

Apocalyptic Pedagogies: Rethinking Publics and Publicness in the Time of Apocalypse

Bindi MacGill

University of South Australia

Abstract

In this photo essay I draw on Haraway's (2016) call to stay "with the trouble" and make "kin in the Chthulucene" to reflect on emergent community understandings as a result of catastrophic fires on Kangaroo Island (KI) in 2019. The title *Immolation with Ashes* is a signifier for staying with the trouble and draws on Indigenous ethics of care and understandings of connection to place. I draw on documentary photography that I conducted over several years on KI to unveil the impact of the ecological disaster and use the images as a site for reflection. Through the framing of apocalyptic pedagogies I offer a family vignette to provide insight into the event of the fires and the emergence of community knowledges and networks that arose as a result of the fires. The photos throughout the paper also reveal sites of healing landscapes in the same way in which traumatised communities form solidarity and knowledge in recovery.

Immolation with Ashes

This photo essay draws on Haraway's (2016) call to stay "with the trouble" and make "kin in the Chthulucene." The images are taken from my home on Kangaroo Island where catastrophic fires destroyed half the island in 2019, destroying over 32,000 domestic animals, homes, humans, and an incalculable number of native wildlife. This ecological disaster has turned the island from a nature reserve to a site of mass extinction. The event was described by many locals and those viewing the unfolding of the event from afar as apocalyptic. The immolation with ashes remaining is a signifier of nature's revenge. These images and text explore the intersection of a land ethics of care, apocalyptic environmental events, and the emergence of traumatised communities. A key theme of *confusion* is advanced to highlight the state of apocalyptic times.

These images draw out the notion of 'ongoingness' in our chthonic lives and turn toward the idea of survival through co-dependence, co-creation and making good trouble. The photographs of burnt landscapes from the Kangaroo Island bushfires was a response to the paralysis that occurs when things are destroyed. Hope disappears as a vague construct in this underwordly chthonic state, but when an embodied urge forces us to respond to these injuries on the land whilst in the ashes, it is possible to feel hopefulness through action. Framing these moments through photography is an enactment of staying in the present and a meditation on deep listening within a posthumanist ethics of care. Immolation is to destroy by fire and also to kill as a sacrifice. The land is a living entity that was sacrificed by the failure of the State to mitigate climate change. This photo essay provides a vignette of escape from the fires and theorizations about damaged sites of public environmental spaces within the context of multi-species activism. It maintains a feminist standpoint of the 'view from below' (Harding, 1991) as its lens and calls for working in the contact zone.

A State of Confusion

Confusion is the condition of the 21st century. Modernism has been described as a state of disenchantment (Bennett, 2016). Postmodernism followed with modes of analysis of deconstructing the 'truth'. Barthes (1983) offered ways of thinking that helped us unravel 'truth', and Benjamin (2008) helped define how we reproduce the normative values produced through film and photography. Foucault lands us in fractured and multifarious terrains but for the purposes of this paper I will use his framings of governmentality (1991).

Individuals witness apocalyptic images of scarred landscapes and burnt koalas and kangaroos lying in agonizing pain on their 20x10cm mobile devices through newsfeeds. How one reacts to these unavoidable newsfeeds is experienced differently depending on one's location and socio-historical conditions. We are networked into a collective portal of distraction that creates states of confusion and detachment. These 21st century conditions require unifying actions to address climatic events, yet there is a state of paralysis, or, as Harding argues, a state of 'unprecedented looking away' about our entanglements and complicity in distinction (Harding, 1991, p. 35). This is coupled with a deferral of response-ability by some citizens where we continue to live our lives if we remain 'untouched' by apocalyptic events. Others work for climate change action as an embodied visceral response that moves beyond contemplation to collective public action.

Contemplation and Distraction

Contemplation is desired as a circuit breaker from distraction and deferred responsibility. These images are chosen as a focus for contemplation to signify a beginning point. It is a point in time to listen to the earth and ask what response is required as the Land is living and the land speaks (O'Brien and Watson, 2014). These images were taken from my home place

on the North side of Kangaroo Island. I have been taking photos of the landscape over the years since the fires began, to search for re-growth.



