

Reflection Statement

The visceral experience of listening to *Saudade*¹ evokes a ‘presence of absence’ that words on a page can only attempt to deliver. An immersive sonic medium gives meaning to an untranslatable word - and insight into the unimaginable experience of grief.

A sound poet can explore the profundity of grief, using speech and the melodies of language as the instruments of choice for the expression of experience.² The polyphony³ of disembodied poetic voices within this poetic soundscape envelops the listener, providing no chance of escape from the ghostly voices that are echoes of my own.

Saudade examines the ineffaceable, foreboding force of bushfires, and the fear that coexists with life in fire zones:

“How she wishes she could escape | *Escape...*
The memory of heat.
But it’s grasp holds tightly
Onto every cell of her being”⁴

My fear of fire has always been with me. It is not so much the flames that scare me, but the power they hold to take away everything - and everyone - I hold close. The piece presents three personas, a firefighter, a sister, and grandfather, who are grappling with the death of a bushfire victim, a sister and a granddaughter respectively.

¹ Saudade: a Portuguese word that roughly translates to ‘presence of absence’ that represents an intense melancholic longing, relates particularly to music and poetry

² D. McCooey, *Fear of Music: Sounded Poetry and the ‘Poetry Soundtrack’*, Axon Journal, 2009

³ Polyphonic: producing or involving many sounds or voices

⁴ *Saudade*

Saudade elucidates my fear and life in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales. It examines and deconstructs bushfires - the “*bitter scent*” of smoke, the embers, the sirens⁵ and the wind.⁶ It uses synesthesia and sensory imagery to force the audience to step outside their understanding of senses, of feelings:

“... she couldn't quite tell if the tears that leaked
Down their cheeks were those
That tasted like Fear
Or Smoke. ”⁷

- and to understand how fear and grief disturb all sense of normalcy. The disembodied voices and haunting echoes of the piece serve to demonstrate the relationship between trauma and time. Long after the initial moment has faded, the echoes of grief, and the untranslatable ‘saudade’ - the presence of absence - will always remain. This is particularly pertinent to the anxiety that summer brings for all residents of the Blue Mountains; so whilst echoing, layered voices do create unease, they also create connection. *Saudade* owes much to my first-hand experiences, particularly the 2019/2020 bushfires in New South Wales. Composing my work whilst the devastation was at its peak helped me capture the vehemence of those bushfires. It is best suited to Australian listeners who understand the emotional and physical devastation wreaked by bushfires.

One of the reasons ‘saudade’ is so hard to translate into English is because it recognises the complexities of grief. The characterised polyphonic voices are a crucial element in exploring grief’s profundity as it demonstrates how each individual carries the burden in a different manner. I had always envisioned echoed voices within the work, so the discovery of Australian poet

⁵ *Australian Firefighters Responding NSW Bushfires Part 2 2019-20 FRNSW RFS NPWS MFG (Compilation)*, YouTube, uploaded by Sydney Emergency, 2 February, 2020 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4e8z3pyvDIY> (Creative Commons License)

⁶ *Howling Wind. [Sound Effect]*, YouTube, uploaded by Sound Effects, 11 December 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxCVRO2w48Y> (Creative Commons License)

⁷ *Saudade*

David McCooney's essay *Fear of Music: Sounded Poetry and the 'Poetry Soundtrack'*⁸ was invaluable as it discusses the concept of 'doubling voice'.⁹ Having limited experience in the construction of sound poetry, McCooney's work helped me when experimenting with the auditory techniques required to successfully create the avant-garde style I desired. *Saudade* is predominantly written in third-person to create an almost voyeuristic observation of grief and loss. However, I felt at times it was important to forge a more intense human connection, which I achieved through layering first-person voices throughout the mix. I appropriated the sound poetry technique of voice doubling, but instead of simply copying the same voice, each character was actualised:

Narrator

*"His granddaughter always sits in
in the shadows*

Grandfather

*My granddaughter always sits
iIn the shadows"*¹⁰

- in order to sonically materialise grief, and demonstrate how the emotion does not create a uniform reaction.

The study of Kae (née Kate) Tempest's *Picture a Vacuum* in English Advanced Module C: The Craft of Writing exposed me to how the blend of poetry and performance within a poetic soundscape creates immersive worlds through meticulously chosen melodic and verbal lyricism. The deep, ominous hums of the synth bass in a minor key that underscore my words are intended to immerse the listener in auditory imagery of eeriness and uncertainty.¹¹ *Saudade* further draws on Literary Worlds in English Extension 1 by illuminating how the construction of worlds within texts reveal the complexity of individual and collective pain. The exploration of three different

⁸ *Saudade*

⁹ Doubling: Copying and pasting a voice slightly out of sync to construct an echo

¹⁰ *Saudade*

¹¹ *Baba Yaga* | *Dark Ambient Horror Soundscape*, YouTube, uploaded by MONST3R MUSIC, 5 March 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rge79Y2WzH0> (Creative Commons License, Permission for use obtained by creator) and

The Abandoned | *Scary Dark Ambient Horror Music*, YouTube, uploaded by MONST3R MUSIC, May 29, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pi0GapxyT0Q> (Creative Commons License, Permission for use obtained by creator)

personas constructs three private worlds to demonstrate how there is no one way to experience grief. Moreover, *Saudade* blends the knowledge I have gained from both English courses in order to demonstrate how the piece could have only been presented within this form as each melodic device, whether it be speech or the underscored effects, immerses the reader in the world of each persona.

