Jorie Graham’s *Sea Change*: the poetics of sustainability and the politics of what we’re sustaining

*Matthew Griffiths*

In her 2008 collection *Sea Change*, US poet Jorie Graham pursues a concern about how language can engage with and represent material force, a concern that has preoccupied her in previous work. But *Sea Change* marks a distinct development of this in two key respects: not only does Graham adopt and sustain a particular form throughout the book to explore the tension between word and world, her concerns also inform a number of pieces that refer, albeit obliquely, to the concept of sustainability. The collection is described in the blurb as ‘poetry of the tipping point, when what is lost and damaged in our world and our humanity is forever irrecoverable, when time itself has disintegrated’ (Graham 2008a: back cover).

In the context of what is ‘lost’ and ‘irrecoverable’, sustainability is clearly a problematic concept, as can be seen in remarks Graham made reflecting on the book’s composition: she writes that she ‘realized that though it might indeed be, as many scientists think, “too late” to completely avoid an unsustainable world – such knowledge is both true, and baffling to the soul’ (2012: 5; author’s italics). A corresponding dilemma is summarised in the foreword to *Sustainability Education*, when Peter Blaze Corcoran writes that ‘sustainability has become the metanarrative of our time – while at the same time sustainability has become a diminishing prospect’ in actuality (2010: xiii). His analysis, like Graham’s, identifies a discrepancy between the ideal of sustainability and our inability as a civilisation to achieve that ideal. This discrepancy arises because of the contingency of any definition of ‘sustainability’, a problem that is of increasing concern in the field. For instance, Leerom Medovoi, in his article, ‘A Contribution to the Critique of Political Ecology: Sustainability as Disavowal’, points to the ‘substantial resources and interests behind the word’ (2010: 129), while Kristiina A. Vogt et al. note in *Sustainability Unpacked* that ‘defining sustainability has been challenging because of the need to include social, economic and environmental factors simultaneously’ and that ‘[o]ne definition cannot
and should not encompass the complexity and capture the nuances that are inherent in the word “sustainable” (2010: 3). Nevertheless, as Medovoi indicates, “[i]t is taken for granted that ‘sustainability’ refers specifically to the maintaining of something that is humanly valued’ (2010: 130), pointing up the inherent anthropocentrism of the concept.

This tacitly self-interested definition also informs Medovoi’s observation that sustainability ‘has become a compulsively used word to get at some unspecified but ubiquitous notion of an environmentally ethical and conscious way of life’ (2010: 129). For Vogt et al. the difficulty of specifying what is meant lies partly in trying ‘to include social, ecological and economic factors with all their interconnections and possible feedbacks into one story. Many factors need to be included that may not, at first glance, appear to be relevant’ (2010: 4). Medovoi’s observation that the term ‘sustainability’ is ‘compulsively used’ and ‘ubiquitous’ corresponds with Corcoran’s notion of sustainability as a ‘metanarrative’; similarly, the difficulty that Vogt et al. perceive in telling sustainable stories represents the difficulty with which we make that ubiquitous notion a reality.

Given the tensions within ‘sustainability’ as an ‘unspecified’ term, and our need to establish ‘interconnectedness’ between ‘many factors’ which ‘may not, at first glance appear to be relevant’, I will in this chapter propose that the poetics Graham employs in Sea Change makes use of the resources of poetic language, technique and tradition to engage with, define and take issue with conceptions of sustainability. In doing so, I contend that she challenges a previous model of ‘sustainable poetry’ advanced by Leonard M. Scigaj in his 1999 book of that title, depending as that does on a particular, relatively narrow definition of sustainability rather than taking up its problematic ambiguities. The inherent tensions of the term recur throughout Sea Change, and I will endeavour to illuminate critically the way in which the poet’s technique addresses the politics of sustainability in the twenty-first century.

I will begin by examining Scigaj’s concept of ‘sustainable poetry’ and suggest how it becomes increasingly problematic in the years after his book’s publication; through a reading of the title poem of Sea Change, I will show how Graham engages with these problems while using techniques for which Scigaj criticises her earlier work. I will proceed to analyse the way Graham’s engagement is sustained throughout Sea Change, and go on to examine how the book’s dialogue with the literary tradition attempts to sustain our culture. I will then reflexively examine how Graham endeavours to sustain art in the face of twenty-first-century environmental change, highlighting the significance of the sustained sequence to our engagement with such change. Graham’s poetics implies that sustainability, far from being an intentional political practice, is a fraught, contingent, but nevertheless persistent human habit.
The unsustainability of sustainable poetry

