate the defining characteristics of 'Anthropos' (Chwałczyk, 2020; Di Maio, 2022). Of significance to this paper, the Anthropocene emphasises that the novelty of this 'epoch' is not the immense scale or even greatly accelerated rate of destruction, but rather that human activities are implicated as the primary cause (Folke et al., 2021; Steffen et al., 2011, 2015). However, several authors argue that the Anthropocene fails to differentiate within and between communities and misses the opportunity to highlight that such damaging human agency is not universal but, instead, implicates a minority with unprecedented

power and destructive influence over social-ecological systems, including other people (Lövbrand et al., 2015; Malm & Hornborg, 2014; Yusoff, 2016). Revisions recognising the central role of various power imbalances include the Capitalocene (e.g., Moore, 2017), the Plantationocene, and the Chthulucene (Haraway, 2015).

In this paper, we explore the implications of such rapid and immense social-ecological change on communities at the local and national scales to illustrate what a broad and abstract concept, such as the Anthropocene (and alternatives), 'feels' like across a range of communities. How is the Anthropocene, and contributing ideologies, experienced? What needs arise and how are these met or ignored? Following Lövbrand et al. (2015), we seek to redress the tendency towards 'generalized and disembodied' explanations of human agency and associated top-down responses.

We draw from case studies of communities across Australia considered especially vulnerable to greatly accelerated socio-ecological change: rapidly urbanising coastal communities. In these communities, socio-ecological change, and potential vulnerabilities, arise through exposure to coastal processes intensified through the pressures of climate change and coastline modification (e.g., through sea level rise, storm surge, and impacts on sediment movement imposed by hard engineering), unprecedented population growth and urbanisation (the fastest growing coastal suburbs), unprecedented levels of wealth, and unprecedented levels of poverty and other inequities. Hence, change in these communities represents an intensification of entrenched processes arising at spatio-temporal scales that extend well beyond the local, including national and global drivers with varying biophysical, social, cultural, political and economic dimensions.

In attempting an integrated approach that considers interactions between the biophysical and social dimensions of vulnerability (Ribot, 2010), we draw on established notions of vulnerability in the climate change literature (e.g., McCarthy et al., 2001; Smit & Wandel, 2006) that describe vulnerability as a combination of exposure, sensitivity and adaptive capacity. We also draw on more recent research from multiple disciplines, especially the humanities and social sciences, acknowledging that vulnerability is dynamic and highly variable within and across communities with significant influences arising from the intersection of social and economic factors (e.g., wealth, education, gender, ethnicity, culture, differences in power) (Ribot, 2010; Sultana, 2022; Thomas et al., 2019). As such, vulnerability may be interpreted as an outcome *and* determinant of adaptive capacity (Füssel, 2007). Significantly, drawing upon social science and humanities disciplines provides an opportunity to re-orient research agendas rather than simply taking additional attributes into account (e.g., Hawkins et al., 2015). A re-orientation is offered by Clark and Yusoff (2017) through the term 'geo-social formations', acknowledging calls by Lövbrand et al. (2015) to 'socialize the Anthropocene', as well as pressure to 'geologize the social' (Clark & Yusoff, 2017, p. 6).

As a starting point, we acknowledge that some degree of intrinsic vulnerability will always be present in dynamic socio-ecological systems, yet, as with other inequalities of the Anthropocene, vulnerabilities are not distributed equally or justly (e.g., Ara Begum et al., 2022; O'Brien et al., 2004; Paavola & Adger, 2006; Sultana, 2022; Thomas et al., 2019; Yusoff, 2016). Significantly, the hierarchical structures and systems of globalisation, capitalism and colonisation have tended to create, exacerbate and entrench such inequalities (e.g., Malm & Hornborg, 2014; Sultana, 2022). It is established in climate change contexts that those most affected are already most vulnerable (e.g., Adger, 2006; Paavola & Adger, 2006; Steffen et al., 2011). Moreover, many interventions designed to lessen risks have intensified them—albeit unevenly (e.g., carbon credits allocated to the replacement of native forests with exotic plantations, and the development of communities with insufficient local infrastructure and forced dependency on expensive, external resources). Often dismissed as well-intentioned but misguided 'maladaptations' (Barnett & O'Neill, 2010), we also acknowledge the more insidious 'manipulations' (Thomsen et al., 2012) characterising 'adaptation' and 'development' efforts that concentrate power and resources and entrench non-adaptative responses (e.g., the protection of high value assets rather than entire communities, or high value food exports rather than local food security). Consequently, some societal members have access to an excess of resources through an unprecedented accrual of capital(s) and other members have access to virtually none, or entirely insufficient amounts—inspiring revisions such as the Capitalocene (e.g., Moore, 2017). As an extensive review by Thomas et al. (2019) illustrates, these are issues of resource distribution rather than availability and contribute to a reinforcing cycle of inequality where 'many groups may face combinations of insufficient economic, institutional, and political capacity' (p. 5). In addition, Thomas et al. (2019) draw on Watts and Bohle (1993) to highlight not only the marginalisation, but the exploitation of some groups. As such, the most recent IPCC report, AR6, argues that adaptation 'solutions' to such hazards observe the 'principles of distributive, procedural and recognitional *justice*' (emphasis in original) (Ara Begum et al., 2022, p. 158).

