

## Burning our Kin: Reflections on the Great Fires

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Mid-year in 2019 I was shown a photograph of a reindeer with its antlers on fire, ostensibly taken on location in the Arctic. I am not sure now whether this was indeed a genuine photograph, but it has stood for me ever since as a mythical trope for the era our planet has now entered. Throughout 2019, Earth seemed to be announcing, by way of an unremitting array of apocalyptic portents, the grand, official, gala opening of Climate Change: climate change was no longer the future threat about which we have for so long been warned. Its full blast was no longer twenty years off, ten years off, five years off. Its full blast was now, and from this point on there would be neither averting nor turning back.

While the new reality was announcing itself via an Old Testament-type lexicon of catastrophe, the global zeitgeist was also swivelling on its axis. In the space of a year unprecedented movements like Extinction Rebellion and the School Climate Strikes exploded onto the political scene. There was a mythic quality to these upwellings also, just as there was to the geophysical disturbances. The new zeitgeist, swirling into being, seemed to have formed in its depths an inchoate need, a hole at its heart that it now sought to fill, blowing softly and searchingly over the planet till it encountered a figure – a child - who fitted the shape of that hole perfectly. It siphoned her up into its myth-space, and set her walking on a path as close as we have seen in these secular times to destiny, in order to stare down the powers driving the ecological apocalypse. These powers had likewise found mythic manifestation in the peculiarly cartoon-like figure of Donald Trump - a figure as unexpected yet apposite, and as freshly minted (and named) on the mythic level, as any archetype from ancient lore.<sup>1</sup> In these two figures, the great rival narratives of our era commenced the fight that will be played out from here on, a fight perhaps to the death: on the one hand, the little girl, defenceless but for truth, standing in fearless solidarity with all living beings, great and small; on the other, the solitary figure of the male narcissist writ large, swallowing everyone and everything in his path, pumped up balloon-like to global proportions with the air he has sucked from his victims, ready to swallow the entire world if need be to fill his insatiable inner void.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A mythic anticipation of Greta Thunberg may be found in Hayao Miyazake's 1984 anime movie, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Winds*.

<sup>2</sup> In another of Miyazake's film's, *Spirited Away*, the portrait of hungry ghost, No-Face, offers an uncanny mythic anticipation of the insatiably needy figure of Donald Trump.

The new zeitgeist also expressed itself in the eruption of a popular discourse of imminent civilizational collapse, well summarised in the title of David Wallace-Wells's widely read essay, "Uninhabitable Earth".<sup>3</sup> In response to this startling literature, many of us felt impelled to dedicate our own personal resources more fully to the cause, ramping up our activism and repeating our long-time message that a change of worldview was required. Though I shared these responses, they nevertheless struck me as inadequate. The rapacious extractivism of our modern economy was not merely a contingent formation that could be overturned by purely external means - whether political or philosophical. It was surely underpinned by psychic structures in which we ourselves would prove to be obdurately invested. Take my own case, for example. It was clear to me, after thirty years of helping to articulate an alternative paradigm through the medium of environmental philosophy, that reason in itself did not change people's consciousness to any significant degree. Yet when I asked myself whether I should give up such fruitless philosophizing and try other means, I detected a kind of mute inner resistance that informed me that no, I would not be giving up philosophizing, whatever the stakes. One could analyse this psychic investment at length, if one wished, in terms of identity constructed around achievement, discipline, production, distinction, currency – all psychic introjections of an economy defined in terms of production, property, competition and power. Our inmost identity, in other words, is organised according to the same competitive and combative principles that govern our external, economic relationship with the world around us.

So it felt to me that we could not change our modern economy, and hence the course of civilization, without at the same time changing the hidden conformation of the modern self. In books, talks and articles we might eloquently speak truth to power, but the message conveyed through our words would be two-fold. One part of the message, about the dangers of climate change etcetera, would be overt; but the second part – about writing as a means of achieving voice and distinction – would be subconscious and covert. The covert message, which inwardly reinforces the principles of production, property, competition and power, has perhaps in the past consistently undermined the overt one, where this might help to explain why rational discourse has so dismally failed to change our deeper attitudes and the economic attitudes that express them.