Graham’s poetic practice challenges the ease with which we have adopted ‘sustainability’ as an ‘unspecified but ubiquitous notion’, in Medovoi’s words. Scigaj himself adopts the term when he writes that ‘[s]ustainable poetry maintains a healthy balance between ... textual and referential needs,’ and he bases his understanding of sustainability on the ‘principle of biocentric harmony,’ proposing that ‘sustainability means that humans can harvest a sufficient amount of a natural resource for consumption so long as we do not deplete the resource base’ (1999: 78). Already, this indicates the tacit anthropocentricity – ‘humans can harvest a sufficient amount’ – to which Medovoi draws our attention. Scigaj also invokes a specifically aesthetic notion of balance in the form of ‘biocentric harmony,’ thus using cultural terms to define a presumed natural condition, on which he will in turn base his titular, cultural concept. When Vogt et al. use a similar, extended analogy, thinking ‘of the global community as a “symphony orchestra”’, they point out that it is only when we ‘coordinate resource consumption globally’ that it ‘becomes more sustainable; that is, the “symphony” plays a beautiful piece of music’ (2010: 9). So what for Scigaj is an originating principle is shown by Vogt et al. actually to require a complex effort of orchestration.

Scigaj proceeds from his definition to suggest that: ‘[t]he resource base of poetry is the referential world, and language that evades the referential world through divorcing text from context ... is not sustainable’ (1999: 79). However, in proceeding from a material to a poetic sustainability, Scigaj examines the definition of neither. As Vogt et al. point out, just ‘[b]ecause we have defined sustainability, this does not automatically mean that we understand how to implement practices to achieve its goals’ (2010: 4); there is, in contrast, no clear sense in Scigaj why sustainability as defined in material terms can only be implemented through referential poetics. For example, to consider a term such as poetic resources will suggest more than just a poet’s referents, and will include the techniques and traditions at their disposal as well. So when Scigaj asserts that ‘a poetic oeuvre driven by theory rather than the actual lived experience of the poet within the stubborn complexities of daily existence’ is not sustain-able (1999: 79), he then eschews what other, non-referential resources might offer in terms of an engagement with sustainability.

This much may be clarified by a pair of complementary critical observations. John Elder maintains in an interview in *The Clearing* that an ‘authentic narrative is one that allows you to live sustainably in place, while an inauthentic narrative has the opposite effect’ (2015); while Elder does not elaborate on these terms, he shares with Scigaj a concern that literature should help us live sustainably. To qualify this, we should also remember that the ‘authentic’ need not consist entirely in the referential.
Of Graham’s earlier work, Helen Vendler writes in *The Given and the Made* that ‘the word “true” for [her] does not mean representational accuracy or scientific accuracy alone; the true, for an artist, must involve the accurate transmutation of feeling into knowledge, perception into categorization’ (1995: 103).

Although he writes nearly a decade before the publication of *Sea Change*, Scigaj also claims that Graham’s earlier work demonstrates a ‘poetics of textuality’ that ‘removes us from the practical world we must engage, moment to moment’ (Scigaj 1999: 56). In *Sea Change*, however, Graham demonstrates that such a poetics can nevertheless be used to engage with the concerns that occupy Scigaj, and in so doing exhibits some of the qualities by which Scigaj characterises sustainable poetry. For example, Graham’s work does ‘emphasize the *relationality* of language – how it articulates and codifies ways that humans relate to nature and themselves’ (Scigaj 1999: 32; author’s italics), and – to an extent – ‘does find ways to reassert and reinvigorate interconnections between the potential agent [i.e. the reader] and the referential world’ (62). That Graham does so without abandoning the techniques for which Scigaj criticises her in *Sustainable Poetry* suggests that he may be too singular in his understanding of sustainability, but it also indicates how much more evident the complexity of the concept – and our failure to realise it – becomes in the nine years between the two books.

**Sustaining sea change**

That our metanarrative and experience are at odds is evident in the opening four lines of the title poem ‘Sea Change’ (Graham 2008a: 3). In these, the narrator first reports an unprecedentedly intense wind before comparing it with ‘the recording’ of weather and then remarking on its characterisation in ‘the news’. The wind’s very force is suggested by a blowing-back of sense at the first few line breaks, which mark transitions where we would not grammatically anticipate them – particularly in the enjambed ‘Un- / natural’. This difficulty can only be countered by the sustained effort one requires to keep the meaning of the poem in mind as one reads. Yet the poem shows that human narrative still endeavours to contain and control the phenomenal world; we have a need for framing discourses that is evident in the explicit reference to ‘the recording’ of weather data and ‘the news’ that relays it. Notably, these occur before sensory confirmation, ‘Also the body says it’ (3). The priority of media over physical experience signals the ubiquity of discourse in our construction of the world, and in this capacity the poem reflects Graham’s continuing concern with ‘[h]ow to give bodily perception its due in thought,’ which Vendler finds as ‘already vexing’ the poet’s earlier verse (1995: 96).
What Scigaj refers to as ‘actual lived experience,’ then, still requires a means of expression ‘to evoke what one cannot completely convey in language, but can experience fully in the lived moment’ (Scigaj 1999: 68). Graham’s mediating discourse is far removed from the context of ‘wilderness experience’ or ‘wild being’ that Scigaj is keen for ecopoets to evoke (1999: 68), yet ‘Sea Change’ could still be said to report on the ‘actual lived experience’ of many who may not have the opportunity or inclination to ‘gain a sense of wild being’ in this way. Again, Graham’s poetics become apposite to describe the difficulties of sustainability because of qualities she sustains from her earlier work, which, as Vendler remarks, show that we ‘cannot assert the sort of mastery over experience’ that would allow ‘choosing to stay the fair moment for inspection’ (1995: 128).