Within *Saudade*, each crackle of a fireplace¹², each howl of the wind draws the listener closer to the omnipresent force of nature. Poet Oscar Wilde suggested that art shapes the way we view the world around us.¹³ This idea influenced my desire to draw attention to the paradox of life in the Blue Mountains: we fear the fire, but hold such love and admiration for the nature that surrounds us, accepting that one cannot exist without the other. I chose to create lyricism out of the sounds that cause me anxiety - sirens, howling wind and a crackling fireplace - to demonstrate how even the simplest sounds can evoke a deeply emotional, familiar response. However, my aim was not to daunt the audience, but draw attention to the inescapability of the flames, and the beauty of such a formidable force:

*“Until the sky turned black
And the fire erupted within the clouds in a brutal storm
Painting smears and smudges of red, of orange, of gold across the horizon
Painting pure anger within the heavens”¹⁴*

As Wilde foreshadowed, this piece of work seeks to change perceptions. As each summer draws closer, the piece will echo in the minds of listeners just as the disembodied voices do, as a reminder of both the inexorable possibility of destruction, and the beauty of nature’s cycle. *Saudade* delivers the potential for rebirth.

¹² *Fireplace cracking - FREE SOUND EFFECT*, YouTube, uploaded by impedim, 25 March 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5wHyMdUDN2c> (Creative Commons License)

¹³ O. Wilde, *The Decay of Lying*, Sunflower Co, New York, 1902

¹⁴ *Saudade*

Through being surrounded by sound, the piece forms an inextricable connection between the inescapability of bushfire and the overwhelming nature of grief. It is almost impossible to detach, as one could with written words, merely by glancing away. Poetic soundscapes result in a paralysis of sorts - as does grief. This experience is discerned within C.S Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, encompassing a personal reflection on the emotional paralysis that the death of a loved one brings.¹⁵ Fortunately, I have never experienced such a loss, so I examined Lewis's work to do justice to the emotion as best I could. The uncensored thoughts of grief deeply moved me, as Lewis notes the one place where the absence of his deceased love is ever-present: his body. Initially, I had feared that my own fortune would inhibit the credibility of my work. However, through a close analysis of Lewis's work, I discovered that my fear and his loss were connected by our innate experience of the only other emotion that is described as all-consuming: love. *Saudade* emphasises the body as being the vessel in which grief settles, as our bodies are the birthplace of our emotions:

*"... each breath allows a thousand more flames
To stream through his veins
Through his lifeline.
Oxygen turns to smoke,
Making a home within him."*¹⁶

My choice to employ fire as the representation of grief within the poem reflects the stages of grief that Lewis relays. The shock and anger is the pain that "*burns through any part...that has begun to heal*"¹⁷, and the despair and emptiness is reflected within "*the darkness that creeps in day by day / Beckoning...with such a gentle voice*".¹⁸ *Saudade*, however, subverts Lewis's singular experience in order to reflect grief as being omnipresent within the community around the deceased girl. From this, the polyphonic quality of the piece was born.

¹⁵ C S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, Faber & Faber, London, 1968

¹⁶ *Saudade*

¹⁷ *Saudade*

¹⁸ *Saudade*

Saudade had to be realised through a poetic soundscape in order to not only immerse the listener, but provide no reprieve, no ability to disassociate because grief, like fire, is unrelenting. Fire will burn until exhaustion or until some outside power intervenes - it does not commune with grief and loss. Our humanity does not afford us the same opportunity. In this, the construction of the piece mirrors bushfire and grief once more.

As it encapsulates a uniquely Australian experience, *Saudade* is suitable for inclusion within the *Australian Poetry Journal's* 'spoken' volumes, which address the ever-evolving nature of the poetic form to suit more contemporary styles of writing. Furthermore, as the piece was inspired by the brutal firestorms that are very much a part of the Blue Mountains, *Radio Blue Mountains* would provide an outlet to remind the residents of our shared experience in a beautiful, yet volatile environment.

Saudade, like grief, is undefinable. This 'presence of absence' takes many different forms: for some it is a constant fire that burns from within and for others it leaves a charred shell. In order to not be overwhelmed, we thus must find the artistry in the flames.

(1499 words)

Bibliography

1. O. Wilde, *The Decay of Lying*, Sunflower Co, New York, 1902
2. C S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, Faber & Faber, London, 1968
3. D. McCooey, *Fear of Music: Sounded Poetry and the 'Poetry Soundtrack'*, Axon Journal, 2009
4. *Saudade*, Major Work, 2020

Non-original Material Acknowledgements (included in Addendum)

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6. *Lighting a match / Striking a match Sound Effect (free to use)*, YouTube, uploaded by Utility Sounds, 27 August 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xnvHz8fBz_w
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