

Musical ecologies of grief: breathing and environmental justice in Love Ssega's "Our World (Fight for Air)"

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Abstract

This paper will consider how ecological grief is managed in "Our World (Fight for Air)", a single released in 2021 by British-Ugandan musician Love Ssega, which addresses the deadly consequences of air pollution on the South Circular Road in London. In light of sparse musicological engagement with ecological grief and air, I bring together a "political ecology of air-and-breathing-bodies" (Allen 2020) and "weathering" (Neimanis and Walker 2014) to illustrate that, in Ssega's work, (safe) breathing becomes political, traversed by vectors of race and class. Paying attention to air and breathing facilitates an understanding of how Ssega's music can help us grieve well, on scales attuned to both individual tragedy and the enormous, distributed nature of environmental pollution. I argue that this music shapes "ecologies of grief" which are communal and therefore can help us engage with loss, not merely as individual mourners, but as makers of safer futures.

KEYWORDS: ecological grief, air pollution, breathing, popular music, political ecology, environmental justice

Content warning: This paper discusses illness, death, and grief.

Introduction

Music is so often present at moments of loss and grief; engagements with grief through popular culture can be distributed among individuals, even vicariously (Lund 2020) or as intensely personal and embodied (Sumera 2020). What happens, however, when grief is on a huge, environmental scale, when we are forced to confront current and future losses in a world marked by anthropogenic climate and

environmental change? In recent years, the term “ecological grief” has come into use, to describe “the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change” (Cunsolo and Ellis 2018: 275). As Cunsolo and Ellis suggest, ecological grief – related to phenomena such as “eco-anxiety” (Clayton et al. 2017) – can be a type of distress caused by the anticipation of future extinctions and losses due to unprecedented environmental changes. Climate change and environmental degradation, however, are also causing human loss and suffering *now*. Moreover, this loss and suffering disproportionately affects people of colour and those from low-income backgrounds. A large swathe of the UK population is in the privileged position of being relatively sheltered from environmental change; certainly more so than, for instance, Indigenous communities in low-lying Pacific Islands or Australia’s wildfire-ravaged lands. Nonetheless, ecological and climate change are being felt in the UK day-to-day (by humans and more-than-humans alike), with the poorest and most marginalised bearing the brunt of the health and social consequences.

In this paper, I will consider how ecological grief manifests in a recent project by Love Ssega, a British-Ugandan musician and former member of Clean Bandit. “Our World (Fight for Air)”, a single released in April 2021, was written as part of Season for Change, a cultural program which highlights underrepresented artistic voices in climate justice and activism in the UK. The single focusses on the impacts of poor air quality on the communities who live in Lewisham, near the South Circular. The South Circular is a ring road around central London which has some of the highest levels of traffic congestion and air pollution in the UK. “Our World” is strongly inspired by the memory of Ella Kissi-Debrah, a nine-year-old who died following severe asthma attacks in 2013. Ella’s home was just 25 metres from the South Circular and, in 2020, a coroner concluded that illegal levels of air pollution from the road were a significant factor in her death, making Ella the first person in the UK to have air pollution added to her death certificate (HM Coroner for the Inner South District of Greater London 2020). Schools in London with the highest percentage of non-white pupils are exposed to levels of NO_x (nitrogen oxides, a prime air pollutant from motor vehicles) that are, on average, 28% higher than schools with the lowest proportion of students from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds; there is a similar difference of 27% between children who attend schools in the most and least deprived areas respectively (Environmental Defense Fund 2021). Working-class people of colour like Ella are thus more vulnerable to the effects of air pollution in London. This is a form of environmental racism in which minority groups are more exposed to life-threatening pollutants.

“Our World” is therefore a work about both the structural inequalities of breathing and the grief which follows losses from such inequalities. Death by air pollution is an ongoing issue which continues to mobilise communities across the UK; “Our World” entails grief which is not only reactive to loss, but anticipatory of emerging losses. While music’s psychotherapeutic capacity to aid those suffering from the feelings of despair and anxiety which accompany grief has been much researched (DiMaio and Economos 2017; Hilliard 2007; O’Callaghan et al. 2013), music and ecological grief remains largely unexplored, as does sustained engagement with breath and air in ecomusicological literature. In light of these

lacunae, I will synthesise work from the broader environmental humanities to consider how Ssega's music addresses ecological grief. In doing so, I theorise how breathing and air in "Our World" acts as a form of socio-political resistance to loss. I bring together the notion of a "political ecology of air" (Allen 2020) and the concept of "weathering" (Neimanis and Walker 2014) to facilitate what Timothy Choy and Jerry Zee call an "atmospheric" form of attention:

This form of thought looks up and around, at plumes, clouds and sky. It looks inward through the vital interiors that render bodies channels, containers, and filters for airs and the things they hold. More significant than the directionality of its gaze, however, is its manner of attunement to the potentials of substances to shift from states of settlement or condensation to ones of airborne agitation, to settle again in time, or to activate a reaction, somewhere else. (Choy and Zee 2015: 211)

Choy and Zee's "atmospheric" attentiveness is thus not only a means of understanding the permeability of bodies (to air, music, grief), but also the capacity of air to act upon its subjects, to unsettle. By attending to air and how it is breathed, I demonstrate that Ssega's music and the people involved in producing it offer an embodied response to loss in the face of environmental pollution. With this in mind, I suggest that music helps us to inherit ecological grief responsibly, focusing not just on healing trauma, but on interrogating our own responses to injustices.

Thinking atmospherically

Much scholarship on music and the environment focusses on the pollution or degradation of the material, living world with reference to land and water: how popular songs chart the pollution of a Taiwanese river (Guy 2009); Indigenous musical responses to fracking and extractivism (Galloway 2020; Love 2018); the depopulation of forests to produce musical instruments (Gibson 2019). Where, though, is air in this body of work? In almost all cases, music-making and listening require air, yet the question of what this air is like, and how its pollution might impact music remains unasked. Air remains largely inconspicuous, always present and breathed, but rarely mentioned or viewed as sufficiently "material" to warrant much attention; a symptom perhaps of a set of "elemental assumptions" (Jackson and Fannin 2011: 436) which frame matter as solid or visible, rather than gaseous. This is no doubt also bolstered by the notion that humans are a "geologic force" (Ribac and Harkins 2020), articulated through the not unproblematic term "the Anthropocene" (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). The geological paradigm the Anthropocene invites has much to offer musicological thought by way of emphasising the long-lasting impacts of human activities, including music (Daughtry 2020; Størvold 2020). Nonetheless, it foregrounds ideas of solidity and directs attention to the Earth's crust, rather than its atmosphere. To decentre this geological focus, this paper will theorise both grieving and music as atmospheric – aired in the broadest sense of the word, moving through us, largely unseen, sometimes uninvited, but always felt.

I want to think through “Our World” in terms of what environmental humanities scholar Irma Allen (2020) dubs a “political ecology of air-and-breathing bodies” (hereafter a “political ecology of air”). She suggests that,

Attending to breath brings previously considered immaterialities (elements, lungs, dust, emotions, affects, atmospheres and breath itself) into sharp focus with implications for how environmental subjectivities and politics come into being and how embodiment figures through these encounters. (2020: 98)

Conceptualising breathing as a “form of knowing” (2020: 89), Allen’s political ecology helps us to recognise that we are always in embodied relations with air and that these relations are structured by particular political and social forms. In other words, breath is the site at which the relationships between humans and the air we rely on can be understood. Resonating with efforts to understand a “political ecology of music” (Devine 2015), Allen’s term is useful for unpacking how music, air, and ecologies of grief might interact. Furthermore, Allen’s is a feminist political ecology which draws attention to the intersectional aspects of the relationship between air and breathing bodies. Breathing is not universally experienced, but is shaped along lines of race, gender, and class (Górska 2016). This is particularly important to note when considering music which explicitly deals with questions of environmental (in)justice. Considering Ssega’s “Our World” through the lens of a political ecology of air (and breathing bodies) allows us to ask which bodies get to breathe which air.

To elucidate how responsible practices of grieving might fit into a political ecology of air, I draw on Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker’s (2014) concept of “weathering”. Responding to the prevalent notion that climate and environmental change does not feel, for many Western societies, particularly “close to home”, Neimanis and Walker suggest a model for understanding our embodied imbrication with our environments, viewing climate change and human bodies “as partaking in a common space, a conjoined time, a mutual worlding that we call *weathering*” (2014: 560, emphasis in original). Weathering is “a logic, a way of being/becoming, or a mode of affecting and differentiating that brings humans into relation with more-than-human weather” (2014: 560); in other words, weathering recognises that – just as the environments we live in are responsive to human activities such as pollution – we are responsive to these environments. Environmental change is therefore not something we are *in*, but something we are *of* (1).

