

The Wonderful Wrapped in the Terrible: Introducing Fire Stories

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THERE WILL BE A LOT MORE FIRE IN OUR FUTURE. Already, there are more fires across the world than there were twenty years ago, and if the scientific modeling of the effects of global warming is correct, then fire seasons will grow longer and burnscapes will widen. Flames will become more difficult to douse or manage, while ever-growing numbers of people will live in fear of fire and its deadly consequences. The intervals between disastrous fires will become shorter, and we will no longer think of a severe fire as a once-in-a-lifetime event.¹

The Australian fire historian Tom Griffiths notes that Western societies couch fire in adversarial terms.² We speak of “fighting” or “overcoming” fire and frequently think of it as a deadly enemy, when in fact it can play an important role in the renewal of plant and tree life.³ Given the centrality of fire to domesticity, it can sometimes seem as though it has turned on us, when

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¹ According to scientists, extreme weather events will increasingly become the norm as human-induced climate change (including the clearance and over-farming of land) causes drought (and therefore aridity) and the continued emission of greenhouse gases leads to rising temperatures. For an accessible overview of the effects of fire and climate change, see Alejandra Borunda, “Are Europe’s Historic Fires Caused by Climate Change?” *National Geographic*, July 31, 2018. Kate Rigby offers a more detailed (and Australia-focused) discussion of changing fire regimes in *Dancing with Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015); see especially chapter 4.

² Tom Griffiths, ed., *Forests of Ash: An Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 185.

³ Griffiths cites the example of the mountain ash tree, which needs fire to reproduce, but there are many northern hemisphere examples of entire ecosystems (for instance, prairies, coniferous forests, and savannas) that depend upon a cycle of fire and regrowth for their existence.

instead of warming us through the winter, it blazes across our summers, destroying homes and lives. The US environmental historian Stephen J. Pyne explains this sense of betrayal when he notes in *Fire: Nature and Culture*:

Tending fire was a model for domestication, and cooking a paradigm for pyrotechnologies generally. But that was only a point of cultural kindling, for fire was a universal catalyst, never far from whatever people did, and by changing its settings, people in turn changed fire. Over time wild fire assumed new identities. It was tamed, hunted, foraged, fished, cultivated, urbanized and machined. Almost everything people did they did with fire, and fire with them.⁴

Implicit in Pyne's astute summary here is the notion that a wildfire is akin to a return of the repressed, giving the lie to human pretensions to mastery and control over fire. Flames might be used to reshape landscapes or, as the ecocritic Kate Rigby reminds us, to facilitate the colonization of inclement regions.⁵ However fire is put to work, it remains wild and unpredictable.

Industrialism changed the ways in which many societies interacted with fire, as Anne Sullivan and Kate Flint have noted in a special issue of *19*, dedicated to what they term "technologies of fire." Sullivan and Flint—whose approach has been influenced by that of Gaston Bachelard—helpfully capture some of the challenges associated with theorizing or otherwise writing about fire. They note that it evokes "competing symbolic values, such as primitivism and modernity, vitality and destruction, intimacy and spectacle."⁶ Furthermore, they argue for reading fire as a "visual and narrative technology by exploring the affective and material histories of firelight."⁷ Their important work highlights the significance of fire to industrialism and how by-products like smoke and soot altered vistas and changed the way city dwellers saw the sky.

Jeffrey J. Cohen and Stephanie Trigg remind us that "fire possesses its own story," although as the diverse responses to fire gathered here reveal, it possesses a plethora of narratives.⁸ In this issue of *Occasion*, we consider fire in many different forms, along with the conflicting affective responses it can evoke. The essays brought together here (including one by Trigg) examine a broad range of fire stories, and the emotions underpinning them. The pieces are arranged thematically, and some move backward and forward across time. Some of these fire stories are deeply personal, while others represent a more collective engagement with fire. Some of the authors consider fire's metaphorization (perhaps the ultimate form of "harnessing" or "taming"), while others focus on fire's place in history. All share a concern with affective responses to fire, sometimes working comparatively across cultures or times, as in the case of Trigg's compelling essay, sometimes celebrating fire's power and beauty. This approach builds upon Peter Denney and Jock MacLeod's special issue of *Occasion* (volume 11), which is dedicated to liberalism and the emotions, while at the same time the contributors consider the particularly extreme reactions that fire can evoke. Fire is, after all, invoked as a metaphor for political activity or intense passion and, as the art critic Alan Krell helpfully notes, "The discovery of fire and the commencement of language go hand in hand."⁹

⁴ Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire: Nature and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 53.

⁵ Rigby, *Dancing with Disaster*, 114.