To begin to hear the injustices of the 'Anthropocene' and address some of the limitations of previous approaches to understanding vulnerability identified by Ford et al. (2018) (e.g., limited meta-analysis at the regional and/or national scale, limited understanding of vulnerability as a dynamic phenomenon, and few studies that utilise an integrated methodology), we contribute to the inclusion of a wider range of voices in understanding the experiences of socio-ecological

vulnerability at local and national scales. We seek to move behind quantitative assessments of disparities in income (e.g., Gini coefficients), rates of exposure, and absolute losses in terms of deaths and kilometres of coastal ecosystems, to offer qualitative accounts of the multiplicity of factors contributing to vulnerability through the voices of those on the front-lines of socio-ecological change. We use poetic inquiry to cultivate participant-voiced poems and share the uncertainties and devastation that arise across unequal communities towards authentic, affective representations of rapidly changing and rapidly diverging worlds. In so doing, we offer an account of the Anthropocene stripped bare—the *Obscene*.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Case selection

Six case study sites (one from each coastal Australian State and Territory, including New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, the Northern Territory, and Western Australia) were included in the study. All sites were experiencing the highest rate of coastal population growth at the SA2 (suburb) level in the State/Territory at the inception of the study. In addition, each of the case study sites were exposed to environmental hazards (e.g., a combination of erosion, sea level rise, flooding, fires, and/or severe storms such as tropical cyclones) and socio-economic stressors (e.g., a combination of rental stress, unemployment, prevalence of health issues such as type II diabetes, high proportion of single parent families and/or lone person households). Hence, all sites had exposure to multiple social and ecological stressors and a high probability of experiencing vulnerability.

2.2 | Data generation

Interviews were conducted with approximately five coastal decision-makers (e.g., local and state government employees) and five community representatives (e.g., government and non-government service providers) in each case location, totalling 68 semi-structured interviews, lasting between 40 min and 1.25 h each. The findings presented here derive from questions designed to generate rich, place-based narratives regarding the socio-ecological dimensions of change. Interview questions focused on (1) the interviewee's personal connection to the region (e.g., length of residence, employment, familial relations etc.); (2) perceptions of the socio-ecological amenity of each case location, and how and why this may have changed over time; and (3) perceptions of community according to dimensions of human needs consistent with Maslow's original theory (Maslow, 1943, 1954), including physiology/basic needs, safety, belonging, esteem and self-actualisation. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or via Zoom and were complemented by extended site visits (from one week to several months). Site visits allowed the researchers to observe and experience environmental and community dynamics for a more comprehensive understanding of each case study location and to contextualise the interviews with participants.

2.3 | Data analysis and cultivation of collective, poetic narratives—poetic inquiry

Open coding of interview transcripts revealed three dominant perceptions of community, including participants who (1) felt they did not know enough about community needs to answer; (2) observed a superficial veneer of 'fineness'; or (3) witnessed significant and deepening inequalities, including experiences of vulnerability and levels of adaptive capacity.

Consistent with Butler-Kisber (2002, p. 232), we considered that these emergent themes 'demanded an evocative portrayal'. In witnessing the impacts of rapid socio-ecological change, many transcripts in their raw form already demonstrated substantial 'emotional resonance' (Conle, 1996; Madge, 2014; Paiva, 2020) and attempts to reduce these to summary themes felt callous and incongruous with the gravity of the shared details and sentiment. We needed 'a means of empathetic, passionate storytelling' and agreed that 'poetry has potential to give insight into the multiple (sometimes painful) realities of life—not some emotionally-flattened version' (Madge, 2014, pp. 180–1). We also agreed that 'perhaps poetry is one of the more useful linguistic tools available to the geographer to attempt to express an affective geopolitics' (Madge, 2014, p. 182). Faulkner (2017, p. 210) highlights that poetry can activate affective responses though the ability to access 'the universal through radical subjectivity...when the audience relates to, embodies, and/or experiences the work as if it were their own...'. Similarly, Eshun and Madge (2016, p. 779) observe the potential to 'enable an intermeshing of

intimate expression and a wider political exteriority'. Consequently, poetry can be a politically active response towards social change (e.g., Eshun & Madge, 2016; Faulkner, 2018; Madge, 2014).