For Scigaj, the ‘intrusive media’ in Graham’s poetry signifies that ‘the only relief from corrosive materialism is lonely anthropocentric introspection’ (1999: 59). However, by consistently enforcing breaks that do not coincide with syntactic pauses, Graham’s versification in ‘Sea Change’ draws attention to its own artificiality, highlighting that our environment comes to us predominantly mediated and our understanding of it arrives at ‘the body’ only after it has been processed through weather records and news. As such, her technique is far from solipsistic, as Scigaj suggests, but indicates her recognition of the way experience is entangled with its mediation; Vendler notes that the poet’s ‘form mirror[s] the unstoppable avalanche of sensations and the equal avalanche of units of verbal consciousness responding to those sensations’ (1995: 106).

This formal ‘avalanche’ suggests that we are in fact struggling with the sustained momentum of experience and in turn failing to sustain our framing discourses, our metanarratives. Graham’s own use of the word ‘sustained’ in ‘Sea Change’ is defined as ‘in a hatred of / a thought’ (2008a: 3; author’s italics). What then seems to be sustained in this context is an intellectual resistance to the knowledge that the earlier ‘news’ conveys, a hatred of thinking it. The subsequent phrase, ‘or a vanity that comes upon one out of / nowhere’, is syntactically ambiguous, so it remains unclear whether the vanity is itself another ‘sustained’ quality or is actually another object of the preceding ‘hatred’. Simultaneously, then, this spontaneous ‘vanity’ is akin to the resistance to thought, and in being hated, also an anti-intellectualism that prompts self-disgust. While this may suggest ‘the tortuous recesses of introspection’ that Scigaj criticises in Graham’s earlier work (Scigaj 1999: 59), the ambivalence is a necessary recognition of the ‘vanity’ that obtains in the concept of sustainability, that is, in trying to sustain ‘actual lived experience’ in the face of a thought that might threaten us.

In this context, we are not actively sustaining our culture; rather, we are passively sustaining an onslaught, in the manner that Medovoi compares to sustaining an injury: ‘[t]o “sustain” something can also mean to endure
or withstand it,’ and so ‘[i]t suggests damage that we are not so much trying to eliminate as to find a way to survive’ (2010: 131). Medovoi describes this as ‘a striking definition precisely because it inverts the valence’ (2010: 131) of the other, ‘ubiquitous’ definitions of sustainability to which we are accustomed. Such an understanding of sustainability reveals it as a position we are forced to adopt, rather than one that allows us a capacity for decision. Far from being sustained through time, this conception of sustainability only begins with the recognition that we must consciously begin defending our lives and culture against encroaching environmental crisis.

Indeed, in ‘Sustainable This, Sustainable That,’ the critic Stacy Alaimo makes the following comments on Graham’s lines: ‘[t]he abrupt departure of a sense of permanence may provoke the desire to arrest change, to shore up solidity, to make things, systems, standards of living “sustainable”’ (Alaimo 2012: 558). Scigaj’s diagnosis that ‘Graham has an inadequate sense of agency’ and that she ‘cannot affirm our human potential for positive social action in the referential world’ (1999: 59) would seem to be borne out in these later poems, because she identifies our reaction as both belated and self-centred. However, her poetic practice is then able to give expression to the tendency in sustainability discourse that identifies the gulf between what we think we can achieve and what we have achieved, which has only widened in the years since Scigaj’s book was published.

A sustained experiment

Graham’s distinctive style of versification throughout Sea Change enacts the contradictions inherent in considerations of sustainability by the tension she creates between the sense and the sound of the poetry, in particular its momentum. This style takes the shape of poems beginning with a line ranged left, sometimes extending across the width of the page, but on occasion finishing before halfway. That line is followed, in most instances, by between one and nine shorter, indented lines, which keep a consistent left-hand margin about 40 per cent of the way across the page. These are followed by another long line ranged left, then more, shorter lines, maintaining the secondary margin at roughly two fifths of the page width. There are no stanza breaks, while the syntax tends to be continuous and most lines are enjambed.

Visually, this creates a concentration of shorter lines some way in from the left-hand margin, and together with the lead-in of the fuller lines and the absence of stanza breaks, this creates a largely vertical momentum as the eye is drawn down the page. The use of punctuation, particularly parenthetical dashes, is syncopated with this, to create a tension between visual momentum and semantic hesitancy. The continued movement of
the reading eye across the page that the longer lines require, or the sustain-
ing of breath when read aloud, make the poems provocatively rather than
evocatively sensory; that is, the spaces make apparent the effort we have
to sustain in reading, in a way that continuous prose, or even conventional
verse forms, would not.