⁶ Anne Sullivan and Kate Flint, "Introduction: Technologies of Fire in Nineteenth-Century British Culture," *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 25 (2017): <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.800>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Jeffrey J. Cohen and Stephanie Trigg, "Fire," *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (2013): 82.

⁹ Alan Krell, *Burning Issues: Fire in Art and the Social Imagination* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 98.

A number of the essays here engage with Australian literature and culture, following *Occasion's* ongoing connection with Antipodean scholarship. As the “continent of fire”—or, as James Cook poetically termed it in 1770, “this continent of smoke”—Australia is experienced when it comes to living with regular and intense conflagrations.¹⁰ Moreover, as one of the places where the effects of climate change are already highly visible and are being felt particularly by impoverished rural communities, Australia is a place that represents the challenges of living with fire.

Research has demonstrated that Australia's natural propensity to burn has been exacerbated by the effects of colonization, with fire regimes altering in response to human interventions like deforestation, farming, and excessive use of water. Of course, Australia is far from unique in this respect: the United States and Canada regularly experience extreme wildfires, while the summer of 2018 also saw forest fires on an alarming scale across Europe. Yet, as Jeffrey J. Cohen and Lowell Duckert argue in their important collection *Elemental Ecology* (2015), writing specifically of natural disasters, “catastrophes are transhistorical in their impact,” and in some ways they are also transnational, evoking common affective responses across time and cultures.¹¹ Many of the contributors to this special issue are interested in the transhistoricity of fire, and while we do not wish to make claims of a universal experience, it is helpful to consider shared visceral responses in fiction and in fact in a world where catastrophe will be increasingly the norm.

One of Australia's most catastrophic fire events, in terms of the loss of human life, was Black Saturday, the name given to February 7, 2009, a day on which wildfires (known in Australia as “bushfires”) ravaged the state of Victoria, and 180 people lost their lives.¹² The aftermath of this devastating event saw widespread grief, trauma, and attempts to understand what had taken place. Although some of the fires were caused by human error (power lines fell in high winds), others were deliberately set, and still others may have been caused by lightning strikes. The months and years following the fires have seen stricken communities look to art and literature, sometimes as offering emotional outlets and at others as a means of learning about fires in the past and their survivors.¹³

The years since the Black Saturday fires have also seen a growing interest in the history of fire, with those whose lives have been touched by fire looking back to conflagrations of the past. More recently, the extreme Californian fires (including the deadly Camp Fire in Butte County) of 2018 and Australia's “Black Summer” of 2019–20 have been horrific reminders that fires are increasing in both severity and frequency. The media now regularly draws parallels between the

¹⁰ Quoted in Richard Evans, *Disasters That Changed Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2009), 34.

¹¹ Jeffrey J. Cohen and Lowell Duckert, eds., *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 17.

¹² Many more people were injured and 1,100,000 hectares were burned in what is regarded as Australia's most severe bushfire. Almost 12,000 animals categorized as livestock (sheep, cattle, horses, chickens, and others) were burned to death, while it is impossible to calculate the toll taken on native wildlife. Properties were destroyed and damaged, livelihoods were lost, while the fire services were seriously stretched with fires on so many fronts.

¹³ Christine Hansen and Tom Griffiths offer a case study of one fire-affected community, Steels Creek, in the Yarra Valley, ninety kilometers east of the city of Melbourne. Their extraordinary book, *Living with Fire: People, Nature and History in Steels Creek* (Collingwood: CSIRO Publishing, 2012), includes an entire section on fire art, in which they note that “locals responded to the fire by painting, drawing, sculpting, welding, stitching and writing. Art . . . became a way of working through their emotions and of coming to terms with what had happened” (152). See also Grace Moore, <https://theconversation.com/bushfire-art-isnt-changing-but-our-response-to-it-might-53980>. Hansen and Griffiths note that some survivors drew upon literary representations of fire (such as Robert Frost's poem “Fire and Ice,” which begins “Some say the world will end in fire”) for inspiration (Hansen and Griffiths, *Living with Fire*, 152).

fire season in Australia and that on the West Coast of the US, and the cultural critic Ross Gittins has written of a climate-change-fueled “wake-up moment . . . for the entire rich world.”¹⁴

Cohen and Duckert argue that “elemental exposure requires narratives of survival and shared vulnerability,” and by examining fire, many of the contributors to this issue confront the vulnerability and tenacity of those who are threatened by or who have survived fires.¹⁵ In her study of disasters, Rebecca Solnit remarks that communities are frequently strengthened in tragedy’s aftermath. As she observes, “We don’t even have a language for this emotion, in which the wonderful comes wrapped in the terrible, joy in sorrow, courage in fear. We cannot welcome disaster, but we can value the responses, both practical and psychological.”¹⁶ Solnit is careful to clarify that it is not disaster per se that is welcome, but rather she finds wonder in the power of human connection and ingenuity. A number of the essays collected here engage with the ineffable post-disaster wonder, which can translate into extraordinary acts of creativity, as Stephanie Trigg and Cassandra Atherton each note in their essays. Creativity can offer a means of understanding how to deal with fire and its aftermath, while attention to broader cultural representations of fire can provide solace to those who have been affected by it. Reading or writing about fire can help to make sense of its deadly power, just as immersing oneself in emotional responses to the past can evoke an understanding of pathways to recovery.¹⁷