Developing a response that was both compassionate and passionate, poetic inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2002, 2018; Prendergast, 2009) was used to explore the emergent themes of community in greater detail and to engage 'artistic sensibility' (Ingman, 2022) in analysis and dissemination. Our initial approach reflected established techniques of poetic inquiry (e.g., found poetry, data poems, research poems) that use participant voices directly, either singularly or in combination (see Prendergast [2009] for a comprehensive analysis of the range of approaches). In particular, we drew on Glesne (1997) who, following thematic analysis, defined an experimental process of 'poetic transcription' towards 'the creation of poemlike compositions from the words of interviewees' (p. 202). Building on Glesne's (1997) approach for a singular interviewee, the following describes our preliminary guidelines for developing a collective poetic narrative: (1) the exclusive use of participants' own words, rather than those of the research team—except where the inclusion of an interview prompt facilitated a more accurate representation of responses; (2) the cutting of words and phrases from any combination of participant transcripts and subsequent reassembly in ways that preserve the intended meaning(s)—accomplished either through the use of longer sections of one participant's transcript or through combination with similar sentiments expressed across multiple participant transcripts (significant cuts, mid-sentence, are indicated with ellipses); (3) the occasional change of tense, deletion of filler words, or insertion of signifiers (indicated with brackets) to ensure clarity of meaning; and (4) consistent with an affective geopolitical agenda (Madge, 2014), we felt it necessary to include voices from all case study locations, where possible, and to distinguish between these on the basis of vocation and geographic location.

The initial poetic drafts resembled ensembles of numerous participant voices with an overarching coherence of content, sentiment and flow. Nevertheless, important differences and individual experiences remained intact. Following Anderson (2019, p. 1121–2) and 'attempting to stay with what representations do, how they make a difference' we considered that the collective narrative had an agency distinct from an individual's, in much the same way as a river is distinct from its tributaries. As such, 'poetic transcription creates a third voice that is neither the interviewee's nor the researcher's but is a combination of both' (Glesne, 1997, p. 215). Hence, our subsequent compositional choices attempted to reveal 'more' than would be possible through a singular narrative. In successive iterations, we focused on the relationships between responses. For example, the expansive scale of one response may resonate through the intimacy of another response; the assumptions of one narrative may be highlighted through the uncertainties of another; and the magnitude and depth of some responses may be reinforced through repetition across multiple responses. This is not to say that the sum is worth more than the parts, but rather that the sum can work in different ways.

Following development of a collective narrative, we remained committed to the ethical and political intentions of bringing the data 'closer' (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 235) towards an increasingly 'poetic form' capable of encouraging affective responses (Eshun & Madge, 2016). Subsequent attention was paid to the poetic devices of rhythm, repetition, metaphor and line breaks towards a concise and impactful composition of people, place and phenomena. Or as Lorimer notes, 'place condenses when it is formed of breath, intonation, emotion and stress...velocity, density, economy, control and precision become the writer's chief concerns' (Lorimer, 2008, p. 182). In using these devices, we sought to 'evoke rather than strictly convey', to produce 'an emotional or affective response' (de Leeuw, 2019, p. 59), and ensure the poems work in their 'own right' (McKnight et al., 2017, p. 315).

Poetic inquiry into the overarching themes of (1) uncertainty and limited knowledge at the community scale; (2) the incongruity of appearance with actual vulnerability status; and (3) the universality of vulnerability yet significant, and worsening, socio-economic inequalities resulted in three poems representing a collective narrative voiced from all case study sites: *Unconsolidated, Erosion* and *Roughened Terrain*. All poems are written as free verse in a lyrical style to present the participant voices as authentically as possible by lessening the need to conform to a more restrictive poetic form. Distinct from most forms of poetry, individual voices within the collective narrative are identified in a second column (page right), parallel to the unimpeded flow of the poem (page left). To ensure a simple composition, participant narratives spanning several uninterrupted lines are identified in the final line only. All other voices are identified per line. Participants are identified in terms of vocational sector (Coastal or Community), case location (State or Territory), and a unique numbered signifier to distinguish participants within jurisdictions and sectors (e.g., 01–05). Distinguishing the individual voices, including vocation and jurisdiction, is important in this study to emphasise the geographic extent, commonality and/or novelty of themes across sectors and case sites. Hence, an important part of the affective aesthetics relies on highlighting the number of individual voices. In this way, quantity becomes an important quality or emotional 'weight' that emphasises the near-universality of particular experiences or phenomena. This is not intended to undermine the power of the individual, instead it builds on the power of acknowledging connections and commonalities.