Image: Yucca (GRASS TREE XANTHORRHOEA PREISSI AUSTRALIAN NATIVE): A mixed recovery—pointing to the sky. Photo by author, 2019

The story of escape

Interestingly, the Grass Tree survives well in fire. It needs fire to blossom. Grass Trees require fire to re-generate, but when the heat is too intense, they explode because they contain resin. This resin was sourced for tool making for epochs by Ngarrindjeri and the sub-Tendis. The settler State ignored the power of fire farming that has been used for millennia by Aboriginal communities to curate, manage and care for the land. Fire farming requires a relational approach to manage the intersecting spaces, environments and peoples in particular areas (O'Brien and Watson, 2014). Uncle Lewis Yerloburka O'Brien, Kurna Elder, 'points to the failings of western understandings of bushfires and their prevention.' He explains, for example, how 'rainfall as a key predictor for bushfires is a factor that has been ignored by mainstream perspectives'. He further highlights 'the historical strategies that Indigenous people have used in managing bushfire prone land such as back-burning and conferencing between nations in order to share environmental knowledge' (O'Brien and Watson, 2014, p. 2)

When the fires fiercely ravaged the north side of the island, my 90-year-old father led a troupe of guests and family through smoke-infused roads with embers shrouding the wind-screen and sparks exploding from the bush that skirts the dirt roads where he had farmed for decades. He knew the way out, despite the blackened light, as it was embodied in the everyday practice of driving around his farms. It was silent in the car, filled with concentration as sounds of the fire became audibly louder with explosions of Yuccas and cracks from falling trees.

No one knew if the house was going to remain, as a mushroom of smoke lingered in the rear vision mirror. All the apps developed through artificial intelligence—Country Fire Ser-

vice and mobile connections—were no longer relevant; they didn't work. Technology is not a friend and will abandon you in times of need. Haraway (2016) implores us to release our faith in technology as saviour. She writes:

...dismiss, namely, a comic faith in technofixes, whether secular or religious: technology will somehow come to the rescue of its naughty but very clever children, or what amounts to the same thing, God will come to the rescue of his disobedient but ever hopeful children. In the face of such touching silliness about technofixes (or techno-apocalypses), sometimes it is hard to remember that it remains important to embrace situated technical projects and their people. They are not the enemy; they can do many important things for staying with the trouble and for making generative oddkin. (p. 3)

Mobile phones proved useless. My father, his passengers and the guests that were following him were driving into the unknown; he knew the roads but in the back of his mind were two doctors who had died in the fires the day before. There was little choice: do nothing and most likely burn to death or do something and possibly escape. My father and his vulnerable crew had to go inland toward the fire in order to get onto the main highway to get out away from the fires at Kingscote. Driving at a steady pace he could barely see the family and friends who followed him on the winding single lane road that undulates across and through thick scrub. Looking ahead, the headlights pierced the smoke and in the rear view mirror there was blurred vision from the ashen grey weight of more smoke. He worked with his lifetime of skills but felt the gravity of responsibility for those who followed. When they arrived on to Playford highway there were glimpses of blue sky that gave a false sense of safety. After they had gotten through and arrived at Kingscote, the small town where Islanders gathered, the highway was completely engulfed by the fire and even those native Grass Trees that usually thrive after a fire were burnt to ashes.

Despite arriving at a seemingly safe site within the township the fear and anticipation of loss was not over. We listened to reports about our house burning, the land burning, and about explosions of sheds, chicken yards, animals and everything that one had built for 90 years. Fortunately, after weeks our family returned to see the ruin and were grateful to the fire fighters who used water planes to save the house, the sheds, and the chickens. All of the guttering, decks, and the land was scarred. The melted aluminium from the house spread across the land like blood, the electrics hung from the rafters like ancient spindles and the house was black instead of white.

Confusion arose about who was responsible. Was climate change to blame, or the lack of the fire management plan on Kangaroo Island, or the Natural Resource Management program that meant farmers could not fire farm in the traditions of fire farming developed over 80,000 years by Aboriginal sovereign nations? Conversations circulated about returning responsibility of land management to Elders who had been stripped of sovereign rights and denied recognition. Belatedly, in these apocalyptic times, Elders and Indigenous community knowledge are valued. Ironically, Indigenous relational ethics of care with the environment are anathema to colonial control and land 'management'. This ignorance is segue to the apocalypse. Conversely, Haraway (2016) calls for the Chthulucene, to stay with the trouble, to take response-ability in apocalyptic times:

Chthulucene is a simple word. It is a compound of two Greek roots (khthôn and kainos) that together name a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth. Kainos means now, a time of beginnings, a time for ongoing, for freshness. Nothing in kainos must mean conventional pasts, presents, or futures. There is nothing in times of beginnings that insists on wiping out what has come before, or, indeed, wiping out what comes after. Kainos can be full of inheritances,

of remembering, and full of comings, of nurturing what might still be. I hear kainos in the sense of thick, ongoing presence, with hyphae infusing all sorts of temporalities and materialities. (p. 2)

In staying with the trouble, Haraway calls us to think within an extended family ethics of care where we make kin with animals, rivers and humans as equals. This is borrowed from Indigenous ethics of care models where all human and non-human subjects have equal value. However, engaging with a relational ethic with the land requires knowledge and sensitivity.

