

#AustraliaOnFire: Hashtag Activism and Collective Affect in the Black Summer Fires

Tania Leimbach, Research Associate, Climate, Society and Environment Research Centre,
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Building 10, Jones St, Ultimo, 2007, University of
Technology Sydney

Tania.Leimbach@uts.edu.au

[ORCID 0000-0002-8144-5065](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8144-5065)

Jane Palmer, Adjunct Fellow, Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology
Sydney

Jane.Palmer@uts.edu.au

[ORCID 0000-0002-4131-4482](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4131-4482)

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How are extreme weather events and the loss of iconic species affecting Australians?
Through digital ethnography, Tania Leimbach and Jane Palmer explore Twitter as a
performative site for collective emotion, action and heightened multispecies awareness
during the Black Summer bushfires of 2019-2020.

@LeimbachTania and @JanePalmer555

Abstract

The 2019–2020 “Black Summer” bushfire season woke Australian and global populations to the harsh realities of a changing climate. The impact was profound, and it remains ongoing. Social media cast a spotlight on—and propelled into a mediatised, virtual space—the suffering of humans and other species. In particular, the iconic and severely threatened koala was a highly visible non-human species directly harmed alongside thousands of species in the order of individual billions. This article explores what comes to matter in the realms of affect, care and action, as observed in the public sphere via social media and the use of hashtags to

interpret and performatively frame events. The catastrophic bushfires prompted a heightened multispecies awareness in the greater population. This article argues that the disaster produced a transversal event through social media communications, one that de-centred the human, allowing for novel connections between the human and non-human, prompting new questions and creating new responsibilities.

Keywords: Australian bushfires, Digital ethnography, Climate change, Affective publics, Multispecies relations.

Introduction

The 2019–2020 “Black Summer” fire season woke the Australian public to some of the harsh realities of a changing climate. The impact on people, land, property, Country and non-human species was profound and is ongoing. The iconic and severely threatened koala was a highly visible non-human species directly harmed alongside thousands of other species in the order of billions of individuals.¹ The catastrophic event has reshaped human–koala relations, and we argue that social media platforms have played a significant role in this re-shaping. With extensive cross-posting from mainstream media and citizen-based journalism, the “digital space”, a term we unpack later in this article, became a performative site for collective emotion and action—as both material forms of care and as political critique and advocacy.

We take up Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s notion of the transversal as a way to pay attention to new and unexpected connections and movements—affective and material—that

¹ The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) estimated the number of animals killed or displaced at close to 3 billion: 143 million mammals, 2.46 billion reptiles, 180 million birds, and 51 million frogs: Lily M. van Eeden et al., *Impacts of the Unprecedented 2019–2020 Bushfires on Australian Animals: Report Prepared for WWF-Australia* (Ultimo, NSW: WWF-Australia, 2020), <https://www.wwf.org.au/ArticleDocuments/353/WWF_Impacts-of-the-unprecedented-2019-2020-bushfires-on-Australian-animals.pdf>.

are generated by such a disaster.² A transversal can hold together, in an ephemeral assemblage, humans and non-humans, the material and conceptual, events and conditions, images and memories, stories and experience, and also a particular past, present and potential future. The typical lines of causation, chronological ordering, hierarchies of living things and category distinctions that attach themselves to things (where “policy” has a different kind of valence from “paw” or “claw”, or where “man-made” is the opposite of “natural”) are temporarily suspended or, in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, “destratified”. The hashtag, we suggest, is a transversal phenomenon that not only brings together—“accretes”—disparate elements such as “individuals, collectives, corporations, environmental forces and immaterial affective flows”,³ but also gives them a momentum. Performing as a vector that produces change, the hashtag reveals what Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich have described as multiple forms of “‘Becomings’—new kinds of relations emerging from non-hierarchical alliances, symbiotic attachments, and the mingling of creative agents”,⁴ with the potential to catalyse social and political transformation.

To explore these ideas of accretion and the transversal, we now turn to the contexts in which the hashtag acted as facilitator and shaper of new publics in the wake of the Black Summer bushfires.

² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London, New York: Continuum, 2004 [1987]).

³ Jessica McLean, *Changing Digital Geographies: Technologies, Environments and People* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 29.

⁴ Eben Kirksey and Stefan Helmreich, “The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography,” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2010): 545–76, 546.

Context 1: A Catastrophic Season of Fires and Destruction

With 18.6 million hectares of land burnt, the Black Summer fires were the most extensive and devastating on record. Their severity is reflected in the shift from the single-day names given to previous bushfires—Ash Wednesday (February 1983) and Black Saturday (February 2009)⁵—to the Black Summer, which extended over a period of at least six months (September 2019 to March 2020). The ferocity of the fire season brought to the fore public discussion of Indigenous fire practices and the failures of contemporary land management that led to the unprecedented conditions, as well as the worsening impacts of climate change.

The bushfires attracted widespread media coverage, intensive and intimate. The untiring work of volunteer firefighters, and firefighter deaths, activated public discussion about what is valued in other humans, and prompted debates on the inadequacy of parliamentary politics in Australia. Notably, some of the affective consequences of the bushfires, such as anger towards politicians for jeopardising the wellbeing of future generations as well as heroic firefighters, and anguish for animal pain, are clearly “other”-focused, compared to grief for the loss of iconic landscapes, the (sometimes sentimentalised) pride in fellow Australians, and anxiety about economic impacts. There have also been particular impacts for First Nations people, for whom damage to Country means not only the loss of physical amenity or utility, but grief for places of cultural and spiritual significance, places of deep interrelatedness between all living and non-living beings.⁶

In the wake of the bushfire season, the incumbent Federal Government was forced to no longer flatly deny or ignore the material evidence of climate change across physical

⁵ Tom Griffiths, “The Language of Catastrophe,” *Griffith Review* 35 (2012), <<https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/the-language-of-catastrophe/>>.

⁶ Karen Martin (Booran Mirraboopa), “Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing: A Theoretical Framework and Methods for Indigenous and Indigenist Re-Search,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 27, no. 76 (2003): 203–14, 206, citing Barbara Thayer-Bacon.

landscapes, nor the public health risks caused by the hazardous levels of smoke and impacts on wildlife. As the economic costs of the bushfires spiralled, and divergent voices from business, investment and insurance industries became louder on the risks of climate change,⁷ Australian political discourse shifted towards the scientific consensus, as evidenced in a frontpage report in conservative newspaper the *Australian* in February 2021, which described the bushfires as “tragic but foreseeable” in the light of climate change.⁸ Nonetheless, anthropogenic climate change remains a heavily politicised issue in Australia. It was excluded from the initial Federal Government response, where instead emphasis was placed on mismanagement, a lack of state/federal coordination, a failure of the fire-management regime, and arson. However, the terms of reference for the Federal Government’s bushfire inquiry recently undertaken by the Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee included “the adequacy of the Federal Government’s existing measures” to assess, mitigate and adapt to climate change impacts.⁹ The full report of the inquiry was handed down in December 2021 and included recommendations for a working group to examine the impact of climate change on bushfire hazards, drawing on the specialist knowledge of, among others, climate change experts and First Nations communities.

