Matter of Degrees

30 March 2020
Matter of Degrees,Series

By **Anna Pilz** and **Kate Wright**

In early January 2020, we began discussing the possibility of curating a collection of creative and intellectual work about the bushfire crisis devastating unceded Aboriginal countries in the continent that is now commonly called “Australia”. Now, only three months later, we find ourselves in a changed world. The Australian bushfire crisis has been outrun by the next disaster. While the smoke cloud from the bushfires circles the Earth, the COVID-19 virus is spreading like wildfire across the globe.

We are living in a time of rolling crises, launching from one calamitous event to the next. How is one to respond well, in both thought and action, to this era of increasing precarity? As a return to “normal life” becomes an impossible target, there is an urgent need for creativity, invention, and experimentation to determine how we will collectively live inside, and in relation to, crises.

Though over 9000 miles away from the situated catastrophe unravelling communities of plants, animals, and humans in the southern hemisphere’s summer, the international community of staff, students, and research fellows based at the RCC for Europe’s winter was very much invested in following the latest news. We frequently discussed the latest developments from the microcosm of climatic safety the city of Munich provided at the time. Despite the geographic distance, we felt very close to, and very much at stake in, the bushfire crisis incinerating lands and communities many of our colleagues and peers feel deeply connected to and love. While degrees of longitude and latitude determined our geophysical atmosphere, it was degrees of relational proximity that began to shape the emotional atmosphere of the Center.

We were all intimately aware of each other's responses and concerns, especially those of the four fellows from Australia who were resident at the time. Whether it was over a cup of coffee in the kitchen or during one of the customary Wednesday dinners after we'd discussed each other's work, we came together to mourn the loss of wildlife, debate government responses, discuss the structural, social, and environmental coordinates that had contributed to the devastation, and ponder what this crisis, and its likely recurrence, might mean for our own futures and the future of our families and friends.

Now, in March, we are ready to publish a series of personal and scholarly reflections on the Australian bushfire crisis crafted by creative writers and thinkers connected to the RCC, while also putting together an annotated multilingual bibliography of global media coverage and scholarship that emerged as the crisis was unfolding. To do so, we are no longer meeting in our little research hub, and have been planning this blog series over Skype. COVID-19 has rescaled the framing of our introduction. Munich is at the heart of the coronavirus pandemic, and physical distance has become a mantra for survival. The relationship between proximity, distance, intimacy, and care was already at the forefront of our minds as we struggled to make sense of faraway images of a country in flames. In the current pandemic, we are being called upon to cultivate networks of solidarity remotely, to practice care by increasing distance, and to create a community safety net as the abstractive logic of market and capital are once again becoming deadly.

Environmental humanities and environmental history scholarship are well placed to illuminate the social dimensions of environmental crises, revealing that very rarely are their devastating consequences inevitable. Bushfires and pandemics alike are produced by particular social and political systems, and the cost they pose to human and nonhuman lives determined by structural conditions. Environmental crises are mediated by state-based and market-based power relations. Certain historically differentiated bodies and communities will be exposed to more intense experiences of vulnerability and suffering. Yet, in our current global state of emergency, we are also compelled to reflect on conditions of shared precarity. Western exceptionalism is increasingly untenable as we face consecutive and intersecting global crises.

Thinking about the temporality of crisis, we are struck by the way in which pace and space are entangled. Both disasters—bushfires and pandemics—are recurrent phenomena that become visible and invisible across different timelines. While living with the immediacy of anxiety, it is sometimes hard to give attention to matters that now seem

irrelevant or deferrable. The fast-paced media cycle tends to isolate crises, each one appearing disconnected from the next, making us much less able to learn from history.

In curating this blog series together with **Kelly Donati** and **Jayne Regan**, who are now based in Australia, we are hoping to create a space where the unprecedented bushfire crisis on the Australian continent, and the flurry of work that surrounded it, will not fade into obsolescence, but can instead collect, condense, and inform how we might respond to the most pressing challenges of our time. As “business as usual” collapses, we are left with a series of urgent questions:

Can experiences of shared vulnerability and interdependency be mobilised to resist the intensification of existing systems of domination and exploitation? How can we craft networks of solidarity as we struggle to imagine new ways of living in the wake of devastation? And how might shared experiences of disaster on a global scale prompt us to shape new compassionate societies that affirm the value of diverse communities and lifeworlds?

These questions offer opportunities for radical world-making if we are ready to take them. At the dawn of this new decade, it is clear that vectors of environmental and social harm are determined by degrees of proximity, separation, distance, scale, and attention. We hope that the following blog series illustrates that the interconnected crises we face in our climate-changing world are, in many more ways than one, a matter of degrees.