Graham’s technique enacts the tension between an overall design and
the difficulty of sustaining the pace that this design requires – replicating
the discrepancy between the metanarrative of sustainability and our
experience of failing to realise it – and also enacts the tension between
uncontainable material phenomena and the human attempt to manage
them. The failure to keep pace with change is evidenced in the remark,
in ‘Sea Change’: ‘how the future / takes shape / too quickly’ (Graham
2008a: 3). The enjambed lines once more create breaks where we do not
syntactically expect them, encouraging us to take breaths at the same
time as forcing us to read through them to provoke the sense of a future
‘taking shape’ too quickly for us to control.

The processes of nature cannot be contained by form or syntax, however,
and conventional categories are exceeded by the enjambed lines. As a
result, when the narrator insists that a ‘calm and / true’ state ‘did exist
just yesterday’ (Graham 2008a: 3), it reads as another projection of human
order rather than as an affirmation of former certainties, further under-
mined by the improbable precision of ‘just yesterday’, rather than just
‘yesterday’. The suggestion is that we are sustaining, or trying to sustain,
the state of yesterday, circling round on our nostalgia to recreate our
imagination of a past ideal. As in Alaimo’s analysis, sustainability confers
a belated value on practices of the past, a recognition that we only try
to preserve these once it is too late to do so effectively.

While Scigaj contrasts Graham’s earlier work with his notion of ‘sustain-
able poetry’ on the grounds that the poet ‘finds comfort only in intrapersonal
reverie’ (Scigaj 1999: 58), it is only through the critique prompted by such
reflection as her poetics enables that we begin to identify the relative
novelty of this conception of sustainability. Graham thus sustains techniques
for which Scigaj criticised her, to show that these can nevertheless offer
distinctive insights into the same concerns that occupied him. She rec-
ognises that we are attempting to sustain a sense of ourselves and our
cultural practices rather than our environments, which are in turn sustaining
change at their own momentum even as they also sustain the impacts of
human activity.2

Graham engages with human attempts to sustain an anthropocentrically
defined world throughout the collection. The ‘vanity’ to which she refers
in ‘Sea Change’, for instance, is again addressed in ‘Belief System’ (Graham
2008a: 45–7), a poem that explores the thoughts and ways of thinking that
our present moment should supersede. In the piece, an anthropocentric
exceptionalism is evident from the fourth line onwards: ‘By the mind we
meant / the human mind’ (Graham 2008a: 45; author’s italics). Graham’s adoption of the collective voice, ‘we’, suggests how complicit we all are in this process: it becomes something with which we can identify. By sustaining this cultural introspection in ‘Belief System’, Graham sees through it to what it in turn sustains: ‘Thinking was the habitation of a / trembling colony, a fairy tale—of waiting, love—of / the capacity for / postponement—’. First, here, is the intimation of how precarious our civilisation is – ‘a / trembling colony’ that we inhabit. But this is followed by the ‘fairy tale’ the ‘colony’ tells itself, and while ‘fairy tale’ may seem dismissive of our self-imposed narratives, Graham goes on to elaborate that we also inhabit such sympathetic qualities as ‘waiting, love’, and these in turn sustain ‘the capacity for / postponement’. This ‘capacity’ is itself postponed first by the line break and, after it, by an indent, these lines being the first two of five with an indented left-hand margin of the kind described above, so the versification again enacts the human contrivance of putting things off. It is a thought that postpones, and a postponement of thought.

When thought is forced to confront ‘[t]he future’, it asks: ‘How could it be performed by the mind became the / question—how, this sensation called tomorrow and / tomorrow?’ (Graham 2008a: 45). The attempt to perpetuate human forms of understanding and negotiation of the world – as in this instance performance – again acknowledges what Alaimo calls ‘[t]he human-centered discourses of sustainability’ (2012: 562). Scigaj maintains that certain poets ‘privilege private self-exploration’ and ‘merely allow the wasteful imperialism of dominant cultures to continue’ (1999: 56); yet Graham suggests that sustainability itself represents an attempt to perpetuate ‘dominant cultures’, and without such broader, cultural ‘self-exploration’, we would be unable to identify as much.

Sustaining the canon in Sea Change

The ‘question’ Graham asks in ‘Belief System’ is one that concerns making the nebulous concept of the future meaningful at the experiential as well as intellectual level. But the incommensurability of the future with human experience is attested by Tom Cohen, who observes that climate change – to consider one aspect of twenty-first-century environmental change – signifies ‘incompatible referentials arriving that would operate beyond archival memory and social history’ (2012: 24). That is, we cannot simply seek to sustain former ideas in the light of environmental change. Nevertheless, Graham’s allusion to Macbeth (5.5.19; Shakespeare 1984: 153) in ‘Belief System’, ‘tomorrow and / tomorrow’, suggests that our engagement with the future is enabled by an engagement with, or ‘performance’ of, the past; though, as per Cohen’s observation, the past offers
no true precedent for its ‘tomorrow’, and our notion of sea change itself experiences a sea change.

