



Axon: Creative Explorations, Vol 10, No 2, December 2020

WE THOUGHT WE KNEW WHAT SUMMER WAS

Susan Ballard, Hannah Brasier, Sholto Buck, David Carlin, Sophie Langley, Joshua Lobb, Brigid Magner, Catherine McKinnon, Rose Michael, Peta Murray, Francesca Rendle-Short, Lucinda Strahan, and Stayci Taylor

Overwhelming catastrophic events have become part of the ‘new normal’ of climate change. This essayistic, collaborative lived experience report by a group of writers, each of whom lived through Australia’s 2019–2020 Black Summer of catastrophic bushfires, demonstrates how the effects of shared but different proximate relations can produce an affective, care-ful account of the lived experience of climate change. Our project asks: how might a practical entanglement with others allow for a meaningful response to climate change? How might collaboration allow for a mode that places care at the centre of writing practice?

Keywords: climate change; collaboration; care; lived experience; writing practice

Those bright red skies

A tree falls to the ground, transformed to ash.

It’s like there isn’t an in-between space: the tree is tree/ash. Someone explains that fires burn at different temperatures, and that these ones are different. That they are hot. Hotter. They turn trees to ash. It’s alchemy. A photo doing the rounds on the internet showed a section of the fleshy body of the tree, its skin split and this raw, sore, cellular mass exposed like a bloody wound.

What do they mean when they say unprecedented?

Images of people huddled on Mallacoota beach, huddled on the jetty. The little boy (little girl?) steering the dinghy. A horse standing still and calm, almost regal, among the activity of men and women and kids.

The beach, the summer! Go to Europe, America, Asia, anywhere — laugh at their beaches! They think they have beaches! You haven’t seen our beaches!

This community, isolated, cut off, no way out, forced to wait to be evacuated by sea — the nightmare of being forced to go back where you came from, to flee in small boats across the wide ocean.

You always thought you were safe because you had the beach at your doorstep. But you don't have a boat.

Smoke drifts in from out that way.

Talking through facemasks (you can barely hear). Whispering in the shared kitchen — when would be the time to leave? What are they saying? What should you do?

Standing waist deep in water, chest deep, neck deep, looking for the kids. You are looking out across the valley, down to where you used to walk in the rainforest, wondering whether that was only ever in the before-times now.

Your voice hurts. From yelling? Maybe.

A freak wave comes in high up the mudflat sands, lifting everyone's towels and drenching everyone's things.

You — it feels like hundreds of you — hunker in the toilets as hail attacks the roof.

You board the ferry wet. Waves are over a metre, a metre and a half high, but you make it through the heads just as darkness sets.

Look around, not ahead. Sit with what has happened.

Your friend's sister posts a picture of what is left: a tangle of corrugated metal; the walls have disintegrated; the roof has collapsed; surrounding trees are black sticks. You can see a kind of clearing around what was her house, and wonder if she had a garden.

Isn't it weird how in a single street there can be one house still standing?

Your sister's friend posts photos of what is left of her house, her garden. She posts photo after photo of the smallest signs of new life.

You haven't had it bad down your way yet. You talk bunkers with your brother-in-law. You get the tree-climbing arborist nephew around with his mini chainsaw. He scoots up the side of a tree like a possum and trims things back. You rake and rake and rake again, trying to keep things clear and gutters free of debris in case of ember attack.

In your firebox: woollen blankets; face masks, the expensive kind; torches and chargers; an antique tin of ham someone gave you one Christmas; a first aid kit; water, but not enough.

When you first bought the house, twenty years ago, you found a Bushfire Survival book in the op shop. You kept it in the loo, near the How To Survive A Rip poster from the weekend paper. It turns out the 'science' in both sources is wrong.

After Christmas with your family, surrounded by smoke — 'but it's the clearest it's been in six weeks,' they say — you fly home anticipating relief. You talk to the Irish woman sitting next to you. She needs to talk and talk and talk.

Orange rain

Notice your breathing.

Notice what it is doing.

Is it short or is it long? Is it shallow or is it deep?

Are the inhales and exhales roughly the same length or are they different?

Where in your body do you feel the breath?

Is it in your

mouth

nose,

chest,

belly?

Is it somewhere else?

I step out and smell this air. I like it because it reminds me of being in Saigon. And with the sound of motorbikes —

It's exciting. This is it. I haven't ever told anyone that.