2.4 | *Unconsolidated*: uncertainty and limitations on scope of knowledge

The first theme of uncertainty and limited knowledge of community is indicated by the reluctance of several participants to answer questions regarding community needs and is represented in the following poem, *Unconsolidated*. This poem includes the voices of five participants across four Australian States (New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria, and Queensland) and the Northern Territory (Table A1). As noted earlier, the ideas expressed through this form of poetic inquiry are reflective of qualitative sentiment across the case study sites more broadly. Similar sentiments were also expressed in Western Australia and Tasmania.

Unconsolidated

Oh, mate — *Coastal Sector, New South Wales (05)*
I dunno
If
I'm the best person — *Coastal Sector, Victoria (06)*

I have...
Very narrow
Exposure
Almost tunnels... — *Coastal Sector, Queensland (01)*

About the ability
Of the community
To fulfil those needs? — *Interviewer, Multiple Case Sites*

It's an uninformed three
[Out of five]
That's got an asterix
Next to it — *Coastal Sector, New South Wales (05)*
From what I have heard — *Community Sector, Northern Territory (02)*

I see
Parts of this problem...
I do not see
The big picture...
I do not...see
The whole community — *Coastal Sector, Queensland (01)*

I do not think I can
Answer — *Coastal Sector, Queensland (01)*
Because who would
We
Define as the community? — *Coastal Sector, South Australia (02)*

The unease of participants when attempting to consider the status of communities (as a whole) squirms from *Unconsolidated*—their chairs are uniformly uncomfortable! The theme of uncertainty when describing local communities is present in all stanzas, building from evasiveness and caveats (e.g., 'That's got an asterix/Next to it'; 'From what I have/Heard') before proceeding to definite refusal ('I don't think/I can answer'). These responses illustrate the inherent difficulty of defining community needs in rapidly changing and highly heterogenous social-ecological contexts. A small number ($n = 9$) of participants had less than a year of vocational experience in the case study sites. Nevertheless, the more

general acknowledgement of 'narrow exposure' and 'tunnels' of knowledge combined with a reluctance and/or resistance to offer a singular definition, indicates the need for enhanced mechanisms to better understand rapidly changing contexts and diverse needs in ways that embrace, rather than reduce, complexity. Recognition of incomplete or inaccurate knowledge accords with concerns of several authors (e.g., Haraway et al., 2016; Malm & Hornborg, 2014) who contend that intra-species diversity is largely disregarded in all-encompassing conceptions of the Anthropocene.

Unconsolidated concludes with the question being returned to the interviewer and potential audiences ('Because who would/We/Define as the community?'). The poem intentionally highlights the word 'We' in the final stanza to build on the participant's suggestion that defining community has both subjective and ethical dimensions (i.e., who are 'we' to define community?). In this way, the role of power in defining community is problematised and returned as a challenge or 'reflexive prompt' for audiences, laying a foundation for ontological and personal engagement with the uncertainties of the material represented.

2.5 | *Erosion*: Hidden and intensifying inequalities (in your street)

The theme of accelerating inequality is represented in the poem, *Erosion* that includes the direct voices of 16 participants from the coastal and community sectors across all coastal Australian States and Territories (New South Wales, the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia) (Table A2). By way of introduction, a quotation from an additional participant precedes the poem.

> Some people believe it's ok to have have's and have nots; other people believe that we should have a more equal society where people are entitled to live a good life.
>
> *Community Sector Representative, Queensland (05)*

Erosion

God, it really depends	*Coastal Sector, Tasmania (02)*
It depends	
Who	
You	
Are	*Coastal Sector, Northern Territory (04)*
That disparity	*Coastal Sector, Northern Territory (01)*
That divide	*Community Sector, Queensland (04)*
Absolute imbalance	*Community Sector, Northern Territory (01)*
Two worlds	*Community Sector, Queensland (02)*
Significantly fragmented	*Coastal Sector, Northern Territory (04)*
Split	
Down	
The middle	*Community Sector, Northern Territory (04)*
A very friendly place... for	
The 'right' people	*Community Sector, Northern Territory (01)*
I can see the gap	
Widening	*Community Sector, Northern Territory (01)*
Extremes...	
Increasing	*Coastal Sector, Queensland (04)*
It's half a dozen of one...	
A dozen of the	
Other	*Community Sector, Victoria (03)*