What is clear is that there is still much to learn about fire. It is destructive and deadly, but fire is also a life force and one upon which human society remains heavily dependent. Learning to live and cope with fire is of paramount importance, and Phil Cheney, a research scientist, expresses this idea very beautifully in a 1994 symposium on biodiversity with this comment: “At the moment, [fire] is considered as a dangerous animal which charges across the countryside whereas, in fact, it’s as natural as the rain spreading across the land.”¹⁸ Memory has a major role to play in our comfortable cohabitation with fire, and the creative arts are key to the process of memorializing both its ravages and its magnificence, and the strong emotions it evokes for those whom it threatens.



We begin this special issue by attending to the interplay between fire and emotion in Western culture’s long tradition of drawing on fire’s heat and intensity to express strong feelings. Aleksandra Hultquist’s essay, “Amatory Ethics and Metaphors of Flame” considers the poet, playwright, and novelist Aphra Behn’s representation of “flaming desire” in her 1688 novella *The Fair Jilt*. Through her analysis of fire metaphors to represent illicit desires on the part of desiring and dangerous women and inconstant men, Hultquist argues that for Behn, flame motifs frequently represent

¹⁴ Ross Gittins, “We Can’t Stop Climate Change by Refusing to Change” in *Continent Aflame: Responses to an Australian Catastrophe*, ed. Pat Anderson, Sally Gardner, Paul James, and Paul Komesaroff (Armadale, Vic.: Palaver, 2020), 164. See <https://timesofsandiego.com/politics/2019/12/01/california-can-learn-from-australias-experience-with-devastating-wildfires/> for just one example of journalistic suggestions that Australia and the US might learn from each other’s fire experiences.

¹⁵ Cohen and Duckert, *Elemental Ecocriticism*, 14.

¹⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 5.

¹⁷ Literature relating to fire can also be instructive in preparing readers for future disasters, as Kate Rigby notes in her discussion of Colin Thiele’s novel for young adults *February Dragon*. See Rigby, *Dancing with Disaster*, 128–38.

¹⁸ Phil Cheney, quoted in Deborah Bird Rose, ed., *Country in Flames: Proceedings of the 1994 Symposium on Biodiversity and Fire in North Australia*, Biodiversity Series, paper no. 3 (Canberra and Darwin: Biodiversity Unit, Australian National University, 1995), 53.

emotional distress and lack of control. Reading burning desires as swiftly extinguished, Hultquist suggests that Behn references the Galenic model of vital heat in her representations of desire, asserting that “cool, damp women should try their best to extinguish hot, dry men if they do not wish to be consumed in consummation.” Fire remains, in this context, a force to be overcome, and Hultquist highlights its unruliness and unpredictability even on a metaphorical level.

Jane Southwood shares Hultquist's concern with fire's figurative properties, which she examines in her essay on Marguerite Yourcenar's novel *L'Œuvre au Noir* (1968),¹⁹ but Southwood's work is also caught up with fire's infernal qualities. Southwood takes as her starting point Yourcenar's interest in humoral theory. The idea that human beings are made of fire and water offers a means of discussing the novel's interest in alchemical fire and its central character's vital life force. Reading alchemical fire both literally and symbolically, Southwood confronts the paradoxical qualities of flames, which can evoke both terror and tranquility, while she also attends to the varied uses and abuses of fire in Yourcenar's early modern setting. Taking in concerns including heresy, suicide, infanticide, and death by fire, *L'Œuvre au Noir* is, Southwood suggests, a work in which both character and narrative structure are consumed and refashioned by alchemical flames. Southwood's reading of the novel pays close attention to a chapter at the work's center, in which the book's protagonist, Zénon, is dislocated within time and space through the intense flames of his heretical experiments. Furthermore, she argues that the reader is forced, through what she terms a “tour de force of narrative alchemy,” to share in Zénon's emotional and physical dislocation.