⁷ Emily Cadman, “Insurance Industry Calls for Action to Mitigate Climate Risk as Australia Bushfires Widen,” *Insurance Journal*, 8 January 2020,

<<https://www.insurancejournal.com/news/international/2020/01/08/553871.htm>>; Adam Morton, “Australian Businesses Call for Climate Crisis and Virus Economic Recovery to Be Tackled Together,” *Guardian*, 5 May 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/05/australian-businesses-call-for-climate-crisis-and-virus-economic-recovery-to-be-tackled-together>>.

⁸ NCA Newswire, “Bushfire Loss ‘Tragic but Forseeable’,” *Australian*, 4 February 2021, p. 1.

⁹ Parliament of Australia, *Lessons to Be Learned in Relation to the Australian Bushfire Season 2019–20: Final Report* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2021),

<https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/024627/toc_pdf/LessonstobelearnedinrelationtotheAustralianbushfireseason2019-20-FinalReport.pdf> (accessed 22 August 2022).

Context 2: A Vulnerable Icon of “Charismatic Life” in Australia

Australia has approximately 560,000 different species of animals. In the last 50 years, koalas (a single species) have become a potent symbol of the country’s unique landscapes and biodiversity. The word *koala* is traceable to the Dharug language of the Greater Sydney region, and stories of the koala are woven into different Aboriginal Songlines and Dreaming stories.¹⁰ Koala populations collapsed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, driven by hunting. As a growing awareness of the animal’s plight increased, koala hunting was gradually banned across Australia, finally ceasing in Queensland in 1927. Since then, evolving community attitudes have led to a patchwork of koala conservation and management practices, along with the development of a lucrative koala-based tourism industry and the international trade and display of koalas in zoological collections.¹¹

Over two centuries of colonisation, Europeans have advanced scientific understandings of the koala and its ecology. *Phascolarctos cinereus* are “specialised, folivorous, arboreal marsupials that do not go into torpor, fly, or shelter in hollows, and lack any ready means of avoiding weather extremes”.¹² Their vulnerability is well recognised, and koalas currently

¹⁰ “NSW Koala Country,” NSW Government, <<https://koala.nsw.gov.au/portfolio/koalas-and-the-dreaming/>> (accessed 29 June 2021).

¹¹ Alistair Melzer, “Koalas: Historical, Cultural and Social Context for Research and Management,” *Journal of Mammalian Evolution* 16 (2009): 61–63; nevertheless, koala numbers have been an ongoing issue in the state of Victoria, where responses include culling (no longer official policy), managing female fertility, and relocation: see Daniel Miles, “Koalas Removed from South-West Forest after They Eat Themselves Out of House and Home,” *ABC News*, 18 May 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-18/koalas-eat-themselves-out-of-house-and-home/100145554>; Staff Reporters, “Hundreds of Starving Cape Otway Koalas Killed in ‘Secret Culls’,” *Age*, 4 March 2015, <https://www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/hundreds-of-starving-cape-otway-koalas-killed-in-secret-culls-20150304-13un49.html>; DELWP Services, “Koalas,” Victoria State Government, www.wildlife.vic.gov.au/our-wildlife/koalas (accessed 3 August 2021).

¹² Daniel Lunney et al., “Koalas and Climate Change: A Case Study on the Liverpool Plains, North-West New South Wales,” in *Wildlife and Climate Change: Towards Robust Conservation Strategies for Australian Fauna*,

face many threats including disease, fire, loss of habitat, climate change, and the impacts of dogs and vehicles. The bushfire season of 2019–2020 brought massive devastation to koala populations, and it is estimated that more than 61,000 koalas were in the path of the bushfires.¹³ The Australian Koala Foundation estimates there are fewer than 80,000 koalas left in the wild, possibly as few as 47,860.¹⁴ If current land-clearing rates continue, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) predicts koalas could be extinct in New South Wales by 2050.¹⁵ Additionally, climate change will have a major impact on koala populations, particularly through increased drought and heatwaves, as well as decreased leaf moisture and leaf nutrition.¹⁶

Theoretical Framework: A Multispecies Framing of Digital Responses to the Bushfires

Since the bushfires, much of the published science has addressed their measurable biodiversity impacts, and alterations needed to Australia’s fire-management regime to account for climate impacts.¹⁷ In the policy sphere, government advisory panels have made

ed. Daniel Lunney and Pat Hutchings (Mosman, NSW: Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales, 2012), 150.

¹³ Graham Readfearn, “‘Devastating’: More than 61,000 Koalas among 3 Billion Animals Affected by Bushfire Crisis,” *Guardian* (Australian edition), 7 December 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/dec/07/devastating-more-than-61000-koalas-among-3-billion-animals-affected-by-bushfire-crisis>>.

¹⁴ “AKF: Interesting Facts,” Australian Koala Foundation, <<https://www.savethekoala.com/about-koalas/interesting-facts>> (accessed 27 April 2021).

¹⁵ See Drew Rooke, “Hopes and Leaves: The Port Macquarie Koala Hospital Working around the Clock to Treat Victims of the Bushfires,” *The Monthly* (March 2020), <<https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2020/february/1582510849/drew-rooke/hopes-and-leaves#mtr>>.

¹⁶ Lunney et al., “Koalas and Climate Change”.

¹⁷ “CSIRO to Support Nation’s Bushfire Rebuild,” CSIRO, <<https://www.csiro.au/en/news/News-releases/2020/CSIRO-to-support-nations-bushfire-rebuild>> (accessed 28 March 2021); Jeremy Russell-Smith, Lachie McCaw, and Adam Leavesley, “Adaptive Prescribed Burning in Australia for the Early 21st Century – Context, Status, Challenges,” *International Journal of Wildland Fire* 29, no. 5 (2020): 305–13. See also other articles in this special issue.

recommendations on “native species, ecological communities, natural assets and their cultural values for Indigenous Australians, all of whom have been affected by the 2019-20 extreme fire events”.¹⁸ Taking a quantitative approach tends to underemphasise that biodiversity is highly contested in environmental politics, where “social questions of sovereignty, property rights, justice, livelihoods and the capacity to shape the future are all at stake”.¹⁹

Moreover, such studies can reinforce a narrative of biodiversity where individual animals are reduced to an “additive theoretical simplification” and species “become quantities instead of unique and irreplaceable qualities”.²⁰ By contrast, academics in the humanities have begun wrestling with the agency of fire in a changing climate and pursuing questions of multispecies justice in post-Black Summer Australia.²¹ These authors follow a path of scholarship that interrogates human-non-human relations, human efforts to “manage nature”, and problematic assumptions underpinning a perceived human superiority.