Diversity here is...	
Diversity between the haves	
And the haves not	*Community Sector, Northern Territory (03)*
In one...	
They're finding themselves...	
They're tree changing...	
All	
This	
Artisan	
Stuff...	
Self-actualising like crazy	*Coastal Sector, Tasmania (02)*
Living the high life	
Beautiful coastal home...	
Beautiful views...	
Your brunches...	
Your sailing boat	*Community Sector, Victoria (03)*
Your café lifestyle	*Community Sector, Queensland (02)*
It's all fabulous	*Community Sector, Victoria (03)*
Living the dream...	
Others, not so much	*Community Sector, Tasmania (01)*
Not so great	*Community Sector, Tasmania (02)*
Façade	
Looks lovely	*Community Sector, New South Wales (04)*
Looks gorgeous	*Community Sector, Western Australia (03)*
Looks fantastic	
It	
Looks	
Rich	*Community Sector, Queensland (02)*
Couldn't possibly be happening	
in those areas...	*Community Sector, New South Wales (04)*
Cut	*Community Sector, Western Australia (03)*
Behind the scenes	*Community Sector, Victoria (03)*
Scratch	
The surface	*Community Sector, Queensland (02)*
No furniture	
No food in the cabinets	
It might not be on	
Your street	
But chances are, it's on	
Your street	*Community Sector, New South Wales (04)*

It's hard
To believe
In the lucky country — *Community Sector, New South Wales (04)*

In the lucky country
Far from the reality of what they expected... — *Community Sector, New South Wales (04)*
The girl ... waiting the tables...
Struggling to get enough
Hours...find suitable housing — *Community Sector, Victoria (03)*
Food has become
A discretionary item — *Community Sector, New South Wales (04)*

Parents, all over the place...
Go home...
Make dinner for the kids...
Tell the kids:
Mum and Dad, aren't eating...we had a big lunch — *Community Sector, New South Wales (04)*

That dirty shameful thing
You're not allowed
To talk about
In the family — *Community Sector, Western Australia (03)*

Clothing? Every now and then
Basic needs? They probably get air for free — *Community Sector, Northern Territory (05)*
People...homeless for so long...
They just cannot
Imagine
Anything different — *Community Sector, Northern Territory (01)*

That sense of failure — *Community Sector, New South Wales (04)*
Amount of death
If that was [me]
[I'd] probably be homeless...
Drunk
Every single day...
Just to forget...
I was lucky...
Not everyone
Is — *Community Sector, Northern Territory (05)*

In raw and painful ways, *Erosion* proceeds from broadscale observations of communities divided along socio-economic lines, through observations of intensifying and, often, hidden inequalities that remain incongruous with national conceptions of 'the lucky country', to conclude with finer scale reflections on the very personal and devastating implications. Australian audiences have long been familiar with the extremes of the Australian landscape through personal experience and well-established literary traditions, including poetry. For example, the iconic poem 'My Country' authored in 1908 by Australian poet, Dorothea Mackellar speaks of the pastoral landscape's 'harshness and forgiveness', 'her beauty and her terror' (Mackellar & Hilder, 1981). However, extremes within Australian communities are less acknowledged.

To stress the nature and pervasiveness of inequality, repetition is used in several ways throughout the poem. The first half of the poem repeats words and similar phrases to mirror the repetition of experience across multiple case sites (e.g., 'two worlds', 'significantly fragmented', 'absolute imbalance'). Repetition of the exact phrase, 'It looks' and the word, 'Your' are also used to represent the consistent narrative of a superficial 'façade' or appearance concealing vulnerabilities ('*Looks* lovely/*Looks* gorgeous/*Looks* fantastic/It *Looks* Rich'). Repetition of the iconic phrase 'the lucky country' is repeated as an ironic refrain that questions the national identity.[1] The refrain also creates a pause and serves as a juncture in the poem—the reader is momentarily on hold as tension mounts (the calm before the storm) before the tempo quickens, the themes darken, and the description densifies to reveal the devastating consequences of inequality foregrounded in the first half of the poem.

The second half of the poem uses the juxtaposition of stark distinctions between the 'haves and the have nots' (e.g., 'the beach houses'/'homeless for so long'; 'the brunches'/'Mum and Dad, aren't eating') to further develop the theme of inequality. Magrane (2015: 87) notes that 'the connections between geography and creativity cut to the heart of the human imagination of how we live on and with the Earth'. To this end, the poetic juxtaposition of the 'haves and have nots' goes beyond a dichotomy of how we live with the Earth to critique how we live with each other. As identified by Malm and Hornborg (2014), 'intra-species' inequality predates the fossil fuel burning and industrialisation often associated with the instigation of the Anthropocene. *Erosion* highlights not only the level of disparity but also the proximity of inequality—these lives are lived geographically close, yet 'worlds' apart. Lives unseen, lives undisclosed, lives unimaginable even to oneself. Hence, readers are encouraged to consider not only familiar, yet unaddressed, inequalities based on gender, age and socio-economic status (e.g., 'The girl...waiting the tables...' for 'the brunches'), but also those arising from the destructive toll of sustained inability to access basic needs, including the loss of safety, belonging, esteem and potential for self-actualisation 'in your street'. In many ways, the loss of imagination ('they just can't imagine anything different') is the most awful conclusion of this collective narrative with devastating implications for individuals and communities.