Like Allen, Neimanis and Walker situate themselves alongside feminist new materialist thinking, in this case Stacy Alaimo’s (2008) concept of “transcorporeality” and Karen Barad’s (2007) concept of “intra-action”, which both posit the co-constitutive and entangled relationships between humans and environment. While “weathering” is more explicitly theorised in relation to climate change and weather itself, it nonetheless speaks to an ontological statement which is aired and atmospheric in nature: that humans change the environment, and it changes us. In a piece such as “Our World” which deals with unwanted and even harmful change, weathering offers a way to comprehend not just how air pollution affects parts of the human population, but how we might respond to it, including

how we might grieve the losses it causes. Thinking with weathering allows both a sense of mutual world-making between humans and their environments and a sense of weathering these changes through resilience; Allen's political ecology of air complements this by bringing out questions of environmental justice. Together, these perspectives afford a view on how ecological grief operates in this music in a way that is focussed on adaptation to change and the political and ethical inequalities that come with this.

Like music and sound, air raises questions of permeability and leakage: it gets into the cracks. Breath and air also complicate the divide between interior and exterior, blurring the distinctions between individual and shared, aired environment. This has interesting consequences for thinking about grief. In a rare consideration of music's role in dealing with loss and grief on an environmental scale, Andrew Mark notes the following:

By sitting with loss, opportunities for responding in ways that do not diminish the significance of what is lost can arise (...) Musicking provides an ethical outlet not merely as emotional ear candy, or only as elegy, but also as a larger systemic process. (2016: 64)

For Mark, the systemic process offered by music is "the strategic ability to slow down and perhaps even stop completely" (2016: 57) as a counterweight to the voracious consumerism which has led to numerous environmental problems, including urban air pollution. While I do not agree that "slowing down" will be universally effective against the urgent environmental disasters playing out globally (see also Sharma 2014), Mark's attentiveness to the need for environmental mourning through music is a welcome riposte to the general absence of literature on music and ecological grief. It also speaks to contemporary work such as Cosmo Sheldrake's "Pliocene" (2018), a pre-emptive elegy for the sounds of endangered species, and the Weather Station's album *Ignorance* (2021), which deals with the artist's own experiences of climate anxiety and grief. I have chosen to deal with Ssega's work because it offers unique affordances on the distributed nature (or systemic process) of ecological grief through its focus on air and breathing. In what follows, I analyse "Our World" to suggest that music can politicise and modulate loss caused by atmospheric, aired changes to our environments by enmeshing bodies – of performers and listeners – in a form of shared weathering.

"Our World"

In the music video for "Our World", Ssega performs while standing by the South Circular, while largely positive, smiling footage of Lewisham residents living their day-to-day lives is montaged.



FIGURE 1. Still from *Our World (Fight for Air)* [Official Video]. Copyright Love Ssega 2021.

We see people wearing now-familiar face coverings, a COVID-era reminder that the air we breathe out can hold contagion, just as much as the air we breathe in. Much of the rhetoric in the single centres on notions of community care and hospitality, best represented in the opening line “Welcome to our world”, which recurs, mantra-like, towards the end, counterpointed with the voices of other, unseen individuals. Ssega’s connection to this “world” and deaths such as Ella’s are based on demographic similarities: in an interview he noted, “That could have been me. Like, because I grew up in the area, I went to school in the same area, I’m also black, you know. That could have been me” (Jean and Ssega 2021). Like the South Circular’s community, whose faces we see in the video, Ssega is subject to the structural inequalities which make him more exposed to air pollution, a fact underlined emotively when his narrative voice switches to address this community: “Look after your family, stay alive, please”. Staying alive, for those on the South Circular, is a process of weathering, of being changed (and harmed) by environmental conditions brought on by the institutional and infrastructural failure to maintain healthy air quality in certain areas.