Quoted from Ariel’s song in *The Tempest* (1.2.396–403; Shakespeare 2011: 200), the phrase ‘sea change’ connotes an irreversible alteration of a state of affairs, a paradigm shift; read literally, it even denotes a process of oceanic restlessness and mutability, such as Graham has grappled with throughout the book. At the same time, as a quotation, ‘sea change’ is an expression sustained in our language for four centuries by a tradition continued in the act of quotation itself. Graham’s use of the phrase for her title thus enacts the recognition of unprecedented change while trying to sustain the culture that is jeopardised by it. As a poem, and throughout the book to which it gives its name, ‘Sea Change’ sustains a number of references to the canon that help organise and inform Graham’s response to the changing global environment of the twenty-first century.

In particular, she recognises the way that the tradition itself changes through time; any act of sustaining is also necessarily a contextually dependent change. Sustaining the past is thus a recycling of it for a different function or purpose. This sustaining of tradition enacts T. S. Eliot’s notion, as formulated in his 1919 essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’, that the appearance of a new work of art will alter all those that came before it, adjusting the relationship that already existed between them (Eliot 1975 [1919]: 38). His implication is that innovative work makes us perceive the tradition in a fresh and distinctive way.

Eliot conceives of this relationship in orderly, sculptural terms, whereas it is productively compared by John Elder to Gary Snyder’s notion of culture as being akin to ‘recycling dead biomass’ (Snyder quoted in Elder 2000: 228) – an altogether more organic analogy, apt insofar as it suggests how poetic material is broken down and reconstituted as new work. Nevertheless, although Elder sees culture as a process, ‘something which one does’ or ‘a dynamic continuity’ (2000: 229–30), Snyder’s organic analogy obscures the intentional, creative act of engagement by a contemporary poet in sustaining poetry of the past, which Eliot’s aesthetic analogy allows. Whether we choose Eliot’s model or Snyder’s, it is still clear that we establish a relationship with something more remote in time than Scigaj’s ‘actual lived experience’, as Snyder comments that culture works with material ‘derived not from grazing off the annual production of biomass, but from recycling dead biomass, the stuff of the forest floor, the trees that have fallen, the bodies of dead animals’ (quoted in Elder 2000: 228).

The process of adopting and adapting past cultural practices is anthropocentric inasmuch as it looks to human precedent to deal with contemporary predicaments. In doing so, though, it seeks to sustain a tradition older than our present practices, or even the ‘calm and / true’ state ‘[w]hich did exist just yesterday’ (Graham 2008a: 3). Vogt et al. correspondingly look to past cultures for sustainable precedents, and they write of
agricultural communities in which ‘[k]nowledge about the edible foods that they gathered’ was relayed from one generation to the next, ‘building a storehouse of information over the centuries’ (2010: 31). Eventually, then, ‘[h]uman history is a series of stories documented, in part, by people who were successful in adapting to their environment’ (Vogt et al. 2010: 283). This conception of sustainability is not simply the panicked attempt to prolong the present, such as that described by Alaimo, but something that has endured as culture endures. It looks to the past but, in order to deal with the ‘incompatible referentials’ to which Cohen refers, adapts a long-term view to current requirements.

In accordance with this principle, Graham’s adoption of Eliot sees a further adaptation of tradition because it suggests we can no longer form an order through the creation of new works of art, even retrospectively. As Alaimo alludes in identifying our desire ‘to shore up solidity’ (2012: 558), our vision of cultural continuity becomes the seeming chaos of Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land* (2015 [1922]: 53–77) because our changing planet exposes contemporary culture’s lack of internal cohesion. Apart from the commonality of reference to Shakespeare, what *Sea Change* also shares with *The Waste Land* is a tension between the human attempt to maintain order and vital, persistent material forces. When ‘the future / takes shape / too quickly’ in ‘Sea Change’, it is figured as ‘grasses shoot[ing] up, life disturbing life’ (Graham 2008a: 3); these echo the blooms emerging at the start of part I of Eliot’s poem, ‘The Burial of the Dead’ (2015 [1922]: 55). Eliot manages to half-contain natural energies with the present participles that end the first three lines of his poem, suggesting a circular pattern even with the onward thrust of those parts of the verb. He creates a cycle from processes that go beyond the containment of the line, managing to keep growth temporarily in check. By the twenty-first century, even this momentarily sustained equilibrium is impossible, and Graham’s form instead signifies the self-sustaining, runaway character of natural processes.