I am drinking coffee. I need to walk up a hill. It is not a very large hill, but by the time I reach the top I am out of breath and coughing. The smoke catches in my lungs and burns in my bronchi. I can't stop thinking about my childhood friend who died suddenly a few months ago. Her lungs couldn't cope with the change in pressure while she was diving off the coast of Greece. I can't stop thinking about lungs and bronchi and alveoli, and the exchange of gases in our lungs; how I teach high school students about learning to breathe slowly — especially to exhale slowly — to manipulate that exchange and thereby calm their stress.

x inhale x exhale x let your body speak x

I am going for a swim in the Continental Pool. Every time I turn my head, I gulp in smoke. One of the old guys, sitting on the steps, says, 'It's like swimming in bacon!'

Did you think about *not* swimming? I didn't think about *not* running.

One day the Brunswick Baths are closed: it's dangerous to be swimming laps in the outdoor pool. The next week they are closed again: this time it is the red rain that deposited Mallee topsoil in a thin but unavoidable layer across every open surface in the city. *The Age* describes the orange rain as 'a gift from the Mallee'.

x inhale x exhale x let your body speak x

I was a bit dim about the orange rain. I got a fright every time I flushed the toilet on Level 4 at work.

Those toilets have often been questionable anyway. I always arrive early, so over the years I've had many opportunities to chat with several rounds of cleaners. (The university seems to move quite quickly through providers.) Some became upset because the night shift was being abolished. They were concerned and embarrassed by the thought of having to clean around working staff. Around this time bathroom cleanliness seemed to suffer and I, correctly or otherwise, made a direct connection. So I didn't equate the red toilet water with the orange rain at first. I was making other disturbing bodily connections.

The glass doors separating our apartment from its balcony are speckled with orange rain. My partner keeps cleaning them, which for some reason I find irritating. I keep telling her to stop. No one cares. It will just rain again, and then ...

People say water all the leaves of your veggies to get the orange film off them, otherwise they can't breathe.

x notice your body speak x listen x

They have a look of worry, as if I need to tell them something true, something to bring their concern closer to another's grief. But I deflect. I say, 'Have you heard about the wombats?' The wombats are ushering others to safety. Snakes, even. Their bodies huddled together. We shudder at the thought of sharing a burrow with a snake. Later, my Twitter feeds are full of people saying it's not true. That the wombats don't really do this. But I don't care. It's true for me. I know those wombats, I've talked to them about this. I know they have their ways of doing things. It's not for me to say whether it is true or not.

x inhale x exhale x

My partner feeds the orphaned wombats with babies' bottles. She calls for donations for the Wildlife Rescue place. It seems the biggest expense right now is rubber teats; the wombats chew them off. The wombats and the possums are mad for grevillea blossoms, my partner says. She cuts the flowers off our plants at home and takes them to the animals as treats.

At the surf club, the Sikhs bring curries and the canteen-lady types distribute salad sandwiches.

Holding two newborns, their legs and arms like spiders and the nearly smoke in the air.

My heart is beating abnormally. How can you be normal anymore?

x inhale x exhale x

Esther calls from Canberra. The air there is ten times worse. They had to close the gallery because there wasn't enough oxygen for the paintings. She stays inside. She and her friend have one P2 mask each; they probably don't even work by now. When she comes to Melbourne she laughs at our 'hazardous' air: this is nothing! We think of sending her more P2 masks if any come to Officeworks but she says, well the post isn't being delivered anyway.

He buys a face mask. It is yellow and has bees on it. At his work, they are yet to come up with a

policy around sending their employees out in the smoke, just as they are yet to implement a policy about sending them home if the temperature gets too hot. His boss asks him questions about the face mask, and the bureaucratic cogs begin to turn. They make masks available to employees. Some of the 'old boys' refuse to wear them, as if their hypermasculinity will protect them. The cogs turn again, making mask-wearing compulsory. He and his colleagues will be asked to breathe in some sort of gas to see if they cough; to test how sensitive they are to smoke. He doesn't know yet what the gas is. He doesn't know yet whether he trusts that it's okay to inhale.

Did you notice?

Almost anyone you meet.

Where were you —?

Who do you know that —?

Almost anyone you meet.

Where were you at Christmas?

What was your summer like?

Did you make it out?

How's your place?

Did you end up getting there?

Did you hear about?

Are you all right?

Eighteen hours on the highway. Caravans, station wagons, kids aching to be out of the back seat. Endless hand-painted signs: 'Thank you, firies!'