Ssega’s influences as an artist are as much British protest music of The Clash, the poetic sensibilities of Gil Scott-Heron, and the urgency of US hip-hop (Ssega 2022), the latter two of which have a strong lineage of responding to systemic violence against Black and working-class communities (Harrison and Arthur 2019; Ogbar 2007). Although he does not class himself as a rapper, his performance here is itself deeply reliant on sustained, rapid inhalation and exhalation while delivering dense lyrical content. The “flow” (a term used widely amongst emcees, listeners, and scholars alike) of Ssega’s performance “describes all of the rhythmical and articulative features of a rapper’s delivery of the lyrics” (Adams 2009: 2) and is thus

reliant on how Ssega uses his breath and body. In addition to rhythm and articulation, flow is also used to denote a performer's ability to generate semantic meaning and affect in inventive and culturally specific ways (Adams 2015, Ohriner 2019). Discussing the various aspects of flow in rap music, Oliver Kautny explicitly conceives two of these in terms of air: "the air flowing out of the lungs" and "the musical result of the airflow synchronized to a musical arrangement called beat" (2015: 103). Kautny unfortunately does not elaborate further, making no subsequent mention of the air involved in flow. Nonetheless, I take up this centrality of air to the act of rapping to highlight how, in "Our World", flow necessitates an embodied relationship between performer and atmospheric elements.

Ssega often begins verses partway through a bar, his words pre-empting the metrical downbeat and offering a sense of urgency. This is heightened by the delivery of lyrics which make frequent use of enjambment and are so long that to sing or rap them in one breath would require great physical effort. Indeed, at points where the end of lines correspond with the end of bars, Ssega can be heard snatching a breath, making the enjambment all the more pronounced when no such breath is taken. The intake of air and its controlled use, then, is central to the flow which Ssega creates. Expelling air, however, is also part of the flow of "Our World". From the outset, the sample of what sounds like a flute or panpipe sits at the top of the texture, an instrument which immediately connotes "breathiness" in its timbre and means of sound production. This quality is mirrored in the sibilance of Ssega's opening line, "Welcome to our world, this is the place, the South London voiceless speak". The chorus, which is formed of a line repeated six times ("Do you really care? Yeah"), foregrounds a different expulsion of air: its scansion and melodic inflection emphasises the two plosive sounds "d" and "c", which require a quicker release of air compared to other phonemes. The recurrence of such sounds at the anchor-point of the chorus compels Ssega to expel more air more quickly than he otherwise might. To be clear, by pointing out these features of the piece's flow, I am not suggesting that they represent conscious decisions by Ssega to retain focus on his breathing. Rather, by noting that air is an intrinsic part of his performance, I am drawing attention to the minute and often-disregarded instances on this busy London road during which an "ecology of air-and-breathing bodies" (after Allen) operates between Ssega and his environment. As I will demonstrate, within such an ecology, this *particular* air weathers his body.

Situated on the South Circular, breathing those same pollutants that have harmed thousands, Ssega's voice thus becomes the site of interaction between Black, working-class bodies and smoggy London air. In "Our World", the flow of his rapping and singing accelerates the flow of polluting matter through his own lungs. To think atmospherically (Choy and Zee 2015), let us trace this matter. From a vehicle's engine, where it is formed during the combustion of fossil fuels, a molecule of, say, a nitrogen oxide (NO_x) is expelled through the exhaust pipe and into the air. Tumbling momentarily, it is then thrust higher by another vehicle, joining millions of other particles. They clump, gather, intensify as rush hour approaches, and Ssega situates himself by the traffic. Recording begins and he inhales. The NO_x rushes in, through his nose perhaps, past the larynx (the site of his vocal cords) down the trachea, and into the dense maze of his lungs. There, the NO_x settles. As Ssega sings or raps, more molecules join; some are exhaled once more, others remain nestled in his body. They begin to irritate the lining of the

lungs, perhaps causing a cough or tight-chestedness. As they do so, he continues to exhale not just particles and air, but words and music about those particles and air. His breath carries not just pollutants, but sonic vibrations. Others – drivers, pedestrians, residents – breathe it all in, the air constituting an atmosphere in both senses of the word: the space around us; and a condition of feeling, shared by others. Ssega literally performs in embodied dialogue with deadly air to illustrate the uneven consequences of pollution. His decision to record on the South Circular itself is therefore in part a political one, in which he and those around him weather the inequalities caused by atmospheric pollution.