Scholars in the field of multispecies studies often prioritise narrated stories of individual encounter and the notion of a multispecies community in ways that build upon the identities of individual animals and their experience. For example, Cheryl Lousley argues that singular animals have unique characteristics, “pre-existing affective entanglements ... and political

¹⁸ “Wildlife and Threatened Species Bushfire Recovery Expert Panel: Terms of Reference,” Department of Agriculture Water and the Environment, <<https://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/pages/effd94e2-00fc-4e4b-8692-941f90f5ad8c/files/terms-reference.pdf>> (accessed 28 March 2021).

¹⁹ Cheryl Lousley, “Charismatic Life: Spectacular Biodiversity and Biophilic Life Writing,” *Environmental Communication* 10, no. 6 (2016): 704–18, 705.

²⁰ Christine von Weizsäcker, “Competing Notions of Biodiversity,” in *Global Ecology: A New Arena of Political Conflict*, ed. Wolfgang Sachs (London: Zed Books, 1993), 124.

²¹ Danielle Celermajer et al., “Multispecies Justice: Theories, Challenges, and a Research Agenda for Environmental Politics,” *Environmental Politics* 30, no. 1–2 (2021): 119–40; Christine Eriksen and Susan Ballard, *Alliances in the Anthropocene: Fire, Plants and People* (Sydney: Palgrave Pivot, 2020); Petra Tschakert, “More-than-Human Solidarity and Multispecies Justice in the Climate Crisis,” *Environmental Politics* 31, no. 2 (2022): 277–96.

claims”.²² Owain Jones notes “the ethical invisibility of the *individual* nonhuman other”²³ and proposes an ethics of encounter, where each human–non-human encounter is “ethically charged”.²⁴ William Lynn and Mick Smith have commented on the moral value of empathising with individual animals, and connected this with a capacity to empathise with distant other animals.²⁵ This engagement can extend to “other quite different species and/or even permeate our felt understandings of the ecology of the entire planet”.²⁶

On the other hand, Gavin Smith, Zoei Sutton and Eleanor Armstrong, in the context of the Black Summer bushfires, suggest that a focus on “animal victimhood should not overlook the tremendous and far-reaching ecological damage caused by the fires and corresponding ash/smoke pollution to the delicate flora, waterways and environmental atmospheres, and of course, to the health (broadly defined) and profile of the nation”.²⁷ We acknowledge that our focus on koalas risks oversimplifying what is at stake in Australia’s response to the bushfires by filtering “ecological relationships through icons of charismatic nonhuman life”.²⁸ Nonetheless, this particular species occupies a significant position in Australian culture, and koalas have become embroiled in the media and environmental politics in important ways since the Black Summer events took place. The Australian media is a “battle zone of the

²² Lousley, “Charismatic Life,” 712.

²³ Owain Jones, “(Un)ethical Geographies of Human – Non-Human Relations: Encounters, Collectives and Spaces,” in *Animal Spaces, Beastly Places: New Geographies of Animal-Human Relations*, ed. Chris Philo and Chris Wilbert (London: Routledge, 2000), 269 (my emphasis added).

²⁴ Jones, “(Un)ethical Geographies of Human – Non-Human Relations,” 270.

²⁵ Mick Smith, “Dis(appearance): Earth, Ethics and Apparently (In)significant Others,” *Australian Humanities Review* 50 (2011). William S. Lynn, “Animals, ethics, and geography” in J. Wolch & J. Emel (eds) *Animal Geographies: Place, Politics, and Identity in the Nature-Culture Borderlands*, (London, New York: Verso, 1998): 280-297.

²⁶ Smith, “Dis(appearance),” 5.

²⁷ Gavin J. D. Smith, Zoei Sutton, and Eleanor Armstrong, *Multispecies Entanglements in a Land of Fire* (Melbourne: The Australian Sociological Association, 2020).

²⁸ Lousley, “Charismatic Life,” 205.

borderlands where ‘wild’ nonhuman animals and humans potentially meet”.²⁹ A multispecies frame offers a moral and ethical orientation useful for shifting away from an anthropocentric view of the world to one that is co-constituted by multiple subjectivities, needs and intentions. In this study, the way in which individualised animal suffering and the expression of human care and emotion assumed significance over the bushfire season was of critical concern.

Hashtags and Social (Trans)formations

Twitter hashtags offer a somewhat limited, partial and filtered view of a social world, but as Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa argue, they can be approached for what they are: “entry points into larger and more complex worlds”.³⁰ Hashtags can be difficult to anchor in an ideological sense, and they have been critiqued as empty signifiers because of their fluidity. They have also been questioned on the basis of fostering multiple meanings and a “polysemic orientation” towards issues, ideas and ideologies.³¹ Counter to this view, Zizi Papacharissi’s theory of *affective publics* posits that hashtags are “open to definition, redefinition and re-appropriation” as circumstances shift and change in real time.³² Hashtags serve as “framing devices that allow crowds to be rendered into [networked] publics”, their communications “aggregated according to a variety of semantic or algorithmic logics”.³³ Significant to this

²⁹ Zoi Sutton and Nik Taylor, “Managing the Borders: Static/dynamic Nature and the ‘Management’ of ‘Problem’ Species,” *Parallax* 25, no. 4 (2019): 379–94, 379.

³⁰ Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa, “#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States,” *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 1 (2015): 4–17, 7.

³¹ Elanor Colleoni, “Beyond the Differences: The Use of Empty Signifiers as Organizing Device in the #Occupy Movement” (paper presented at the workshop Material Participation: Technology, the Environment and Everyday Publics, University of Milan, Milan, 2013).

³² Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.