In addressing the divide that widens, reflexive prompts that directly address the audience towards empathetic responses, or the cultivation of a sense of connection with the plight of those experiencing vulnerability, are also scattered throughout the poem (e.g., 'It might not be on/*Your* street/But chances are, it's on/*Your* street'; 'If that was [*me*]'; '*Your* café lifestyle') with the intensifying resonant potential underscored in the final lines with the words: '*I* was lucky...not everyone Is'. Emphasis on inequality is also achieved through the cutting and placement of phrases across lines. For example, the cutting of the final phrase attempts to further reinforce the experience of inequality by placing emphasis on the final word, 'Is'—a 'state of being' verb that describes, or this instance problematises, existence.

Portraying the inequalities and jarring disconnects that leave communities completely out of balance, *Erosion* also reveals that diversity— a cornerstone of resilient and flourishing social-ecological systems—is reduced to a simple dichotomy of 'haves and have nots'. In a devastating irony, prevalence of facades, shame and guilt on behalf of those discriminated against through mechanisms of the Anthropocene (e.g., capitalism, colonialism, globalisation) indicates how internalised and 'socially' unacceptable the implications have become. The reluctance to admit such difficulties from within the prevailing system also serves to partly explain the level of uncertainty regarding community needs expressed in the first poem, *Unconsolidated*, such that issues are likely to be far worse than 'generally' perceived.

Overwhelmingly, the poem portrays sharp distinctions and ruptures towards loss of elements essential in thriving systems: community and imagination. Hence, as some authors contend, the Anthropocene may be better understood as a tipping point, a disjuncture or discontinuity in time rather than a continuation (e.g., Haraway, 2015; Haraway et al., 2016). *Erosion* is loss.

2.6 | *Roughened Terrain*: vulnerability as 'non-negotiable', adaptive capacity as highly negotiated

The final theme of universal socio-ecological vulnerability and differential ability to adapt (adaptive capacity) is described in the poem *Roughened Terrain* that includes the direct voices of 24 participants from the coastal and community sectors across all case sites (Table A3). This poem also begins to highlight connections between the social and ecological dimensions of communities whereby both are vulnerable, with some able to adapt and some constrained by 'human built' structures and systems.

Roughened Terrain

Our whole
coastline is shaped by change — *Coastal Sector, Victoria (04)*
...a pandemic
...bushfires
...floods
...erosion — *Coastal Sector, New South Wales (05)*

Moments
...phases
...periods of vulnerability — *Community Sector, Tasmania (01)*

You're not
a vulnerable person
throughout
your
life — *Community Sector, Tasmania (01)*

The challenge
is...
human built... — *Coastal Sector, Victoria (04)*
systemic — *Coastal Sector, Queensland (03)*
structural, attitudinal, behavioural — *Community Sector, Tasmania (01)*
society and systems...
create...
vulnerability — *Community Sector, Victoria (03)*

This stereotype
...the homeless person/an old man
swag on his back
staggering along the road (usually with a bottle)
so far
from the truth — *Community Sector, Queensland (03)*

Everybody — *Coastal Sector, Queensland (03)*
anybody — *Community Sector, Western Australia (03)*
any age...
any demographic — *Community Sector, Northern Territory (02)*
of
people...
community
and place — *Coastal Sector, Victoria (05)*

Marginalised
...pushed
.....to the outskirts — *Community Sector, South Australia (05)*

the flipside	*Coastal Sector, South Australia (02)*
A lack of ability to...cope or respond ... of resources	*Coastal Sector, Western Australia (06)* *Community Sector, New South Wales (02)*
employment... food...	*Community Sector, New South Wales (01)*
Your geographic location... personal circumstances... abilities...	*Coastal Sector, Queensland (04)*
....A dangerous situation	*Community Sector, Northern Territory (04)*
exposure ...to risk	*Multiple Coastal Sectors*[2]
.....to hazard	*Coastal Sector, Tasmania (02)*
...your adaptive capacity	*Coastal Sector, South Australia (03)*
Not knowing...	*Community Sector, New South Wales (03)*
rights	*Community Sectors, Qld (03); SA (04)*
what to ask for...	*Community Sector, New South Wales (03)*
as a person, as a child	*Community Sector, South Australia (04)*
the fear of asking	*Community Sector, New South Wales (03)*
This box of tissues sits on the desk because...vulnerability is really difficult to put into a sentence	*Community Sector, Queensland (03)*

Consistent with the possibility of vulnerability being both a starting and endpoint (Füssel, 2007), *Roughened Terrain* highlights that vulnerability is a universal feature of socio-ecological systems and may be considered an important precursor to change. However, the poem also highlights that vulnerability may be experienced in differing temporal dimensions (e.g., ephemeral, periodic or entrenched) and identifies vulnerabilities arising from a combination of sensitivity, exposure and adaptive capacity 'of people, community and place'. Hence, the voices in the poem are consistent in noting the 'non-negotiable' (Coastal Sector, New South Wales, 05) nature of vulnerability and the highly negotiated nature of adaptive capacity; to the point where some individuals and societal sectors were either unaware of rights or too fearful to ask for assistance. In accordance with earlier studies (e.g., Thomas et al., 2019), some sectors are likely to experience greater vulnerability and lesser adaptive capacity, despite communities (as a whole) having access to resources. In other words, inequality is prevalent.