The force of the wind images this quality in both poems, and the comparison highlights the exacerbation of climate in the eighty-six years between them. In ‘A Game of Chess’, the second part of *The Waste Land*, the wind remains beyond a door, figuring the disturbance of the narrator’s interlocutor (2015 [1922]: 59). As order increasingly disintegrates throughout *The Waste Land*, however, its final section is exposed to the elements, so we hear ‘What the Thunder Said’: The wind in Graham’s poem resembles Eliot’s thunder in that it cannot be shut out, but it is given voice from the very beginning of her book. In ‘Sea Change’, the wind’s voice refutes the claim that we are unaware of our participation in worldly phenomena: ‘consider your affliction says the / wind, do not plead ignorance’ (Graham 2008a: 3–4). As in *The Waste Land*, civilisation wishes to sustain itself in separation from environmental change, hence
the distress expressed at the opening of Eliot’s poem on the return of spring after winter (2015: 55).

But we can only maintain the state that Graham calls ‘ignorance’ by suppressing the continuity between past and present. This condition is then forced to confront its own artificiality in Graham’s poem – ‘away leaks the / past, much farther than it used to go, beating against the shutters’ (2008a: 4) – while in The Waste Land, the attempt to bury the past beneath ground and ice is met with the recurring reassertion of its presence, whether as the flowers that open ‘The Burial of the Dead’, or the dead themselves that end the section (2015: 55, 57). In Graham’s poem, the cumulative past of human interaction with the environment is imagined not as the dead but as the weather, ‘beating against the shutters’, but our resistance to it is still marked by the failed enclosure of human domestic space apart from nature.

The wind’s imperative ‘consider’ is repeated later in ‘Sea Change’: ‘Consider / the body of the ocean which rises every / instant into / me’ (Graham 2008a: 4). This recalls the verb that directs our regard to the drowned sailor of ‘Death by Water’, part IV of The Waste Land (2015: 67), but a tonal shift between the two poems is seen in the way Graham writes as a first person, ‘me’, who is subject to the elements, rather than Eliot’s symbolic Phlebas. That is to say, we cannot project human experience of the sea into a separate, impersonal figure, but we must deal with it in the first person. Furthermore, there is only a versified – that is to say, artificial – boundary in Graham’s poem between ‘ocean which rises every instant into’ and ‘me’, so the environment impinges on personal experience. We are ourselves sustained by water, in the sense that Medovoi defines as ‘to “furnish with the necessaries of life”’ (2010: 130), but water’s own significance exceeds this function.

Graham recognises the difficulty of sustaining a boundary between the self and its material surroundings. Her poetry was already characterised by such trespass of the environmental on the territory of the personal. Of Graham’s earlier work, Vendler writes: ‘[t]he self must now portray itself in primary matter’ and ‘[y]et the indifference of the material universe to our fate makes us hesitate to appropriate the phenomena as adequate symbols of ourselves’ (1995: 125; author’s italics). By sustaining this concern until and through Sea Change, Graham’s poetics demonstrates the fallacy of maintaining a discrete sense of self as though it is separate from natural forces.

Sea Change’s allusions to The Tempest are further developed in the poem ‘Full Fathom’ (2008a: 30–1), which begins with the sea but churns in the experiences of everyday living, so as to evidence not only a comprehensive breakdown in categories but also a collapse of scales and contexts. Graham is then able to bring wider environmental and cultural phenomena into personal proximity in the poem with the reversal of
Shakespeare’s formulation: ‘Those are pearls that were his eyes’ (*The Tempest* 1.2.399; Shakespeare 2011: 200) becomes ‘those were’ / ‘that are’ in ‘Full Fathom’ (Graham 2008a: 31). The phenomena are rooted in an experiencing subject, ‘his eyes’, to become a vision of human entanglement with ‘carbon sinks’ and ‘carbon sources’ (Graham 2008a: 31). Human institutions such as ‘reparation / agreements, summary / judgments’ are not then sustained as such; rather, their dependence and impacts on the environment are exposed through their position in this sequence of phrases. The poem also questions the attempt to sustain the present:

```
when was it
in your admittedly short
life you
were permitted to believe that this lasted
forever?]
``` (Graham 2008a: 30)

Throughout, the poem’s deferral of syntactic closure represents both the belief that we can sustain present conditions forever and its simultaneous fallacy. The colons and ampersands that punctuate the opening lines recur throughout the poem, which is also strung through with em-dashes to put off a full-stop until the end of the final line. The syntax itself is trying to sustain things here, as a string of recapitulations, from which narratives emerge but are only hesitant and divergent.