Such was the state of play, *chez moi*, till fairly late in 2019. Then something occurred that was unprecedented in my lifetime, in the history of my country, and indeed in the recent annals of evolution. Australia as a continent began to burn. Not the usual seasonal fires, which are bad enough and have for years been worsening. This was something new. It pointed to the truth that the geological era we have entered is not merely an Anthropocene but a veritable Pyrocene.<sup>4</sup> The fires commenced on the east coast in July, in the middle of winter, months earlier than the official start of the

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<sup>3</sup> David Wallace-Wells, "The uninhabitable earth", New York Magazine, 9 July 2017

<sup>4</sup> Stephen J. Pyne, "The planet is burning", *Aeon* <https://aeon.co/essays/the-planet-is-burning-around-us-is-it-time-to-declare-the-pyrocene>

fire season. They took hold in forests sucked dry by years of drought and thereafter they did not relent. For week after week, month after month, they increased in scale and ferocity, burning out not only the flammable sclerophyll forests but the wet rainforests that had evolved over millions of years to withstand fire. By December vast areas were blazing out of control. The Currowan fire alone burnt out almost 500,000 hectares on the south coast of NSW and raged for 74 days.<sup>5</sup> Throughout these months, Sydney and Canberra as well as the fire zones themselves were dim with smoke, rendering atmospheric conditions extremely hazardous for millions of people.<sup>6</sup>

At first I felt somewhat removed from what was happening. True, the fires seemed larger than usual, but the news coverage was relatively muted, and where I live, in Melbourne, the weather remained unseasonably cool and mild. By the early days of January however, I, like most Australians, had become gripped by the unfolding spectacle, on screen, of our nation in chaos – of thousands of people stranded amid infernos on the south-east coast; of people being evacuated en masse by military vessels from lurid beaches; of highways choked with the traffic of fleeing holiday makers; of community after community receiving the warning, ‘you are in imminent danger and need to take action now’, as towers of flame bore down on their homes.

Over on the south coast, Kangaroo Island, iconic wildlife haven of over 4000 square kilometres and home to a flourishing koala population of 50,000, was meanwhile undergoing incineration. Along with the rest of the world, I gazed transfixed with horror at images of blackened koalas, their still-living faces mutilated and scorched. I listened to them cry out in terrified little voices as they scrambled over glowing red ground on bare feet, their fur on fire. My heart cracked as I watched desperately parched koalas, in video after video, approach a human stranger for help, reaching out to hold their benefactor’s hand as they drank from the proffered water bottle. The shattered expressions of the little patients, bundled up in bandages and bunny rugs in the back yards and living rooms of saintly wildlife carers, were hard to bear. I remembered my own foray into burnt-out fire fields in earlier years, searching for survivors to deliver to carers. This was also koala country, and each charred body we found told the heart-rending tale of the animal’s last moments. Particularly memorable was that of a mother koala, still gripping the base of a tree with one paw and the hand of her collapsed child with the other; also that of a koala pressed into a slight excavation in the side of a stream bank, the depth of the excavation too pitifully small to afford protection. Koalas are more vulnerable to fire than most of the larger mammal species, being so slow-moving and so dependent for everything – food, shelter and safety – on the dangerously flammable eucalypt.

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<sup>5</sup> SBS News, 9 Feb 2020. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/nsw-south-coast-fire-finally-out-after-burning-for-74-days-across-499-621-hectares>

<sup>6</sup> The Guardian Australia provided superb coverage of the fires throughout their duration. See for example <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2020/feb/11/counting-the-cost-of-australias-summer-of-dread>

There were of course videos and photographs of numerous other animals, grievously hurt or charred beyond recognition – kangaroos, wallabies, possums and wombats, for instance – and commentary about the tragic losses to conservation that had been incurred: six million hectares of threatened species habitat destroyed; the ranges of approximately 70 nationally threatened species reduced by 50 per cent; and, the figure that shocked the world, more than a billion mammals, birds and reptiles killed.<sup>7</sup> But, due to the circumstance of the Kangaroo Island fires, and its impact on the last large colony of disease-free koalas in Australia, it was koalas that became the face of the Great Fires to the world.