The poem also begins to introduce the similarities between the social and ecological experiences of vulnerability with both the Coastal and the Community sectors considering the societal drivers of unequal and intensifying vulnerabilities (e.g., Coastal sector: 'The challenge is...human built'; Community Sector: 'Society and systems...create...vulnerability').

Hence, the collective narrative is consistent with previous integrated analyses of vulnerability (e.g., Ribot, 2010) and the Anthropocene more broadly (e.g., Malm & Hornborg, 2014; Yusoff, 2016), indicating that broader, societal-scale structures can create new and/or exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, including differentiation in adaptive capacity towards adaptive *in*capacity (including political incapacity). Hence, limited structural change occurs and affected individuals and responding agencies can be quickly overwhelmed.

To conclude, *Roughened Terrain* describes an increasingly difficult context for 'Everybody...Anybody...People, community and place'. Significant variations in adaptive capacity are acknowledged, but even high levels have diminishing returns when causes and consequences are present at the system scale. Moreover, where 'phases' of vulnerability become perpetual, they also tend to become pervasive with the potential for entire systems to become 'marginalised'.

.....

The poems can stand alone, and they can also stand together as consequential 'geosocial formations' (Clark & Yusoff, 2017). Hence, an *Unconsolidated* status facilitates *Erosion*, which, in turn, facilitates *Roughened Terrain* in a reinforcing cycle driven through the imbalances of inequality. In seeking a constructive rupture of this cycle, each poem concludes by highlighting the role of, and affects upon, those at the front lines of response. These final lines challenge notions of community (Who would/We/define...), offer solidarity (If that was me...), and underscore an immense emotional and physical toll (A box of tissues...). To use vulnerability terminology, respondents are *exposed*, *sensitive* and empathetic, and *adaptive* to diverse needs. In contexts increasingly characterised by sharp distinctions, these individuals offer a rare point of connection requiring urgent support towards systemic change (i.e., physical *and* political resources) rather than continually grappling with immediate responses.

3 | CONCLUSION

The ethics of the conscious destruction of socio-ecological systems by a minority implies human obscenity, rather than agency. The differentiated causes and consequences of the Anthropocene are not novel arguments (e.g., Lövbrand et al., 2015; Malm & Hornborg, 2014; Yusoff, 2016) with multiple reworkings, including several linguistically similar to our proposal. For example, Parikka (2015) introduced the term 'Anthrobscene' in an examination of the intersection of media and geology through mineral politics, and in particular the way in which digital media has deep consequences for subterranean environments. The Obscene is also briefly suggested as an alternative term by Kenneth Olwig in a recorded conversation, 'Anthropologists are Talking', in Aarhus, 2014 (Haraway et al., 2016). Of most significance is Swyngedouw and Ernstson's 'Anthropo-obScene' that interrogates the depoliticisation of the Anthropocene and counters with the political potential of those marginalised (Swyngedouw & Ernstson, 2018). We further contribute to processes of recognitional justice (e.g., Ara Begum et al., 2022) through the development of a 'critical-creative' (Magrane, 2021) portrayal of social-ecological loss building on a critical 'shift' in cultural geography (and related disciplines) towards exploring 'what representations do rather than what they stand in for' (Anderson, 2019, p. 1122).

Significantly, the identification and isolation of 'The Obscene' does not undermine the conceptual leap and seismic reorientation in understanding and accountability attributable to the Anthropocene. In fact, the Anthropocene paves the way forward and enables an increasingly lucid and clear description of what we hope will be a moment limited in every way. Moreover, an existential advantage of the Anthropocene is that it remains open to the possibility of implicating human activities in exceptional advances and achievements in sustainability. Nonetheless, we contend that the current dire circumstances for socio-ecological systems demand a more pointed term that lays bare 'the Obscene' nature of increasing power imbalances curated by an insatiable minority.