³³ Massimo Airoidi, “Ethnography and the Digital Fields of Social Media,” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 21, no. 6 (2018): 661–73, 662.

research, it is often affect or “bonds of sentiment” that are the key factor in generating such aggregations.³⁴ Papacharissi suggests that platforms including Twitter lend “emerging publics their own distinct mediality” and that “affect becomes the drive that keeps them going”.³⁵ Jessica McLean refers to this “blurring of identities, roles, passions, hopes and ways of engaging with the world” as a “weird and productive solidarity”,³⁶ an accretion of disparate elements that may bring surprising opportunities and “amplify the possibilities of each and all”.³⁷

Hashtags elicit different modes of affective engagement.³⁸ For those who do not identify as activists but wish to bring about change, they can provide an “arms-length” opportunity for what can be perceived as acts of citizenship rather than activism,³⁹ a way of “organising without organisations”.⁴⁰ The reinforcement of issue-based groups, exercised through hashtags, @ responses and retweets, should not, suggest Rebecca Sandover, Samuel Kinsley, and Stephen Hinchliffe, be criticised as “bias” but rather be seen as the social platform’s *performative agency* in the emergence of publics.⁴¹ Hashtags are “a key element” in the way users negotiate a complex controversy,⁴² and part of what makes an online platform neither

³⁴ Papacharissi, *Affective Publics*, 2; McLean, *Changing Digital Geographies*.

³⁵ Zizi Papacharissi, “Affective Publics and Structures of Storytelling: Sentiment, Events and Mediality,” *Information, Communication and Society* 19, no. 3 (2016): 307–24, 308.

³⁶ McLean, *Changing Digital Geographies*, 26.

³⁷ McLean, *Changing Digital Geographies*, 29.

³⁸ Papacharissi, *Affective Publics*.

³⁹ Jessica E. McLean and Sara Fuller, “Action with(out) Activism: Understanding Digital Climate Change Action,” *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 36, no. 9–10 (2016): 578–95, 591.

⁴⁰ McLean and Fuller, “Action with(out) Activism,” 583, and Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport, *Digitally Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011).

⁴¹ Rebecca Sandover, Samuel Kinsley, and Stephen Hinchliffe, “A Very Public Cull – The Anatomy of an Online Issue Public,” *Geoforum* 97 (2018): 106–18, 109.

⁴² Sandover, Kinsley, and Hinchliffe, “A Very Public Cull,” 116.

virtual nor real but rather “its own epistemic context”.⁴³ For example, hashtags are used not only to group and to archive, but also to emphasise the intended importance of a specific utterance. Bonilla and Rosa point out that hashtags are similar to the coding systems employed by anthropologists, allowing users to “file” their comments and “performatively frame” what their comments are “really about”, thereby enabling users to indicate a meaning that might not be otherwise apparent.⁴⁴

The affective engagement and the “truth claims” made by individuals via social networks closely relate to the affordances of new technologies, particularly the use of mobile phones for recording audiovisual content.⁴⁵ As Bolette Blaagaard suggests, “Technology becomes an extension of the lifeworld and of narrative. We are shown the world not only from the perspective of another individual, but as if we were inside that person's body, seeing the world with his or her eyes. This is particularly apparent in visualized citizen journalism, in which the poor quality and visibly unprofessional aspect of mobile phone footage makes that footage even more ‘compelling’ and suggests to us that the story is true.”⁴⁶

Moreover, such examples of technicity—“the power that technologies have, both on their own and in combination with the human body, to make things happen in the world”⁴⁷—suggest that phone technologies as well as social media platforms do not exist in the “virtual” as distinct from the “real” world, but are integrated into and co-constitute the material and

⁴³ Sandover, Kinsley, and Hinchliffe, “A Very Public Cull,” 117.

⁴⁴ Bonilla and Rosa, “#Ferguson”.

⁴⁵ Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, “Emotion and Journalism,” in *The Sage Handbook of Digital Journalism*, ed. Tamara Witschge (London: Sage, 2016), 135.

⁴⁶ Bolette Blaagaard, “Passionate Publics in Mediated Civil Society,” in *Global Civil Society: Ten Years of Critical Reflection*, ed. Mary Kaldor, Henrietta L. Moore, and Sabine Selchow (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 80.

⁴⁷ Samuel Kinsley, “The Matter of ‘Virtual’ Geographies,” *Progress in Human Geography* 38, no. 3 (2014): 364–84, 372, 377.

affective worlds of their users. Samuel Kinsley notes that “technical activities convene assemblages of bodies, objects, feelings, language, values and so on, and fold them in and out of spatial practices”.⁴⁸ McLean similarly suggests that the more-than-real, encompassing the networked, the material and the abstract, “facilitates the capacity for affect to flow beside, and produce, action of multiple sorts”.⁴⁹

There are, however, cautions to be observed in this confluence of affect and action, the digital and the material. Sandover, Kinsley and Hinchliffe point out that an individual or entity can achieve an “authority” in online publics that is not reflected in a corresponding status (or, it could be argued, expertise) outside of these platforms.⁵⁰ Lucy Jackson and Gill Valentine note that, “with ‘new media’ consumers become active producers, allowing them not only to participate but also to abolish the hierarchical power relationships present within traditional media”.⁵¹ However, in a different take on the digital versus real world debate, they suggest that the anonymity afforded to users of online platforms can result in less ethical and responsible behaviours than those that would be carried out or accepted in face-to-face encounters.⁵²

The contentious and emotional aspects of the abortion issue in the UK, for example, are reflected in the online comments quoted by Jackson and Valentine and the ability of some users to silence, often through insults, the voices of others. But as will become clear in the discussion below, our study of Twitter feeds relating to the issue of koala suffering and

⁴⁸ Kinsley, “The Matter of ‘Virtual’ Geographies,” 378.

⁴⁹ McLean, *Changing Digital Geographies*, 171.

⁵⁰ Sandover, Kinsley, and Hinchliffe, “A Very Public Cull,” 116.

⁵¹ Lucy Jackson and Gill Valentine, “Emotion and Politics in a Mediated Public Sphere: Questioning Democracy, Responsibility and Ethics in a Computer Mediated World,” *Geoforum* 52 (2014): 193–202, 195.

⁵² Jackson and Valentine, “Emotion and Politics in a Mediated Public Sphere,” 200.

human responses in the Black Summer bushfires reveals an equally passionate but more constructive discourse.

Methods

Between the months of October 2019 and March 2020, this study mapped digital “social formations” that aggregated around human responses to animal suffering, potential extinctions, and the immediate and longer-term impacts of catastrophic fire on ecologies.⁵³ As we navigated the mass dissemination of posts, re-posts and reporting that occurred, our attention became focused on three questions: What is revealed about specific human–non-human engagements in the context of extreme weather events and climate impact? What can be said about the movement of affect and emotion outwards from the personal realm into the social sphere? And what about the attendant possibility of a multispecies politics (of concern and care) that enables action?