Eventually, in February, cooler, wetter weather arrived in the fire fields. But we knew that the fire season was not over; perhaps it would never be over. We knew that this was how it was going to be henceforth: that our forests are drying out and that our new climate might no longer be able to sustain forests. Forested areas might revert to the arid shrubland that occupies most of the Australian continent. It is hard to know what conservation might mean under these new conditions, when the painstaking and expensive work of decades is utterly cancelled out in a few days or weeks. The epic suffering we have witnessed our wildlife endure is not over; it will be repeated endlessly into the future. Perhaps eventually we shall lose our heritage of wildlife altogether, the wildlife that, as Australians, we take for granted, abuse, trivialize, but clearly also love.

This outpouring of love was for me the most surprising response to the fires. In the past the deadly toll of bushfires on wildlife has been almost entirely ignored in news coverage and commentary. The impact of fires has always been measured in terms of asset loss (including the loss of so-called ‘livestock’) and loss of human lives. But now the plight of wildlife was being captured on phones and broadcast to the world in real time. Animal terror and torment was no longer backgrounded as a ‘natural’ part of fires, but seen for what it is, individual trauma experienced exactly as we would experience it ourselves.

As the world outside looked on, and we were aware of others perceiving us and our wildlife as interchangeably Australian, we realised that that is indeed who we are. We are the Koala people. The Kangaroo, Wallaby, Wombat, Kookaburra, Emu, Cockatoo, Platypus and Lyrebird people. For a hundred years, non-Indigenous Australians have asked the question, who are we? What makes us Australian? Was it Gallipoli and mateship? Don Bradman? Australian rules football? Holden utes? The barbeque? It is hard to credit that we asked this question, when the answer was so obvious from the start. We are Australian because we inhabit the continent of Australia. The fact that we asked the question at all reveals our entire colonial history of erasure and denial, our blind determination to treat this continent – already a federation of innumerable human and other-than-human nations at the time of European invasion – as a blank slate on which to inscribe a new fiction: Australia. A new fiction which could never ‘take’, or get beneath our skin, because all

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<sup>7</sup> M. Ward et al. <https://theconversation.com/six-million-hectares-of-threatened-species-habitat-up-in-smoke-129438>. At mid-February the final figure for the total area burnt was 12.6 million ha. See fact check on ABC Radio National program, *Science Friction*, 16 Feb 2020.

the while the continent itself was getting under our skin, and making us who we were, a people unconsciously shaped by the particular patterns of light and shade, sound and smell, wetness and dryness, form and, especially, life-form, that were unique – so unique – to this particular continent. So we prattled on about our institutions, our history, our sports heroes, our product brands, but as soon as those of us who were born here went overseas, we missed the smell of eucalyptus and the feel of summer on the beach or in the bush, and knew that we were Australian.

It is surely because we have been so blind to who we are, and have purposely built Australia as a fiction on that founding nullification of the entire variegated, intricately lived-in character of this land that we have from the very start treated the land so abominably. In doing so we have not only brought it to its present pass – desiccated, its soils exposed, cooked, eroded, leached of nutrient, polluted, blown away, its forest skin ripped off, its remaining wildlife battered, diseased and on the run – but we have betrayed ourselves. Because we are, at the end of the day, despite everything we have done, *of this place, this land*. It is because we are *here*, and not for any other reason, that we are Australian. And this land pre-existed us, by temporal orders of magnitude beyond reckoning. We did not make it. It made itself. It was made by Koala, Wallaby, Long-Necked Turtle, Kookaburra, Bettong, and a myriad of other species. They shaped it, with their feats of ecological engineering, at macro- and micro-levels, as it in turn shaped them, their anatomy, their adaptations, their ways of life. It was their country; its character was an expression of their character, as theirs was of its. In more recent aeons, the land was also of course shaped by Indigenous nations, who always acknowledged that theirs was a co-creation with that myriad of other species, each a nation in its own right. When Europeans arrived, their children too were born into Koala Country, Pobblebonk Country, Goanna Country, Cockatoo Country, as well as into the many Countries of the First Peoples. Whitefellas might deny this all they liked, but identity at the deepest level is not made by fiat, but by ontological realities.

Perhaps, as we watched these places, this continent - to which we belong in our ontological depths - reduced to ash without our consent, under the eyes of an onlooking world, many of us did indeed realize, this is who we are. While the rest of the world wept for the helplessness of the adorable koala, we wept because Koala – along with our entire extended faunal family - is not only helpless and adorable but, beneath the skin, our deepest kin.