My dead father's dying friend is furious about bushfire propaganda. He routinely posts stories by long-lettered academics refuting climate emergencies: marshalling evidence to blame the Greens. My sister sometimes takes him on while my shame cowers in the wings, furtively scrolling, watching the show. I slide into my sister's DMs and we bemoan my mother's emoji'd endorsements and ask each other why we don't unfriend our dead father's dying friend. It fascinates me how much the articles he posts are the mirror opposite of those posted by my peers; those articles offered for the purpose of refuting the deniers and greenie bashers. On social media each side feels like its well-written arguments — coherent, grounded in evidence, endorsed by legitimate experts — are pitted against lunacy.

Shake my hand, Cobargo! Shake it. I have a hand here ready for the TV shaking. Shake it, Goddamn you. Scrub that image. Can we scrub that? Can we deny that? Who was she? Any background on her? Did she do that deliberately? Everyone makes mistakes, I'm only human, can I say that (over coffee with the minders, or in front of the bathroom mirror)?

I have an Aussie friend who doesn't like New Zealanders weighing in on bushfire politics. I find this so interesting amid pictures of pink Auckland skies and tinted glaciers. There was a feeling that summer that it was only an Australian catastrophe; that people in other countries couldn't also be

shocked and appalled. The smoke had travelled around the globe many times already so it was really everybody's problem.

Did anyone notice the floods in Jakarta? Fifty or a hundred people died; it was happening right at the same time. All these images of climate disaster but some are more 'newsworthy' than others. Australia broke into the consciousness of America and Europe for a few weeks. Indonesia is moving their capital city to a completely different island because Jakarta is sinking as the waters rise.

Did you notice? The highway across the Nullarbor was closed for weeks. The supermarkets in Perth started to run low on supplies. This didn't even register.

So he was a small time horse trainer and he had a property at Woodside. The CFS hadn't been out and he thought — I need to stay and protect the horses, protect the sheds, the house. He had a ride-on that he'd fitted out with water and other equipment he thought he'd need. The fire came up and he was watering down embers, flushing away the flames, but then the water ran out, and the flames were more intense than he'd expected, and suddenly he was surrounded. He was burnt by the flames, but still alive. He was in a coma for days. When he came to, he couldn't move most of his body. One of the doctors came to visit him. He knew that this doctor had developed a new cream for burns. The first thing he said to the doctor was, 'You need to share the proceeds from that cream with the victims of the fire.' After that comment the doctor didn't visit him again.

My dad rings from overseas while I'm on the beach, our favourite bay, at daybreak. The kids rough and tumble in the still water after a hot night and early run to the campground toilet: Pete is back at the house, digging up the septic tank, trying to find a fix. Dad asks how I am and I surprise us both by crying. He says, as though he doesn't know this is why I'm crying: 'we've heard about the fires.' I cry and cry. Say, 'the fireys.' Say, 'the animals.' He says, 'Rightio. Well, glad you're okay.' I am not okay. We are not okay.

I meet a friend from Bega. He spent the 'last' fires sheltering in the ocean with his kids. This fire has been kinder, he says: we didn't have to go to the beach. He tells me it's better for the younger ones, they don't know anything different. It's the older ones he worries about. It's a new kind of solastalgia, he says, they can remember when we went to the beach just for a swim.

Because of the smoke

This summer I planned to go to the beach more, the pool more, swim more. This year our place was fine. You feel bad thinking that. Denial. Comes in so many hues and textures. Is denial even essential in carrying on with 'normal life'? The effort of pretending normal life is possible — ticking off our usual work priorities, making plans; all the time wondering. Wanting, wanting, wanting everything to be okay. A friend tells me a story: her sister visiting from England dragged her to Altona Beach on the day with the smoke and later the mud rain. Her sister didn't care about the smoke, despite the warnings on the beach not to swim because the water is contaminated; she insists that on a hot day in summer you go to the beach. My friend notes how she was more scared of her sister than the warnings. One day a neighbour drew our attention to a koala casually wandering down what is

essentially a suburban street. We were so excited to see one so close, and not in captivity, that we celebrated our luck before asking the obvious questions. This koala was not in distress, but the neighbour was pleased to hand over responsibility for monitoring the driveways and alerting passing motorists. We carefully tracked the koala, but papped him/her/they all the way to the tree up which he/she/they speedily climbed. Out of danger and, hopefully, in the presence of some rehydrating foliage. The tree was in a driveway so we approached the house, to alert residents to the possibility of the koala reappearing on their driveway. The front door to the house was ajar, even a door to one of the parked cars was wide open, but there was nobody home.

x

The highway's closed.

Are we living in the same universe?

An extra week of holiday! my nephew squeals.

We can't get in or out, there's no power, no phone reception.

If this is possible, what else?

But we have all our Christmas books to read.