Ethnographies as texts generally involve the telling of stories based on encounters, observation and dialogue, stories that can reveal the multifactorial, cumulative nature of experience.⁵⁴ Fieldwork as a well-established method provides for a kind of complex thinking paid to encounters, movements and contact zones in the field, which may all become useful forms of data.⁵⁵ Our methodological approach was informed by the evolving scope of “hashtag ethnography”,⁵⁶ which works with the availability of online social data to generate

⁵³ Alessandro Caliandro, “Digital Methods for Ethnography: Analytical Concepts for Ethnographers Exploring Social Media Environments,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 47, no. 5 (2018): 551–78.

⁵⁴ Jane Palmer, “Ethnography as transdisciplinary inquiry: Two stories of adaptation and resilience from Aceh, Indonesia” in *Transdisciplinary Research and Practice for Sustainability Outcomes*, ed. Dena Fam, Jane Palmer, Chris Riedy & Cynthia Mitchell (London: Routledge, 2017): 190-203.

⁵⁵ Tania Leimbach, “Sustainability and the Material Imagination in Australian Organisations” (PhD diss., University of Technology Sydney, 2015): 90.

⁵⁶ Bonilla and Rosa, “#Ferguson”.

insights into human needs, behaviours and experiences, as well as examining the “active public voice” that can emerge in real-time in response to events and issues.⁵⁷ There are challenges in undertaking digital ethnography because the scope of potential data is very large; defining the boundaries of a study is therefore important. A multispecies approach informed the selection of search terms and our specific interest in koala–human relations and #koala communications during the Black Summer fire period. We identified the social networking site Twitter as a performative space fostering “real time engagement” with users who are “intimately searchable” across vast distances.⁵⁸ Twitter users are generally not anonymous, and the fast-paced exchange of short posts (at 280 characters or fewer) is a defining feature of the platform.

While we followed interactions within and beyond the Twittersphere, the data that we collected and analysed came from tweets and associated hashtags on the Twitter platform. Our qualitative study focused on the unobtrusive observation of “affective publics” and their shared personal narratives and commentaries via the internet.⁵⁹ Principles of informed consent and confidentiality were considered inapplicable in light of the distinct “peculiarities of meta-fieldwork – such as the detachment between observer and participant”,⁶⁰ and the public declarative nature of the posts and commentary. Meta-fieldworks can be conducted with the help of online tools that permit tracking of hashtags and/or keywords, according to

⁵⁷ Jackson and Valentine, “Emotion and Politics in a Mediated Public Sphere,” 195.

⁵⁸ Jackson and Valentine, “Emotion and Politics in a Mediated Public Sphere,” 195.

⁵⁹ Meredith C. Burles and Jill M. G. Bally, “Ethical, Practical, and Methodological Considerations for Unobtrusive Qualitative Research about Personal Narratives Shared on the Internet,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 17, no. 1 (2018): 1–9.

⁶⁰ Airoidi, “Ethnography and the Digital Fields of Social Media,” 671.

the metadata-based logic that is ontologically at the root of the digital environment.⁶¹ Hashtags mark evolving conversations and allow for the ordering, archiving and quick retrieval of information about specific topics and unfolding events. They enable interactions distinct from relatively stable “classical” online communities, such as discussion forums and blogs, which tend to be bound by socio-technical context and which change more slowly. In the realm of Facebook, Instagram and Twitter feeds, digital fields are often fast-paced and transient, and they can aggregate “scattered communicative contents”⁶² sharing some features—such as the hashtag #koala, #Australianfires and #koalacrisis. Hashtags are “transversal to digital spaces and constantly changing over time”,⁶³ and we elaborate on the significance of such transversal connections in following sections.

During the Australian bushfires, as details were emerging through September and October 2019, users began tweeting out information with the hashtag #bushfires. This practice morphed rapidly into variations that included #Australianfires, #NSWRFS,⁶⁴ #NSWfires, #australianbushfireanimals, #wildliferescue, #kangarooisland⁶⁵, #koalacrisis, and so on. Across Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, hashtags were posted and aggregated, and these were shared and re-shared by users several million times in Australia and internationally. Over the five-month period, we collected data by using Twitter’s Advanced Search function. The internal search engine enables posts to be searched on the basis of

⁶¹ Richard Rogers, *Digital Methods* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2013); social media data collection tools are freely available online. For instance, see <https://wiki.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/ToolDatabase> (accessed 28 December 2017).

⁶² Airoidi, “Ethnography and the Digital Fields of Social Media,” 662.

⁶³ Airoidi, “Ethnography and the Digital Fields of Social Media,” 662.

⁶⁴ New South Wales Rural Fire Service.

⁶⁵ 50 per cent of Kangaroo Island, off the coast of South Australia, was severely burnt in the Black Summer bushfires, with catastrophic impacts on animals, plant species, humans, homes and businesses. See <https://southaustralia.com/travel-blog/bushfire-regeneration>.

metadata (hashtags and keywords), combinations of these to be tracked and collated, and their associated content to be analysed.

Our analytical process involved thematic analysis, with documented reflection and analytic memos after each round of coding text, images and video. Fifteen hashtags and their associated content became our focus.⁶⁶ These were honed from broad observations at the outset of the fire season, drawing together a snowball sample as months progressed, which included #bushfires, #Australianfires #wildliferescue, #NSWRFS, #conservation, #craftingpouches, #PrayforAustralia, #koalasnotcoal, #climate change, and #culturalburning. We gathered additional source material from legacy media reporting over the October 2019 to March 2020 period to consider the media framing of relevant events and issues, and the crossover between social media and formal reportage facilitated by the contemporary hybrid media system.⁶⁷ Five categories of report emerged, which informed the thematic analysis: the first was human–non-human interaction, followed by the impact on species and extinction rates, reports that combined affect and action, organised responses to animal suffering, and, finally, government response to impacts on ecologies and specific species.

A limitless combination of commentary, images, video and media cross-posting is supported by the Twitter platform. Through our analysis, it became clear the significant degree to which “networked publics”⁶⁸ connected and were mobilised through “expressions of sentiment”.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ #bushfires; #AustralianFires; #koala; #Australian Bushfires; #KoalasNotCoal; #australianbushfireanimals; #koalacrisis; #NSWFires; #NSWRFS; #wildliferescue; #kangarooisland; #PrayforAustralia; #culturalburning; #AustraliaOnFire; #saveourkoalas.

⁶⁷ Andrew Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁶⁸ Danah Boyd, “Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications,” in *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, ed. Zizi Papacharissi (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁶⁹ Papacharissi, “Affective Publics and Structures of Storytelling,” 311.