So, Australia wept, in a new way. Throughout the ordeal, people maintained their daily deadpan Aussie personas, their down-to-earth lives, but when talk turned to the fires, many of us found ourselves choking up, ambushed by a grief that lay deeper in our being than we could reach with our words.

After existing in this state for a month or two, numb with grief, barely able to speak about the fires, I, for one, suddenly discovered my response. This response was, I realized, personal rather than political: I could simply no longer bear to live in a way that resulted in the incineration of kin that I loved with a love that was deeper than consciousness could reach. For let us not obfuscate: these Great Fires were the

direct result of ordinary actions that I and countless others have taken every day of our lives. In the past I had of course considered my 'carbon footprint', and reduced it where I conveniently could, but I had reasoned that to continue my 'important work' toward environmental reform I would need to play the part of a respectable professional. If this meant travelling to international conferences, keeping up middle-class appearances, supporting a busy schedule with all the amenities of our normalised Western affluence, then so be it: it was what any rational cost-benefit analysis required. Now however, this kind of abstraction from the actual consequences of such habits felt unconscionable. The issue was suddenly no longer abstract but concrete and personal; it wore a face: that of Koala. I simply could not bear to continue burning Koala and all the other animals whose identity was fused at the root with my own.

In one sweep then the fires have cleared away all such rationalizations by revealing a depth of significance so terrible it reduces every other measure to triviality. I now have no choice but to disengage materially from my civilization to a degree it had not before been possible even to contemplate. There must be no more air travel; I must give up driving; food must be thoroughly responsibly sourced; I must rid my life of plastic; any further commodities or clothes I may require must be purchased second hand. When all this is negotiated I may again take stock, and consider what further agents of death my manner of living is unleashing on my kin. I am not prescribing this as a new set of abstract moral standards to which all must be held accountable. This is nobody's business but my own. I am accountable directly to the Earth, to this land – to Koala, if you like – and not to anyone else. Whatever consequences such personal reforms entail for my social identity – my identity as a respectable professional and member of society - is no longer the issue. If I emerge from the process shabbier, gap-toothed, less professionally available and less presentable, so be it. Professional obscurity is far preferable to living in murderous denial.

Such defection from the shared material practices of one's own society of course in no way detracts from the necessity for intensified political activism but rather adds a new depth of sincerity and authenticity to that activism. Nor will it by itself entirely root out the psychic underpinnings of the modern economy, categorically premised as that economy is on brutal instrumentalism. But it might at least begin to close the gulf that has hitherto yawned between our words, as ecological thinkers, and our lives, where this gap may have been rendering our words, for all their validity, hollow. In any case, I know that it is the existential step that I myself must take. By taking it, and by hopefully finding companions in the endeavour, I might perhaps free my own psyche sufficiently from the dark spell of our present - mutant - civilization to begin to envisage pathways to the future a little more clearly.

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In her classic ethnography, *Dingo Makes Us Human*, Deborah Bird Rose relays from her Aboriginal teachers a set of Dreaming or Ancestor stories about Dingo and

Moon.<sup>8</sup> Moon, in its endless waxing and waning, follows a transcendent trajectory that enables it to rise above the suffering and mortality of fleshly life by subjecting the rest of creation to its will, annexing their life to preserve its own in perpetuity. Dingo declines this path, and throws in his lot with his perishable, ever-morphing, fleshly kin, trading the prospect of sterile sameness throughout eternity for identity embedded in the teeming regenerativity of creaturely life. He accepts that, as born beings, we belong to one another, not to ourselves. It is they who make us who and what we are. Aboriginal people, according to Rose's story-tellers, adopted the path of Dingo as their Law. By entrusting the story to Rose to pass on to the world, these elders implied that whitefellas incline to the Law-negating path of Moon. The Great Fires have now perhaps given us a new iteration of this story: by following the logic of Moon, annexing the life of this continent to preserve our own disembodied individual identities in perpetuity, we are burning up the very thing that anchors us to reality. We are extirpating the greater family of beings born of this continent, to whom we, as Australians, owe our identity; to whom we belong. Moon shines down as indifferently and serenely on a burnt-out continent, with its charred remains of Koala, Kangaroo, Wallaby and all the rest, as on a continent teeming with multi-bodied, multi-minded, interdependent life. But Moon is not human at all, and can certainly never be Australian.

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<sup>8</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992.