Breath

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Matter of Degrees,Series

By **Kelly Donati**

In early January 2020, hitting the refresh button on *The Guardian* punctuated my waking hours as I obsessively tracked the movement of the bushfires from Munich. Watching from afar, sleep grew elusive. Just as I was meant to be drifting off, people along the east coast of Australia were waking up—if they had slept at all—to appraise the destruction and gather their wits for another day of fire-fighting, evacuation, or just waiting. It was a time in which breath did not come easy. Anxiety slithered around my chest and tightened its grip as I worried for friends. My shallow inhalations were contrasted by long sighs that punctuated the writing group during which my Rachel Carson colleagues and I attempted to focus on our research. It felt so unfamiliar to see people across Australia donning facemasks as they choked on thick smoke blanketing cities and rural areas for weeks on end. Nobody had any notion that the whole world would be wearing them only a few weeks later.

I worried for how we humans would eat as farmland burned and for the millions of other creatures whose lives depend on fresh air and the vitality of forest ecosystems for their sustenance. I thought of trees whose leaves reach for the sun so they can nourish themselves and feed their sugars to subterranean networks of mycorrhizal fungi. These same plants exhale oxygen so crucial to making life as we know it possible. This was metabolic disruption on a planetary scale.

Forests that had never burned—that were never meant to burn—burned so hotly that it was painful to witness, even from such a great distance. Bhiamie Williamson, Jessica Weir, and Vanessa Cavanagh write of a pain far more searing—a “perpetual grief” that comes with the colonial trauma of dispossession. This wound, never healed, is inflamed by the incineration of sacred places and the stories and memories that animate

Country.**[1]** The bushfires produced a great unravelling of lifeworlds and "nourishing terrains," as the late Deborah Bird Rose describes it—that is, the Country "that gives and receives life… lived in and lived with."**[2]** Country is shaped and marked by the stories and movements of the ancestral beings and generations of people that have cared for it over millennia.

The Aboriginal notion of Country as "nourishing" is fundamentally distinct from colonial understandings of landscapes as "productive." The former emphasises an interconnectedness, a Law that emerges from the complex relationality of living beings, spirit worlds, language, and the elemental qualities of rock, air, water and, so crucially, fire. The notion of productive landscapes, even in its most seemingly benign form, cannot be prised away from the history of colonial violence that commodified and reorganised life on this continent through the appetites of colonial invaders and sheep.

As fires raged, the true nature of their accelerant was hotly contested. Many experts agreed that climate change produced the dual problems of rising temperatures and drought, each reinforcing the other. Climate deniers and proponents of climate science alike pointed to insufficient hazard reduction. Some decried government failure to reduce fuel loads in national and state parks. Others argued that climate change had rendered the window in which to undertake fuel reduction so narrow that the load, and therefore the threat, only increased with each passing year. Former fire and emergency leaders signalled the alarm months earlier, their concerns falling on the deaf ears of a federal government in denial. As the weeks wore on, the fire expertise of Aboriginal peoples was hailed as a necessary solution. Non-Aboriginal people, myself included, forget all too easily that access to Country continues to be disrupted by systems of private ownership, that Indigenous knowledge is inadequately valued within the institutions now put in place to manage fire, and that council approval processes render cultural burning illegal or impossible for many Aboriginal people. Western science and administrative regimes dictate what can be done where, when, and by whom. As STS scholar Helen Verran suggests, the cultural logic of natural resource management is to transform Aboriginal cosmologies into asset values that facilitate how the government does business with nature.**[3]**

The rhetoric of "fuel reduction" nagged at me throughout January. This "fuel," the detritus of life, is not merely an accelerant; it has the potential to nurture new life. The cool fire of cultural burnings nourishes soil below and encourages fresh grasses that feed marsupials and many others. In careful hands, fire is regenerative. But it requires people

to walk its contours and tend to the myriad needs of Country. D'harawal knowledge keeper Shannon Foster notes how cultural burning shapes the mosaics that connect and nurture webs of relation, while western fuel reduction practices emphasise protection of assets and private property.**[4]** Indeed, the public focus on "fuel" obscures the true accelerant of the so-named Black Summer of 19/20—a rapacious economy that extracts carbon from the earth and belches it back into the air we breathe. It knows only fuel, not life. Everything—food, landscapes, and people—becomes fuel to feeds its own growth. And grow it does, just as the fires grew and devoured the world around them.

The fires were still burning when I left Munich in mid-February. They burned in one place or another for no less than nine months. The bushfires now seem a distant memory for those fortunate enough to have not lost loved ones or homes.

Millions of people are wearing face masks now, though for very different reasons. Breath has taken on a new meaning. As rain extinguished the fires in March, a virus re-ordered social relations and forced a slowing of appetites. Flights were grounded; roads emptied. The wheels of industry decelerated. Smog lifted; skies cleared.

The earth seems to be taking a breath. We see—momentarily and with tentative hope—what a different world might look like. The paradox is that the economic free fall accompanying a global pandemic deepens the gaping chasm between the privileged and the vulnerable.

Today, I checked the calendar. We are only two months away from when last year's fires started in Queensland. Whilst we looked elsewhere, the government approved even more gas exploration; logging of native forests continues apace. Aboriginal people continue to die in police custody, and native title has been stripped from lands in Wangan and Jagalingou country in Queensland to make way for the Adani coalmine. Meanwhile, remote communities struggle to access food under lockdown. There is much work to be done.

I long to take to the streets again: to demand an end to an incendiary economic and political system that benefits a privileged few and to create the conditions for co-existence in which we can all breathe more easily.

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[1] Bhiamie Williamson, Jessica Weir, and Vanessa I. Cavanagh. "Strength from perpetual grief: how Aboriginal people experience the bushfire crisis." *The Conversation*

(2020, January 10). **https://theconversation.com/strength-from-perpetual-grief-how-aboriginal-people-experience-the-bushfire-crisis-129448**

[2] Deborah Bird Rose. *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal views on landscape and wilderness*. (Canberra, ACT: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996).

[3] Helen Verran. “Natural Resource Management’s ‘Nature’ and Its Politics.” *Communication, Politics & Culture* 42. no.1 (2009): 3–18.

[4] Shannon Foster. “Ancient Aboriginal fire knowledges for cutting edge solutions.” (2020, January 22). University of Sydney Faculty of Science. https://www.sydney.edu.au/science/news-and-events/2020/01/22/ancient-aboriginal-fire-knowledges-for-cutting-edge-solutions.html