Discussion: New Spaces of Affect and Activism

Natural disasters “lift veils” on what is generally hidden from view, forcing confrontations with that which is known but difficult to reckon with.⁷⁰ The Black Summer bushfires revealed how different species are valued (individually and collectively) in Australia. Within the media spectacle surrounding the fires, koalas became a potent signifier of species extinction in Australia and emblematic of larger political struggles and conflicts in contemporary culture.⁷¹ On-the-ground “disaster reporting” during the bushfire season converged with news stories that highlighted the ongoing threats to koalas and recognition of their critically low numbers. In this way, the bushfires pushed to the forefront (and thus raised public consciousness of) the imminent threat not only to koalas but also to a great variety of Australian species. This consciousness was both heightened and nuanced across Twitter collectives; the deaths and injuries of koalas were documented in detail and framed within wider issues of animal suffering, sustainability of ecological systems, land management and climate change.

Our initial interest was born from observing material forms of care in the face of the fires. Many people felt desperate to help animals and mobilised through crafting. Wildlife welfare groups such as WIRES received tens of thousands of handmade donations from

⁷⁰ Steven Lukes, “Questions about Power: Lessons from the Louisiana Hurricane,” *Items: Insights from the Social Sciences*, 11 June 2006, <<https://items.ssrc.org/understanding-katrina/questions-about-power-lessons-from-the-louisiana-hurricane/>>.

⁷¹ Gabi Mocatta and Erin Hawley, “Uncovering a Climate Catastrophe? Media Coverage of Australia’s Black Summer Bushfires and the Revelatory Extent of the Climate Blame Frame,” *Media/Culture (M/C)* 23, no. 4 (2020), <<https://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjjournal/article/view/1666>>.

Australia and internationally.⁷² Volunteers were driven by the need to do something determinate: to make and distribute the pouches, bags, beds, quilts and mittens for animals that had been burnt, orphaned and rendered homeless. Additionally, activists recruited a “koala army” via social media for the Australian Koala Foundation: volunteers travelled to koala hospitals across three states of Australia to support koalas’ physical rehabilitation, and individuals became directly involved in the restoration of koala habitats. The narratives that grew around these material forms of care were expressed via combinations of hashtags (#wildliferescue #knitting #sewing #crafting pouches #bushfires), which worked to “amplify the possibilities” of communities coming together in physical space, or collaborating virtually to create tangible offerings in the face of disaster.⁷³ We noticed that such openness resulted from, and was continually reinforced by, media images and words that described animal suffering in terms that resonated with human suffering: “You heard the koala mewling in pain as the woman doused it in water”.⁷⁴ The same article noted one koala scientist’s suggestion that “the whole thing about koalas is the head shape, with the forward-facing eyes and the big round head that instinctively reminds people of a human baby”.⁷⁵ The suffering of koalas—burnt paws, an inability to breathe, trapped and encircled by fire, babies left without parents—resonates with the parallel suffering of humans. Images of injured or suffering humans, and injured or suffering koalas, have both appeared—often one after the other—on television and social media as *in situ* footage of the same event.

⁷² Wildlife Information, Rescue and Education Service Inc; Emily Brayshaw, “Crafting in Times of Crisis Helps Critters and Creators,” *The Conversation*, 27 November 2019, <<https://theconversation.com/crafting-in-times-of-crisis-helps-critters-and-creators-127616>>.

⁷³ McLean, *Changing Digital Geographies*, 29.

⁷⁴ Stephanie Wood, *High and Dry* (Sydney: Fairfax Media, 2021), 12.

⁷⁵ Wood, *High and Dry*, 14.

One of the reasons that the suffering of koalas captured the imagination of so many Australians and international onlookers is that social and mainstream media constructed *virtual encounters* between their audiences and koalas; the significance of “the encounter” between humans and non-humans is a recurring theme in much writing on multispecies relations.⁷⁶ Jane Lydon notes that images have a particular affective force “arousing emotions” and “creating social relationships such as empathy or compassion”.⁷⁷ Affirming the potency of images, the online media environment during the fire season was overflowing with the collective arousal and expression of complex emotions from gratitude, admiration and awe to compassion. Television programs and hundreds of Twitter and Facebook posts provided viewers with vivid images of injured and distressed koalas, and their rescue and care by humans: koalas drinking from water bottles, sleeping in cars and washrooms, and interacting closely with dogs and other domestic animals (with hashtags aggregating around #koalas, #bushfires, #bushfiresaustralia, #RFS, #wildliferescue). Just as interviews with distressed human victims of the bushfires and images of their destroyed homes or lost family members produced an outpouring of material support from the wider community, so too have koalas become not only a symbol of the devastation to non-humans brought about by the fires, but also a focus for human–non-human relations in which compassionate material action alleviates the suffering of individual animals.

We observed how an individual Twitter user such as Kailas Wild (independent of formal disaster relief programs and associated institutions) can gain relevance and traction in today’s

⁷⁶ See, for example, C. Scott Taylor and Jennifer Carter, “The Agency of Dolphins: Towards Inter-Species Embassies as Sites of Engagement with ‘Significant Otherness’,” *Geographical Research* 51, no. 1 (2013): 1–10; Thom van Dooren and Deborah Bird Rose, “Storied-Places in a Multispecies City,” *Humanimalia: A Journal of Human/Animal Interface Studies* 3, no. 2 (2012): 1–27; Steve Hinchliffe et al., “Urban Wild Things: A Cosmopolitical Experiment,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23, no. 5 (2005): 643–58.

⁷⁷ Jane Lydon, “Colonial ‘Blind Spots’: Images of Australian Frontier Conflict,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2018): 409–27, 410.

“polymedia” environment,⁷⁸ reflecting Sandover, Kinsley and Hinchliffe’s point that one can achieve an “authority” in online publics not connected to status elsewhere.⁷⁹ Wild’s visible actions and social media communications prompted tens of thousands of shares and retweets, and they are an example of the propagation of affectively charged expression. Wild exemplified an individual operating in a polymedia context, with the attendant “access and availability, affordability, and media literacy” of an effective communicator.⁸⁰ His posts were mostly accompanied by handheld audiovisuals either at work in the fire grounds or talking to a camera in visible distress at the end of long days. During his time rescuing koalas on Kangaroo Island, it was Wild’s deeply empathic persona and “can-do” conservation ethic, combined with the vulnerability of the animals he cared for, that led him to become a conduit of emotion for the wider social world. Using combinations of tags (#koalas #bushfires #kangarooisland #arborist #treeclimber #australia #conservation #wildliferescue #wildlife), Wild would post long, harrowing descriptions of the fire ground, and each post begins in a similar way: “Today was pretty bloody intense and I cried twice.” His emotional expression appears unrehearsed and unpolished. Matched with unprofessional media production, it gives the impression of something raw, immediate and deeply affecting for the viewer. These examples illustrate the blurred boundaries between public and private life, ushered in by diverse forms of citizen journalism and user-generated content.⁸¹ The aggregation of disparate types of entities and phenomena—“bodies, objects, feelings, language, values”⁸²—

⁷⁸ Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller, “Polymedia: Towards a New Theory of Digital Media in Interpersonal Communication,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2012): 169–87.