Summer, like winter, has become an inside season.

Will we still swim?

Let's keep dancing in a conga line together

Maybe getting worse — even worse? — will make change happen.

Hitting rock bottom and all that.

But who is the rock, who gets hit?

It was funny and I took a pic I never posted.

We are slowly-or-not-so-slowly fucked.

x

We return to work in late January and are surprised by how many people, when asked about their summer, say: it was 'great!'

And then the dust

Checking, checking and checking again ... to make sure that nothing has happened since last time I looked.

Every day, first thing: check the Fires Near Me app. Then out onto the verandah: smell the weather. It seemed impossible that there wasn't a fire burning close by, down the road say. But there wasn't. It was always smoke drifting down from the fires up in the Highlands. The smell was acrid. Can a smell be uneasy? Because it made us uneasy. We'd recheck our apps continuously. Once there was a fire in the next valley. I ran to the neighbours and asked: what are you doing? Going? They said: no, don't worry, it's a truck on fire. On those smoky days the birds congregated in the pond, dipped in and out. The grasshoppers came inside; twenty of them jumping along the corridor. Frogs came inside too and hid in the wet areas. You'd always have to check the toilet as they'd sit

under the lid. Spiders ran across the ceiling. There were no mosquitos though. It was better to have the windows shut rather than open. It was better not to go walking, even on a mild smoke day. We had been told we had to move house and so on some days we'd be looking at houses to rent or buy and we'd see helicopters in the distance dropping water on the fires. One day, we went to a house inspection and a fire started in a paddock across the road and all of a sudden we were surrounded by firetrucks and police cars. It seemed nuts to be looking for a place to live at this time; it seemed nuts to be doing ordinary things, but some ordinary things had to be done. We made new conditions for our house search. If there was only one road into a suburb and one road out, we wouldn't look in that area. The thing we had always loved, to be surrounded by trees, needed careful planning.

The Vic Emergency app. I love and hate it in equal measure; I refine and refine the radii of the zones I wish to monitor. At first I am alert to every new ping, responding to each with a small jolt — my startle reflex working overtime, like a nervy dog in a thunderstorm.

Is the Ventolin past its use-by date? What are the masks we need? How much water do we have?

I'm too scared to ask; I know she lost the studio in the last fires. I've written with her about this. The remnants, and the regrowth; the starting again. We have shared cups of tea, smelling the lingering ash and marvelling at the green. But this time I'm afraid to call.

A friend I've known forever. Her hometown is ablaze and I hesitate

I
download the app. Delete it. Download, delete. Every day I get an air quality warning for my area. Whoever knew there were so many fires so close to our house. I download the app. Delete.

Look at all the fires in NSW! Aren't there any in Victoria?

I find myself refreshing news sites, combing for pictures taken of the Mallacoota aftermath: looking for my friend, whose sister lost her house. She was in that town with her husband and small child. I am fairly certain she is pregnant. The family wouldn't be able to evacuate on the boats because their little boy couldn't climb the ladders, and maybe my pregnant friend couldn't either.

Zoom in zoom in. In my hand, blue, yellow, red diamonds diamonds all the way up the coast to Brisbane.

Next to Alphington train station is an air monitoring machine. Do they have an official name? I never took much notice of it until this summer. I was housesitting two whippets in North Fitzroy when the smoke haze in Melbourne first began. I woke up thinking the house was on fire.

A friend is in Bega, and I follow those stories too — he is a radio producer. My friend calls me one day to see how I am. How I am. I feel guilty. I tell him this.

I find myself noticing all the cracks in window frames.

New weather

I read somewhere that we should consider changing our summer holiday period to March.

The thick air acts like flint.

Oh yes, and then the weather report on ABC radio: 'tomorrow we might expect some mud-rain'

The place is full of tradies in fluoro vests, but we are in the Respirator department trying to snap up a box of ten, now that the shelves in Bunnings are empty. I get bronchitis, sometimes asthma — I haven't had thunderstorm asthma yet but it too is a thing now and I must be prepared with ventolin and a spacer: in every bag, in the car, in the office, on the plane. We are triumphant. We score that ten pack, and the ziplock bags to store them in. Later that day I anoint the inside of a mask with essential oil: lemon, mint and lavender.

I had slept in late — till midday — and was going to take things slowly. I needed to clean the house. Eventually I got around to vacuuming. Looking out the living room window it seemed like evening; the light a dusky yellow. I checked the time and was confused to see that it was only 2pm. My Aotearoan sky was that way because of the smoke from Australia. Fucking fuck. I sat down, feeling like I couldn't move. Moments later, my fingers scrolling Instagram, I saw that @bestofGrindr had posted a terrible meme about Iran. Queers complicit with American imperialism: I couldn't move again.