Public Pedagogies

Public pedagogies were produced as a result of the Kangaroo Island bushfires where people came together to share, console, sit in grief and work together to find solutions. Sandlin, Schultz and Burdick (2010) outline how public pedagogies can be informal education sites that range from the internet to grassroots social movements. On Kangaroo Island new public pedagogies emerged and groups of people found ways to help those who had lost their livelihoods and properties. Land care, the Army, teams of volunteers and animal rescue organisations were ferried to Kangaroo Island to support. Farmers, families and locals were the educative agents (Charman and Dixon, 2021) who informed these support teams on ways to re-build. Many locals were overwhelmed with the support and some were speechless and did not know how to tend to the immolation. As the work of restoration was underway on Kangaroo Island, new negotiation frames were established around natural resource management programs that would ensure this would not happen again. New fire management programs and renewal programs were created.

Catastrophes like fires bring people together and highlight kinship connections and what people truly value. The fires on Kangaroo Island bought people and family together and the stories of survival all return to the care of the land. This care by non-Indigenous families is not the same conceptualisation of a 'Caring for Country' from an Indigenous perspective but the wound from the fire still sits in the heart of people that have lost their land. This grief highlights that farmers are connected to the land and the land has shaped the way they think and feel, but there is a lot to learn from the land. Learning to listen to Indigenous knowledges and histories about Caring for Country is a public pedagogy.



Image: Burnt but still standing. Photo by author, 2019

A Land Ethics of Care as a Public Pedagogy

The connection to land/country and the ways Country informs kin relationships are not features of the ethics of care practised in dominant white culture. Caring for Country as an ethics of care is not an attempt to re-construct an anthropological and voyeuristic representation of all Indigenous peoples' associations to Land. It is an attempt to highlight how experiences and activities of daily living shape ethics of care frameworks. The values that shape one's locatedness also inform patterns in caring relationships. These patterns therefore become a central feature of ethics of care.

Learning to listen to 'Country' is a pedagogy of place iterated through stories by Indigenous knowledge holders (MacGill et al., 2012). Reconceptualising 'Country' as an actor that teaches produces a public pedagogy that brings all actors into dialogue through acts of listening, observing and responding. Hearing with the body, mind and soul is known as Kulini. The Anangu, Aboriginal people from the APY Lands (Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands), have an approach to pedagogy which is informed by Kulini, a deep listening, spiritual, embodied knowledge system (Osborne, 2014). The premise behind a land ethics of care is something not just 'imagined or represented, it is lived in and lived with' (Rose, 1996, p. 2).

Rose outlines the notion of caring for the environment 'as a moral community' (Rose 1988, pp. 378) and articulates the associated responsibilities, which include:

Keeping the country 'clean', i.e. burning it off properly. Using the country by hunting, gathering, fishing, and generally letting the country know that people are there. Protecting the country's integrity by not allowing other people to use country or Dreamings (in ceremonial contexts) without asking. Protecting the country, particularly Dreaming sites, from damage. Protecting the species related to that country. Protecting dangerous places so that harm does not come out of that country. Providing a new generation of owners to take over the responsibilities for that country. Learning and performing the ceremonies which keep country and people *punya*. (Rose 1992, pp. 106-107)

Rose is referring to the responsibilities of the Yarralin people. She refers to the carer of the country as *ngurramarla* (the person who is physically taking care of country) (p. 107). The complexities of kinship relations are embedded in a land ethics of care. Rose explains the interconnection between family and land in relation to the Aboriginal land rights claims of the Victoria River country (Yarralin and Lingara):

Allen Young explained to me, as he later explained to the lawyers and finally to the judge, that real traditional owners are the *ngurramarla* ('ngurra' means country; 'marla' is not productive of meaning in itself but relates to concepts of dweller; in this context, to permanent dwelling and belonging). Sometimes he identified the Dreaming creators as the *ngurramarla*, sometimes as undifferentiated sets of ancestral people/Dreamings, and sometimes his own direct ancestors. Another person in the area explained: 'he's the *ngurramarla* when he's dead-to take care of the country'. (Rose, 2004, p. 167)

In this context, *family* means both physical and non-physical relations who are part of the land/country. Rose claims that people are connected through relationships as much as they are connected to land, because the land breathes and needs to be cared for. If relationships between people and country share a similar weight of responsibility to those between people, then here the land/sea/sky scapes are central to Indigenous ethics of care models. When my father drove through the fires without seeing he had in a sense embodied a connection to Kangaroo Island. He knew the paths and had revegetated sand dunes and landscapes planting thousands of trees and shrubs. He had learned to care for the land, as the land he occupied taught him to listen.

To honour country is to pay respect to Country, and this is an emotive act. The experience of being present in the landscape shapes the importance of caring for Country as central to an ethics of care. Connections to Country continue to be very much part of many Indigenous peoples' lives, whether these connections are lived or whether they are re-enforced through remembering. Embodying a sense of place through tuning in and listening to the land/sea/river/ is an educative act that requires care.