To stress the physical implication of human beings in the climate, Graham also redeploys the imagery of *The Waste Land* in ‘Positive Feedback Loop’ (2008a: 42–4), itself a term naming a self-sustaining phenomenal cycle. The poem moves from a meditative, attentive opening to imagine the titular process, a way of describing a change that, once instigated, sustains itself. Using one of Eliot’s key symbols, Graham freights contemporary personal experience with the environmental processes that are beyond our grasp, both physically and mentally, when she invites us to use his image of dust (Eliot 2015 [1922]: 55) as a tactile model for ocean circulation, making the original spiritual connotations of that dust materially manifest. This represents a further engagement with the concerns Vendler identified in Graham’s earlier work, of ‘[h]ow to give bodily perception its due in thought’ (1995: 96), except that, here, Graham is trying to give thought its due in bodily perception in order to engage abstract phenomena through sensory experience. (We might compare Graham’s poetic achievement of this with the fictionally established relation between the phenomenological and the speculative real in Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* as discussed by Louise Squire later in this book.) Graham’s technique affords a similar value to experience as Scigaj does, but does so because of the broader world to which imagined experience can give us access, rather than experience for its own sake.

The lines of the poem again run across the page in a manner that demonstrates the difficulty of being able to follow the instructions ‘try /
to hold in mind the North Atlantic Deep Water’ and ‘try to hold a / complete collapse, in the North Atlantic Drift’ (Graham 2008a: 42), as we might try to retain the dust we are handed. The conceptually difficult – ‘try / to hold in mind’ – becomes what is physically impossible – ‘try to hold a / complete collapse’. Graham’s poetics successfully establishes a connection between failure at the experiential level and the failure of climatic mechanisms that play their part in sustaining human existence. Furthermore, the belatedness of what it is now possible to sustain is hinted at in the substitution of dry substances – first ‘sand’, then ‘dust’ (Graham 2008a: 42) – for the vast bodies of water we are asked to imagine.

A sustained note

While *Sea Change* reveals quite how problematic it is to sustain thought or a contemporary sense of culture, the poetry suggests an alternative, provisional possibility. The terminology of music runs through the collection – for instance, in the ‘chorusing in us of elements’ (Graham 2008a: 4), ‘Who is one when one calls oneself / one? An orchestra dies down’ (42) and ‘The score does not acknowledge / the turner of / pages’ (45). These images suggest that identity is sustained as a function of many participating agents in a concerted effort. Like the orchestra, humanity is able to create a harmonious world, and Graham’s extension of the musical image across separate poems itself enacts that context of cumulative creation through multiple recurrences. Moreover, Graham’s use of music as a motif – a non-mimetic art form – affirms the value of poetic technique to express the tensions of sustainability, using sensation as much as representation or argumentation.

It does take the effort of a collective, however, to create and sustain this fictive harmony: as Vogt et al. point out, sustainability at the global level would itself require such a co-operative, orchestrated effort by humanity (2010: 9). Because individual conceptions of ourselves are implicated in environmental change – as ‘Full Fathom’ indicates with its sequencing from the personal through the political into the phenomenal (Graham 2008a: 31) – when we revert to such individualistic conceptions, the orchestral effect becomes impossible. The assertion of individualism in ‘calling oneself one’ in ‘Positive Feedback Loop’ means in contrast that the music ‘dies down’ (Graham 2008a: 42). Another sense of ‘sustained’ is invoked here, albeit in its absence, that of a musical note being held.

This motif of music is central to ‘The Violinist at the Window, 1918’ (Graham 2008a: 32–4), a quasi-ekphrastic poem named for a painting by Matisse that involves visual art as much as literature and music in the creation and sustaining of culture. Speculating on the music that the
Reading sustainability

violinist will play, the poem seeks ‘the sustained one note of obligatory / hope’ (Graham 2008a: 32). This ‘obligatory hope’ is further qualified by Graham’s subsequent description of it ‘taken in, like a virus’, eventually processed by the body to be made ‘natural again’ (2008a: 32). As individuals, she suggests, we first resist what art conveys to us – perhaps in the way ‘a hatred of / a thought’ is ‘sustained’ in ‘Sea Change’ (2008a: 3) – before being infected by it and coming to regard it as natural.

Danger arises, though, when we do not see that we have created the world and instead naturalise our conception of it. This would be to sustain a conventional idea of ourselves without acknowledging our active role in doing so. When ‘the mind is hatched and scored by clouds’ (Graham 2008a: 33), the verb ‘scored’ plots the meteorological phenomena like musical notes, giving them artistic form. But having naturalised an aesthetic view of the world, we assume an unwarranted power to preserve it indefinitely, and the narrator declares ‘what is weather—when it’s / all gone we’ll / buy more’, ensuring ‘ages that shall not end’ (Graham 2008a: 33). That envisages a perpetual recycling of the present rather than the ‘dynamic continuity’ that Elder suggests constitutes culture (2000: 230).

When Graham then returns to ‘the note, sustained, fixed’ at the end of the poem, she hears it as a ‘high note trembling—it is a / good sound, it is an / ugly sound’ (2008a: 34), reflecting its essential ambivalence, our gradual acclimatisation to the notion conveyed in the note, but one still underscored by dissonance. All this occurs in a poem where ‘the war to end all wars has come / to an end; but is then immediately undercut by the wry aside ‘—for a while’ (Graham 2008a: 32). The poem takes place in an interlude framed by the world wars as the violinist is framed by the window and doubly by the frame of the picture, signifying our artificial, aestheticised containment of the present moment.