We chose poetic inquiry to elucidate experiences of intensifying inequality because of the potential to create a reflective moment—a space—for a greater multiplicity of voices to be heard in an affective register. Through a portrayal of the embodied experiences of rapid social-ecological change we also offer a connection between the particular and the abstract (Cresswell, 2021, 2022; Magrane, 2021). As Leggo (2008, p. 167) emphasises, 'poetry is not a window on the world. Poetry invites us to listen. Poetry is a site for dwelling, for holding up, for stopping'. Our approach is consistent with that of geopoetics as an experimental, and creative practice that considers, among other dimensions, reflexivity in the representation of place and the potential for greater resonance with audiences beyond academia (Magrane, 2015, 2021). As Prendergast (2009) notes, poetic inquiry is imbued with the researcher's affective response to the researched. We disclose heartbreak, anger and despair, but also determination to respond in a 'catalytic expressive mode rather than a reactive analytic mode' (Magrane, 2015, p. 89).

The minimalist form of poetry allowed the authors to interrogate the broad concept of the Anthropocene and associated phenomena (e.g., climate change, pollution, homelessness, mental health issues), and distil salient and defining features—including that impacts are both wrought and felt unevenly. In particular, juxtaposition was used in multiple ways to highlight differences, similarities and connections. In combination with repetition across the collective narrative, juxtaposition also proved effective in showing the pervasiveness and pain of inequality. Sharp contrasts in the experiences of the extremely poor versus the extremely rich moreover offered a space to contemplate not just the void, but how they may be connected. Juxtaposition can splice causes and consequences together such that symptoms no longer appear isolated, but rather as foreseeable conditions in response to systemic injustices incurred beyond the level of the individual and extending across socio-ecological systems (e.g., ongoing processes of colonisation, uneven resource allocation and access etc.). Juxtaposition of empathetic responses with apathy or indifference indicates that such inequality is not inevitable. Hence, a distinction between intrinsic vulnerability and *created* vulnerability arises that calls to attention the ethics of the conscious destruction of socio-ecological systems through the mechanism of inequality.

The entrenched and severe nature of those particularly impacted indicates that *created* vulnerability is not so much a starting point or an endpoint, but rather a starting point with no endpoint in sight. It is *difficult* to think, to organise, to advocate, to survive when you are hungry, sleepless, cold or drenched in sweat, ill, isolated, flooded or burned, preyed upon, at risk of violence, suffering the adverse impacts of alcohol and other drugs, without shelter, without an address, robbed of imagination. In these painful ways, the *Roughened Terrain* of inequality is highly susceptible to *Erosion* and loss, remaining *Unconsolidated* and vulnerable to further exploitation.

The poetic techniques of juxtaposition and metaphor also assisted in drawing connections between the social and ecological dimensions of systems whereby *Unconsolidated*, *Erosion* and *Roughened Terrain* link the experiences of change and being shaped by change, similarly visible/visceral in the social and ecological dimensions of systems.

Application of poetic inquiry towards a collective narrative allowed not only a more direct and evocative account of experience, but use of 'reflexive prompts' facilitated a constructive opportunity to direct questions outwards to readers/audiences/decision-makers towards the potential for greater political efficacy. Hence, we argue that reflexive prompts can be used to widen dialogue and narratives beyond the researcher and researched towards active audience participation—as a mechanism for 'solidarity building' (Sultana, 2022) or 'making kin' (Haraway, 2015), which are essential in climate justice praxis.

In sum, we present a representation that engages with various poetic techniques to enhance affective and political potential—a representation towards greater clarity in defining causes and consequences of 'the Obscene' and how these manifest in very personal, pervasive, and often devastating ways.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

[1] This cultural reference refers to the book 'The Lucky Country: Australia in the Sixties' (1964) by Donald Horne. The reference is used somewhat negatively in Horne's analysis of the Australian economy that refers to the role of luck in Australia's fortunes. Nevertheless, it is colloquially understood in favourable terms.

[2] *Coastal Sector: Northern Territory (04); South Australia (03, 05); Tasmania (02, 03); Victoria (01).*

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APPENDIX

TABLE A1 Interviewee characteristics of transcript excerpts included in the poem, *Unconsolidated*.

	Northern Territory	Queensland	New South Wales	Victoria	Western Australia	Tasmania	South Australia	
Coastal		01	05	06			02	4
Community	02							1
Total	1	1	1	1			1	5

TABLE A2 Interviewee characteristics of transcript excerpts included in the poem, *Erosion*.

	Northern Territory	Queensland	New South Wales	Victoria	Western Australia	Tasmania	South Australia	
Coastal	01, 04	04				02	05	5
Community	01, 03, 04, 05	02, 04	04	03	03	01, 02		11
Total	6	3	1	1	1	3	1	16

TABLE A3 Interviewee characteristics of transcript excerpts included in the poem, *Roughened Terrain*.

	Northern Territory	Queensland	New South Wales	Victoria	Western Australia	Tasmania	South Australia	
Coastal	04	03, 04	05	01, 04, 05	06	02, 03	03, 02, 05	13
Community	02, 04	03	01, 02, 03	03	03	01	04, 05	11
Total	3	3	4	4	2	3	5	24