Staying With the Trouble and De-centering the Confusion

Whiteness and white ethics of care are privileged in policy and neoliberal institutions to the point where its 'complex set of values structures' remains normalised (Tronto, 1993, p. 116). Care is largely 'devalued as work' because it is aligned with 'women's work' (Tronto, 1993, p. 117), which further entrenches caring's role through its alignment with gender. As a result of Covid, people's lives are no longer demarcated along private/public binaries. We enter each other's homes via zoom. QR codes mark our footsteps. Caring has shifted from embodied experiences to remote gift giving on public streets by children, such as the puppet spoons and words of care marked on the streets in chalk. Shifting the debate of the public/private; care/justice binary we call for a deeper understanding of care as an 'integral moral and political concept' (Tronto, 1993, p. 124), where the 'importance of care requires a paradigm shift and a redrawing of moral boundaries' (Kent, 2000, p. 91).



Image: The ashes. Photo by author, 2019

A decentred approach that supports local needs and knowledges that are specific to communities is the first phase toward a radical shift in the valuing of diverse ethics of care paradigms. Staying with the trouble is learning to listen and 'to take care of the country' (Rose, 2004, p. 167). This practice of staying with the trouble on a damaged planet enables generations-to-come a place to live in.



Image: Recovering Ecosystems. Photo by author, 2019

Conclusion

These stories tell us how to think rather than provide solutions to ever-changing problems. How we think a problem is local and specific. This photo essay explored the need to stay with the trouble as a response-ability within a dynamic ethics of care. Immolation is where something is killed or sacrificed. The apocalyptic event on Kangaroo Island contained sacrifice on an unrepresented scale. These photographs capture a moment in time about the notion of 'ongoingness' in our chthonic lives and turn toward the idea of survival through co-dependence, co-creation and making good trouble. The practice of staying present and a meditation on deep listening within a post-humanist ethics of care are approaches considered in this paper. This photo essay provided short descriptions of the bush fires on Kangaroo Island and theorizations about damaged sites of public environmental spaces within the context of multi-species activism. Staying with the trouble and building communities of publicness within an ethics of care is sustaining. Apocalyptic nature events like those I describe in this essay disrupt the power nexus of the State. As the State exercises power to resolve these problems we notice the fragility of its mechanisms. The people, publicness and its associated pedagogies that are co-created in the context of apocalyptic times will define the problems and co-create solutions with the people, species, land, sea and sky to work towards states of clarity. This is the shift: a move from confusion about what is the problem, who is to blame, and how one should solve those problems, to a sense of clarity about these intersections.

References

- Barthes, R. (1983) *Empire of signs*. Translated by Richard Howard. London: Cape.
- Benjamin, W. (2008) *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility, and other writings on media*. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (eds.). Harvard: Harvard University Press.

- Bennett, J. (2016) *The enchantment of modern life: Attachments, crossings, and ethics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Charman, K. and Dixon, M. (2021) *Theory and methods for public pedagogy research*. New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1991) 'Governmentality', trans. R. Braidotti and revised by C. Gordon, in G. Burchell, C. Gordon and P. Miller (Eds.), *The Foucault effect: Studies in governmentality*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp. 87–104.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016) *Staying with the trouble. Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Harding, S. (1991) "Strong objectivity" and socially situated knowledge. In *Whose science? whose knowledge? Thinking from women's lives*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, (pp. 138-163)
- Kent, J. (2000) *Social perspectives on pregnancy and childbirth and the caring professions*. Maidenhead, Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- MacGill, B., Matthew, J., Trevorrow, A. E., Abdulla, A. A., and Rankine, D. (2012) 'Ecology, ontology and pedagogy at Camp Coorong', *M/C - A Journal of Media and Culture*.
- O'Brien, L. and Watson, I. (2014). 'In conversation with Uncle Lewis: bushfires, weather-makers, collective management', *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Scholarship*, 10(5), pp. 450–461.
- Osborne, S. (2014) 'At the heart of learning: Putuna Kulini: The trouble with "hearing"', *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 10(1), pp. 3-14. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/117718011401000101?journalCode=alna>
- Rose D. (1992) *Dingo makes us human life and land in an Australian Aboriginal culture*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Rose D. (1996a) *Indigenous customary law and the courts, postmodern ethics and legal pluralism, Discussion paper*. The Australian National University: North Australian Research Unit.
- Rose D. (1996b) *Nourishing terrains: Australian Aboriginal views of landscape and wilderness*. Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission.
- Rose D. (2004) *Reports from a wild county, ethics for decolonisation*. Sydney: UNSW Press.
- Sandlin, J. A., Schultz, B. D., and Burdick, J. (2010) *Handbook of public pedagogy*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Tronto, J. C. (1993) *Moral boundaries, A political argument for an ethics of care*. New York, NY: Routledge.