⁷⁹ Sandover, Kinsley, and Hinchliffe, “A Very Public Cull,” 116.

⁸⁰ Madianou and Miller, “Polymedia,” 171.

⁸¹ Wahl-Jorgensen, “Emotion and Journalism”.

⁸² Kinsley, “The Matter of ‘Virtual’ Geographies,” 378.

has been variously described as “accretion”, “assemblage” and “heterogeneity”.⁸³ Such “aggregates” are given a momentum—that is, a galvanising social and political force—because hashtags not only connect but emphasise and frame the affective, visual and descriptive aspects of users’ posts. This momentum reached international audiences, generating responses such as this Tweet from Japan (in response to a moving video produced and tweeted in Australia): “Almost 500 millions of animals lost their lives in this enormous disaster. [It] is so heartbreaking. We pray for all the lives in Australia from Japan. #AustraliaFires #AustraliaOnFire #PrayForAustralia #KoalasNotCoal”.

The use of Twitter by internationally influential figures such as Barack Obama, Ellen DeGeneres and Elton John heightened awareness and prompted a mass global fundraising effort that generated AU\$200 million for animal rescue groups, particularly WIRES. Obama’s initial Tweet, which provided a link to a *New York Magazine* article on 10 January 2020, was retweeted 37,900 times.⁸⁴ Demonstrating McLean’s point that digital technologies have international reach but their impacts are often very grounded,⁸⁵ this post was followed up the same day with a link to the Obama Foundation website and a story promoting a local climate solutions group and options for donating money: “Here’s the thing: Even with problems of this magnitude, each of us can still find a way to make change. That’s why I’m proud of young people like Alice Mahar, [an] environmental activist in Melbourne. Read about her and find ways you can help, too.”

⁸³ McLean, *Changing Digital Geographies*, 29; Kinsley, “The Matter of ‘Virtual’ Geographies,” 378; Sandover, Kinsley, and Hinchliffe, “A Very Public Cull,” 106.

⁸⁴ David Wallace-Wells, “Global Apathy toward the Fires in Australia Is a Scary Portent for the Future,” *New York Magazine*, 19 December 2019, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/12/new-south-wales-fires-in-australia-the-worlds-response.html>.

⁸⁵ McLean, *Changing Digital Geographies*, 129.

During this critical moment of new connections, social media platforms became a significant site not only for a heightened awareness of animal suffering and for galvanising on-ground action to alleviate it, but also to document and challenge the distortion of climate science in mainstream media: they became strategic outlets for reimagining multispecies relations and, hence, environmental politics. Examples of hashtag activism grew with the protracted fire season. Our research traced thousands of #koala communications that concomitantly addressed climate change, and large-scale grassroots mobilisation leading to online campaigns for greater legislative and policy protections for koalas. Again, the wildlife rescuer @KailasWild's initial posts of heroic wildlife rescue later came to reflect a larger frame of responsibility for animal suffering due to human-induced climate change. On 19 February 2020, he posted a graphic, low-quality video of a koala rescue and wrote: "The last thing I ever want to do is interfere with wild koalas but if I have to, then this is the fastest, safest and least stressful way to catch one in a tree. I don't enjoy doing this and I'm not sharing for entertainment." These sentences were followed by the text #koalas #wildliferescue #bushfires #kangarooisland #koalacrisis. This is one example of performative framing, with its associated hashtags and a broader interpretive communication of events. Many of Wild's rescue posts suggest a layered awareness of the precariousness of the situation, highlighting tensions around the status of "wild" and "companion" animals and the "unnatural" scenario he was in, driven by climate change.

Much activist commentary gave voice to contradictions between government rhetoric and policy, and failures to account for climate change impacts in public communications and mainstream media coverage during the fire season. Earlier bushfire and koala hashtags were reappropriated to support activist rhetoric and were often combined with clearly focused climate action agendas (#emergency #climateemergency #koalasnotcoal and #StopAdani). Very often, these hashtags were used to challenge government-subsidised coalmining in

Australia and its contribution to climate breakdown, as well as the ongoing destruction of essential koala habitat across Australia, for example: “Catastrophic bushfires, dangerous heat, choking smoke, floods & dust storms show climate change is devastating #Australian communities. You must insure our future against #ClimateChange not Adani’s climate-wrecking coal project #StopAdani #koalasnotcoal.”

The shift from the expression of raw emotions such as grief to focused expressions of anger and calls for accountability is an example of the “performative agency” of the hashtag, acting as a transversal or vector to both aggregate and move—affectively, politically, socially.⁸⁶

Conclusion

In recent years, communication scholars have questioned whether online emotional engagements make a difference to social and political life.⁸⁷ The Black Summer bushfires became connected with wider issues, on-ground action, conceptual knowledge and longer timeframes, using the openly affective affordances of social media. We suggest that this occurred because of a movement or vector—in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, a transversal⁸⁸—that gathered together “ideas, awarenesses, physical events, images and emotions” to bring into play new possibilities for human–non-human relations. Braidotti and Fuller describe a transversal as offering a “new means of mobilization” where “alliances

⁸⁶ Sandover, Kinsley, and Hinchliffe, “A Very Public Cull,” 109.

⁸⁷ Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta, eds., *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Papacharissi, *Affective Publics*; Janet Staiger, Ann Cvetkovich, and Ann Reynolds, eds., *Political Emotions: New Agendas in Communication* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); Wahl-Jorgensen, “Emotion and Journalism”; Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley, eds., *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

⁸⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 371.

might be made across scales, locations, species”.⁸⁹ A transversal can be seen as a *gesture* that enables “a shift in habits, in frames of reference, but also in daily interactions and activities”.⁹⁰ Hashtags are one such gesture, operating upon ostensibly mundane reports of day-to-day activity, but connecting these to wider political and social issues, and to spheres of action and (re)imaginings.

Gabi Mocatta and Erin Hawley have framed the Black Summer bushfires in terms of a “revelation”—“a temporal collapse whereby the future is dragged into the present”.⁹¹ The authors argue that Australians in general have been slow (resistant) to face the science of climate change. At that particular moment of “fires unfolding and smoke settling on half the country”, there was a “physical revelation that the impacts of climate change are not limited to geographically distant people or as-yet-unborn future generations”. Extreme bushfires may allow us to reimagine our relationships with the environment, and with the future, and to approach a conception of land that comes closer to an Indigenous notion of Country.