Given the cumulative nature of *Sea Change* as a book, this concept of a precarious interlude – the ‘note trembling’ of ‘The Violinist at the Window, 1918’ resonates with the ‘trembling colony’ that we inhabit in ‘Belief System’ – is taken up again in the final poem, ‘No Long Way Round’ (Graham 2008a: 54–6). This offers a coda to the motifs and themes of the collection, again contrasting the incommensurability of global environmental crisis with everyday experience. In two passages of this last poem, the verse clumps into a pair of paragraphs resembling prose. The first of these, beginning ‘It is an emergency actually’, centres on the break ‘the whole 15,000 years of the inter- / glacial period’ (Graham 2008a: 55), accentuated by the shortfall of the first of these lines compared to those preceding it, and by the lengthy indentation of the subsequent one. If we mark the interlude here with silence, it reminds us of the brevity of our geological window, the current ‘inter- / glacial’; if we instead mark it by holding the reading breath, we realise the physical difficulty of sustaining even one unspoken line. In either event, the effect reminds
us of our physical implication in the world. Graham's resumption with a further prose-like stanza creates an illusion that things are close to normal, this 'waking and doing; ‘the getting done’ (2008a: 55), but the interruption serves to communicate the contingency of our quotidian lives. The poetry creates a prosaic effect for the everyday, only to disrupt it with a poetic break that highlights the difficulty of sustaining an accustomed normality.

‘No Long Way Round’ draws in with a moment of seeming lyrical meditation that again makes this quality of a sustained narrative apparent, the ‘need to tell / your story’ (Graham 2008a: 55–6). Graham shows how that ‘story’ is confined to its profoundly human significance; it begins personally – ‘how you met, the coat one wore’ – and even when it approaches a more global scale, as in ‘Positive Feedback Loop’, it tries to contain this, limiting it to ‘that part of / the planet’ and ‘the first Spring after your war’ (2008a: 56). Finally comes the desperation to sustain an imagined normality and hold on to it through the imagined restatement of the word: ‘thousands of times / you want to say this—normal—’. In contrast to these staccato, insistent remarks, the final lines of Graham’s poem remind us: ‘there are sounds the planet will always make; that is, sustained notes, ‘even / if there is no one to hear them’ (2008a: 56). These resonate with the sustained, ‘ugly’ note of ‘The Violinist at the Window, 1918’ (Graham 2008a: 34) to make a sound that persists even though it can only be prospectively conceptualised, and never humanly experienced.

Beyond sustainability

Graham’s technique across *Sea Change* does not so much take argumentative issue with the concept of sustainability – a concept exemplified in Scigaj’s approach – as demonstrate the inherent difficulty of satisfying its contending definitions, discussed by Vogt et al., which are simultaneously ambitious and impractical. Instead, Graham’s verse reveals that we tend to perpetuate an idealistic metanarrative such as the one Corcoran identifies while we endure environmental change, where both these verbs, ‘perpetuate’ and ‘endure’, represent distinct definitions of sustainability by Medovoi.

But Graham’s poetics also shows that, in seeking to survive through what is to come, we must be alive to culture beyond the individual, beyond the present, and recognise – and make best use of – tradition, intention and contingency to comprehend our position. Produced in the tension between her poetry’s momentum and the transitions she describes between the global and the banal are themes and motifs that operate according to their own aesthetic syntax, accumulating into a willed change that also
recognises the weight and agency of what it changes to bring the work together across history and geography. This is the distinctive achievement of *Sea Change*, a design that sustains cultural tradition and collective endeavour even as these sustain the onslaught of environmental change in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1 This latter quality in particular is reflected in Graham’s own measured, almost hesitant performance of the poems: see, for example, the clip ‘Jorie Graham and Yusef Komunyakaa at the 92nd Street Y’, in which she reads ‘The Violinist at the Window, 1918’ from *Sea Change* (Graham 2008b).

2 The impacts of our cultural practices will become more evident in the poem ‘Full Fathom’ (Graham 2008a: 30–1), discussed below.

3 Alaimo’s phrasing echoes line 430 of the poem (Eliot 2015 [1922]: 71).

4 In a Guardian review of *Sea Change*, M. Wynn Thomas remarks ‘[s]ignificantly, this volume’s title points us not to the redemptive vision of *The Tempest* but to [it] as ominously refracted through Eliot’s *The Waste Land*’ (2008).

5 This also echoes the underground vernal stirrings in *The Waste Land*, written in the shadow of its own war, as well as the interwar interlude of ‘The Violinist at the Window, 1918’.

References

Alaimo, Stacy 2012. ‘Sustainable This, Sustainable That: New Materialisms, Posthumanism and Unknown Futures’, *PMLA* 127 (3): 558–64.