Hail the size of golfballs is falling in East Melbourne.

And it's raining, and as I haven't been here before I'm not sure if it's normal or not normal but it rains all day, it rains

The ferns are coming back. Clusters of leaves clinging to the blackened trunk.

Mosquitos.

An echidna.

Contextualising Statement

Overwhelming catastrophic events have become part of the ‘new normal’ of climate change: relentless, persistent destruction of habitat and atmosphere and species. Sometimes these events rumble in the background, like the Boxing Day test on the TV in the next room; and sometimes they intrude more urgently into our lives, like blistering sunburn.

In February 2020, 13 writers — from University of Wollongong’s MECO (Material Ecologies) Network and RMIT University’s non/fictionLab — came together to explore ways we might respond to the season we had all just experienced. We were reeling from the immensity of it all: the destruction of over 18.6 million hectares; the emission of 250 million tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere; an estimated one billion animals killed and three billion displaced. We also felt that the conventional research systems available to us as writers and scholars prevented us from articulating our lived experience: the panic and the powerlessness, the stench in our nostrils, the scars on our lungs. We agreed with Deborah Bird Rose’s assertion that the neoliberal apparatus ‘disembeds that which is embedded, aiming to decontextualise ... [it] replaces living systems with disarticulated fragments’ (2013: 3). We understood that the usual practice of individual authorship could not adequately record what we had all encountered.

Instead, we spent the day talking and thinking and writing collaboratively. We used a process we call ‘cross-over writing’: multiple authors work together in the same space — both physical and digital — to write a single text (Carlin et al 2019). The process necessitates a letting go of authorship as a solo process, allowing the work to emerge as a conversational collage of agreements, disagreements, surprises and connections, manifesto and diatribe. Our aim was to explore how the effects of shared but different proximate relations might produce an affective account of the lived experience of climate change. In this, we are responding to the call from Maria Puig de la Bellacasa to place *care* at the centre of our writing practice. As she writes, care is ‘a vital affective state, an ethical obligation and a practical labour’ (2012: 197); it is, as Thom van Dooren notes, an ‘obligation to look after one another’ (van Dooren 2014: 291), and also a recognition that, in Rose’s words, ‘one’s own self is always entangled with all the others ... who make life possible’ (2013: 7).

We thought we knew what summer was is part of the conversation we had that day, and part of a conversation we will continue to have, as we breathe in smoke and breathe out the contagion of the events to come.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan Ballard, Hannah Brasier, Sholto Buck, David Carlin, Sophie Langley, Joshua Lobb, Brigid Magner, Catherine McKinnon, Rose Michael, Peta Murray, Francesca Rendle-Short, Lucinda Strahan, and Stayci Taylor

Susan Ballard is an art historian and writer based at Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka, Aotearoa New Zealand. She established the MECO network in 2014.

Hannah Brasier is a Naarm (Melbourne-based) research practitioner interested in the relationship between interactive media and ecocritical thinking.

Sholto Buck is an artist and writer based in Naarm Melbourne. He is currently a PhD Candidate in Creative Writing at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia.

David Carlin is a writer and interdisciplinary artist, who currently co-directs the non/fictionLab at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia.

Sophie Langley is a writer and sound media maker based at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia.

Joshua Lobb is a writer based at the University of Wollongong, Australia. He is the author of *The Flight of Birds* (2019).

Brigid Magner is a literary studies researcher based in the School of Media & Communication, RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia.

Catherine McKinnon is a writer and teacher at the University of Wollongong, Australia. She is a co-convenor of UOW's C3P Research Centre and author of *Storyland* (2017).

Rose Michael is a writer and critic of speculative fiction.

Peta Murray is a writer-performer and Vice-Chancellor's Postdoctoral Research Fellow at RMIT University whose research focuses on the use of arts-based practices as modes of inquiry.

Francesca Rendle-Short is Associate Dean Writing and Publishing in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT, co-founder of non/fictionLab, and co-director of WrICE.

Lucinda Strahan is a writer and researcher of expanded nonfiction at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. She is Writer in Residence at Linden New Art.

Stacy Taylor is a media lecturer and creative practice researcher based at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

URL: <https://www.axonjournal.com.au/issue-vol-10-no-2-dec-2020/we-thought-we-knew-what-summer-was>

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Published by
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research
University of Canberra
Canberra, Australia
ISSN: 1838-8973