Care for Country involves listening to messages “from weather, flora, fauna, environment, heavens and each other”,⁹² as well as working with fire in profoundly different ways from the colonisers. During the Black Summer bushfires, mainstream bushfire-mitigation policies and practices were forcefully called into question in the media, via social networks and through academic research.⁹³ Strong support for the widespread

⁸⁹ Rosi Braidotti and Matthew Fuller, “The Posthumanities in an Era of Unexpected Consequences,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 36, no. 6 (2019): 3–29, 6.

⁹⁰ Braidotti and Fuller, “The Posthumanities in an Era of Unexpected Consequences,” 23.

⁹¹ Mocatta and Hawley, “Uncovering a Climate Catastrophe?”.

⁹² Martin (Booran Mirraboopa), “Ways of Knowing, Being and Doing,” 207, citing Oodgeroo Noonuccal.

⁹³ Douglas K. Bardsley, Thomas A. A. Prowse, and Caren Siegfriedt, “Seeking Knowledge of Traditional Indigenous Burning Practices to Inform Regional Bushfire Management,” *Local Environment* 24, no. 8 (2019): 727–45; David Bowman and Greg Lehman, “Australia, You Have Unfinished Business. It’s Time to Let our ‘Fire People’ Care for this Land,” *The Conversation*, 28 May 2020, <<https://theconversation.com/australia-you-have-unfinished-business-its-time-to-let-our-fire-people-care-for-this-land-135196>>; Michelle McKemey et al.,

implementation of traditional Indigenous fire practices has prompted a rewriting of the narrative of fire in Australia. The dominant vision of fire as a destructive force needing suppression stands in contrast to the teaching of First Nations Australians, who consciously and deliberately use/d fire in ways that involve controlling the intensity and timing to generate a dynamic mosaic of ecosystems.⁹⁴ These practices have been informed by an understanding of fire as an ally and protector, a generative tool and medicine for Country. Voices in the public sphere who actively challenge dominant understandings, such as Indigenous Elder Victor Steffensen, have been amplified. Steffensen has championed Indigenous fire-management practice for many years, demonstrating the value of cultural burning, which involves the safe, careful and controlled application of fire, with knee-high blazes that behave “like water trickling through the country”.⁹⁵ These ancient fire practices have been widely suppressed since colonisation, resulting in bushfire-prone landscapes and a general ignorance of fire as a force that shapes Australian ecosystems. A quantum shift is underway, as deep knowledge embedded in practices of Caring for Country are re-evaluated by mainstream Australia. This change can be seen in two examples of online communications during the Black Summer:

#Australia’s #history going up in smoke!! Unless we adopt #culturalburning techniques to protect these sites we allow our #NotreDame to be destroyed

“A Review of Contemporary Indigenous Cultural Fire Management Literature in Southeast Australia,” *EcoEvoRxiv Preprints* (2020): 1–63, <<https://ecoevorxiv.org/fvswy/>>.

⁹⁴ Deborah Bird Rose, “Caring for Country,” in *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness* (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996).

⁹⁵ Frank Odenthal, “Preventing Fire with Fire (Interview with Victor Steffensen),” *Fair Planet*, 19 November 2020, <<https://www.fairplanet.org/story/preventing-fire-with-fire/>>. See also Victor Steffensen, *Fire Country: How Indigenous Fire Management Could Help Save Australia* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant, 2020).

by fire. Grave fears held for thousands of rock art sites after #bushfires lay bare irrevocable damage

#Bushfires are not the only thing raging now, so is the debate about #backburning. But since the beginning, #IndigenousAustralians have been using fire to care for our country, and it's time we did it their way. We should learn from them #culturalburning

The bushfires, with the media coverage they generated, produced a particular set of critical relations at a critical time, reflected repeatedly in hashtags that, albeit ephemerally, placed the human and non-human, the material (burnt paws, dying animals) and the abstract (historical land use, climate change) in closer relation to each other. Moreover, this transversal action was an *affective* phenomenon. It was an urgent call to do something, or change something. In our new, or renewed, empathy for koala suffering, in our openness to seeing them as fellow creatures sharing our environment, the collective manifested qualities of spontaneity, enthusiasm and determination, were seized in a transversal movement. This phenomenon has resonance with the democratisation of influence and power that has been visible since the rise of the #MeToo movement and other key social movements like it.⁹⁶ Our study suggests that the Twitter #koala conversations were, unlike the online abortion debates that Jackson and Valentine have described, less about silencing dissenting voices and more about a call to fellow users for action, and to the government for a changed politics. The emergence of non-party-aligned independents in Australian Federal politics is connected directly to a rising sense of urgency about addressing climate change, and specifically to the impact of the

⁹⁶ David Leser, *Women, Men and the Whole Damn Thing* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2019).

bushfires. During the 2022 election campaigns, Twitter was utilised, with hashtags that worked transversally to mobilise local citizenship and significant philanthropic funding in support of a new political movement. As one campaign leader said: “With the bushfires, everyone could see that the government wasn’t the answer, that fire brigades weren’t the answer, that just trusting the system to solve your problems wasn’t working.”⁹⁷

A multispecies perspective on the digital response to the bushfires opens up a discussion of the ways in which human–non-human entanglements can be changed or renewed; it also, shows us the power of the Twitter hashtag to enable shifts in affective relationships, and reveals the way these relations connect with broader issues, ideas and ideologies. The Black Summer came to challenge what Gay Hawkins elsewhere describes as “the anthropocentrism of much political thinking”.⁹⁸ Digital engagements with the plight of the koala reflected and reinforced a new public understanding of the shared consequences of extreme bushfire events. It was a moment/momentum that made critical new connections across phenomena, species, hierarchies of understanding and action, with the potential to shift future human–non-human relations.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments, which assisted us in strengthening the arguments in this article.

⁹⁷ Cathy McGowan cited in Brook Turner, “Simon Holmes à Court: ‘If it works, the payoff will be enormous’,” *Sydney Morning Herald Good Weekend*, 30 October 2021, <<https://www.smh.com.au/national/simon-holmes-court-if-it-works-the-payoff-will-be-enormous-20210916-p58sbn.html#comments>>.

⁹⁸ Gay Hawkins, “More-than-Human Politics: The Case of Plastic Bags,” *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 46 (2009): 2, <<http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2009/05/01/more-than-human-politics-the-case-of-plastic-bags/>>.