By focussing on the communal aspects of breathing, Ssega in turn generates a musical understanding of grief as shared – the lives of particularly vulnerable individuals like Ella were lost by dint of the conditions “where we live, die and eat”, as Ssega sings. The “Our World” of the song’s title is a place in which to mourn the fact that their lived environment is not safe. The sad irony is that much of that mourning – that sung, spoken, *breathed* mourning – is done in the very place where the air might kill you, especially if you are Black and Minority Ethnic, and/or working class. Thinking about this with reference to a political ecology of air, it becomes clear that breathing in this music is not an equal act, but one traversed by vectors of race and class. The air in the suburban, relatively affluent Edinburgh street where I write this is not the same air Ssega breathes as he sings in traffic-saturated London. As Allen puts it, “Where you breathe matters; who breathes counts” (2020: 92), a sentiment reflected in the lines Ssega sings which question “NO₂ means something to me, but what does it mean to you?/Or do you not care/Because you think you’re in an area that’s for the well-to-do?”. “Our World” draws attention to the listener’s own embodied interaction with air, inviting questions about the injustices in our relations to the socionatural world which lead to breathing becoming deadly for some. I emphasise the *some*: after a pointed reference to then-UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s run-in with COVID-19 and the UK’s distressing death rate (“Can’t even get the man at the top/He survived here, others did not/Hundred and fifty thousand plus can’t be forgot”), Ssega appeals, “So please let us breathe/Before the breathing stops”. At this point, a sudden break in the music occurs, leaving only the sounds of a car horn. The curtailment of musical and lyrical flow stands here as an analogy to the curtailment of airflow. Replacing all the sounds which require breath (rapping, singing, the flute/panpipe sample) with an instantly recognisable aural signifier of traffic underscores the results of political inaction on air pollution: the inability to breathe, hence loss of life. The questions of environmental justice raised in “Our World” thus forge a political ecology of air by recognising that who gets to continue to breathe does indeed count.

Breathing and weathering through grief are, in “Our World”, justice-oriented ways of being. Ssega’s exhortation, then, to “fight for air” is where grief turns to action. Offering space to grieve environmental injustices, the single nonetheless leaves listeners with a mobilising call to do something; it ends with the question, “Would you fight for your air?/Cause we all need to care”. This is also reflected in the co-projects which accompanied “Our World”. *Project Earth*, a comic strip illustrated by London-born, Edinburgh-based artist Andrew Kiwanuka, foregrounds the voices of young Black and Minority Ethnic individuals, who, upon realising

environmental damage is much closer to home than they thought, become engaged in activism.

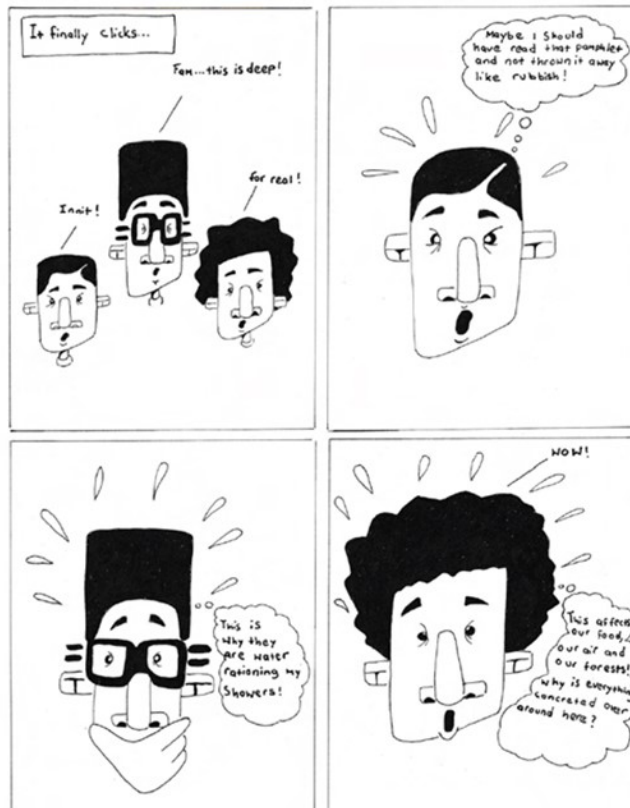


FIGURE 2. Excerpt from Project Earth. Copyright Andrew Kiwanuka 2021.

Billboards across South London also raised awareness of the single and Lewisham's problems with air pollution. These are public expressions of environmental injustices and the grief they can cause. Breathing, here, is therefore a site of suffering, but also a site of shared resistance to being weathered. Even the chorus of voices which respond to Ssega's might easily be equated with the Lewisham residents depicted in their daily lives across the music video. Ssega's project speaks to a commons of air: a grassroots expression of pain within a community as way of healing; yet also a collective intake of air laden with toxins. It is less about environmental degradation and more about what it is like to live and breathe with the consequences of it. "Our World" speaks for communities weathered by particular (and particulate) material manifestations of both grief and air pollution. Simultaneously, it also enables a weathering of these manifestations, offering endurance and solidarity through its own political ecology of air.



FIGURE 3. Billboards around South London. Photo by Nick Obank Copyright Love Ssega 2021.

On Hope?

While grief and mourning have the capacity to be paralyzing and to reinforce feelings of despair, this is not the grief we find in “Our World”. Yet, the apparent antidote to hopelessness or despair, hope, is not especially apparent either – the single largely focusses on the systemic problems facing Lewisham residents. Several scholars position hope as a useful motivator in addressing climate and environmental change and as an alternative to the negative feelings often experienced (Li and Monroe 2019, Ojala 2012, Pihkala 2018). But, as “Our World” and the sobering depictions of climate change outcomes in popular media show, it is not so easy to choose hope when there is so much to be grieved. Mark goes so far as to “pathologize the impulse for hope and positivity” (2016: 70) in environmental movements, suggesting that hope can lead us to repeat harmful patterns of behaviour; instead, he argues, musical processes for mourning offer a valuable space for reflection in environmental activism, leaving musicians and musicologists with the call, “Don’t organize, mourn!” (2016). Mark, however, seems to be referring to a specific genre of hope, which generates blind optimism in the face of indefensible disasters. The political ecology of “Our World”, I want to suggest, charts a more complicated route which defies a simple dualism between hope and despair.

Instead, “Our World” offers a kind of musical resilience imbued with a call to accountability. It does so through highlighting what unites every human: the need to breathe. In the place-specific resonances and collaborative nature of the project, Ssega responds to grief and adversity by forging social bonds: the montaged faces

of Lewisham residents; the choir of voices; even the *our* of “Our World”. It is important that the connective tissue for these bonds, the thing-in-common, is presented as air, or – more specifically – the right to clean air. I mentioned earlier that the air I breathe and the air Ssega breathes is not the same in terms of pollution levels. While this is true to an extent and is modulated by our different breathing bodies, when viewed atmospherically, it *is* the same air, in that we are both dependent on a shared atmosphere. By following the air of “Our World” and finding it to be thus shared, the loss of lives such as Ella Kissi-Debrah’s at the hands of this air also becomes shared. This collective understanding of air and grief which I have attempted to expose here views our lives and deaths as enmeshed with each other and with our environments. This is, at least to me, unsettling in the manner outlined in Choy and Zee’s proposal for atmospheric thinking at the beginning of this paper. Who, for instance, would tell Ella’s family to have hope when their child died because of the cumulative (in)actions of thousands of drivers and those tasked with keeping air safe? Likewise, who would say that mourning is the only option when there is so much more to be done to protect children like Ella? Thinking atmospherically allows us to move beyond simplistic notions of a choice between hope and despair to instead emphasise that (by virtue of always already being entangled with and shaping our world, by weathering) each of us has the “responsibility” (Barad 2007, Haraway 2016), an ethical imperative, to make sure the atmosphere is safe for everyone in it, no matter how bleak or hopeful the situation seems. We are all called to weather in “Our World” and this allows us to attend to new forms of political ecology, attached not just to territoriality, or individualistic small-scale actions, but to atmospheres in which both grief and hope can percolate.

As ecological grief is only likely to increase in prevalence as we move further into the Anthropocene, I would suggest that there is an urgent need for cultural practices which help us carry out processes of grieving. Indeed, Makenzie MacKay et al. (2020) suggest that community-centred and culturally specific approaches are particularly constructive strategies for dealing with negative emotional experiences such as ecological grief. Part of making sense of the ecological crises we are witnessing is the act of what Donna Haraway (2016) calls “staying with the trouble”, of living and dying with other humans and more-than-human species. Ssega does not shy away from “the trouble” and the struggle between living and dying; on the contrary, his music embodies it. Death by anthropogenic environmental change not only raises questions about why that death has occurred but implicates those of us who remain behind. The very absence of voices – be they the present or the likely future victims of air pollution – forces us to ask why we are the ones allowed to grieve, to survive beyond others. In using music and air to frame ecologies of grief, the losses memorialised in “Our World” uncannily ask, “why was this allowed to happen, and what will we do about it?”

Acknowledgement of sources

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Endnotes

(1) It is worth noting that weathering bears some resemblance to the Inuit concept of *Sila*, which composer John Luther Adams has incorporated in his music, and which signifies “in the largest possible sense the weather, its cosmic and chaotic modalities, and the wisdom that attends to them” (Chisholm 2016: 173). Like weathering, *Sila* emphasises the connectivity and mutual vulnerability between humans, climate, and atmosphere.

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