Stephanie Trigg's contribution examines two catastrophic fires, one from the northern hemisphere and the other from the south. Trigg's work neatly bridges the old world and the new to consider transhistorical and transhemispherical parallels. She begins by focusing on the Great Fire of London in 1666—homing in on a bucket that may have survived the event—but reaches forward to 2009 to explore the impulse to collect objects in the wake of a disaster like the Black Saturday bushfires. Through this compelling transhistorical comparison, Trigg seeks to understand the emotional relations between people and things at times of crisis, while also attending to how fire devastates and reshapes the material world.

Focusing her attention on glass, Trigg examines the collection and display of melted glass artifacts in London and Melbourne, cleverly reminding us at the same time of fire's role in the original formation of glass. By reading burned objects as carriers of emotion, invested with memories of homes and lives that have been destroyed, she argues that melted objects trouble the idea of the aura, sitting as they do halfway between art and accident. The piece considers the investment of both survivors and museum collectors in discovering beauty among the ruins, and it analyzes the compulsion to collect and preserve objects that testify to a fire's power and destruction. Commemoration of a fire is, for some survivors, an important element of the recovery process, and the displaying of objects in a museum or gallery can be an important form of public testimony to their ordeal.

Survivors of fire often frame their experiences in apocalyptic terms. Flames are represented as demonic or hellish, while historically they have been interpreted as presenting a warning.²⁰

¹⁹ Translated into English by Yourcenar's partner, Grace Frick, as *The Abyss*.

²⁰ Demonic and apocalyptic tropes are not restricted to the northern hemisphere. As Juanita Feros Ruys has noted, medieval ideas of the demonic were regularly applied to the Australian landscape by settlers whose suppressed guilt stemming from their violent seizing of land made them highly susceptible to ideas of devilry and divine punishment. See Ruys, “The Devil's Coach House and Skeleton Cave: Colonial Tales, the Medieval Demonic and the Absence of the Indigenous,” *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 5, no. 2 (2016): 159–88.

Charles Zika's study of fiery portent as depicted in the collections of the Zurich Church considers the meanings that natural disasters took on during the Little Ice Age. Fire inevitably assumed an added importance during this time of significantly colder weather, with European societies depending on it for cooking and heating. Zika examines the wonder of fire that was, during this period, increasingly combined with fears of its destructive capabilities. As he expresses it, "Fire was indeed an ever-present danger in the towns and villages of sixteenth-century Europe . . . But rather than simply a danger, fire possessed a mysterious, magical, and also symbolic character, largely because its activity was unpredictable and its origins unclear." Paying particular attention to the writings of the Protestant clergyman Johann Jakob Wick (1522–88), Zika analyzes the uncanny properties assigned to fires, particularly those that appeared to originate in the sky.

Fires that seemed to occur spontaneously and without a known perpetrator were believed to be divine in origin in the early modern world. Accordingly, these conflagrations became loaded with symbolic meaning. As Zika notes, they were surrounded by a type of emotional contagion, whereby individual responses of terror or puzzlement rapidly spread across an ever more nervous society that became progressively more inclined to regard these natural phenomena as harbingers of an impending apocalypse. Given its potentially dangerous properties, fire from the sky—including the appearance of the northern lights—was seen as a warning of imminent punishment for sin, and as the climate of fear spread, people reported celestial apparitions including flying dragons. Today we might interpret these visions as mass hysteria, yet whatever the citizens of Zurich may or may not have seen, it is evident that fire filled them with terror.

Giovanni Tarantino's essay considers emotional strategies for trauma in the aftermath of a disaster, resisting the idea of a universally translatable approach. Through a discussion of the work of the Japanese painter and printmaker Shiba Kōkan (1747–1888), Tarantino highlights the importance of comedy and humor as a means of handling disaster. Through an examination of survivors of earthquakes and the fires that follow in their aftermath, Tarantino draws attention to a Japanese belief in positive outcomes from natural disasters. Writing of the importance of purification rituals in the wake of destructive events, he notes that "events of large-scale destruction could lead to social change and wealth redistribution." He also considers representations of firefighting in European and Japanese art, demonstrating Kōkan's enthusiasm for European equipment and techniques, while drawing attention to the anarchic and rather dark humor embedded in his work.

As Richard Read demonstrates in his essay on the aesthetics of apocalyptic fire in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011), fire from the sky remains a fascination today. Read suggests a shift in understanding of fire from the heavens, however, that privileges scientific interpretations of natural events and has robbed this kind of fire of its ominous properties. In his wide-ranging study, Read tracks what he terms "the advent of visual meaninglessness: a sky without public resonance," which is, he argues, private, scientific, or perhaps even nihilistic. One of the factors behind this reluctance to (over)interpret fire from the firmament is, Read argues, the postindustrial sky, whose smoggy darkness has propagated a pervasive gloom that is regarded as a sign of economic progress rather than divine judgment. Read's essay closes with a discussion of global warming and how a new era of climate change may lead to a revival of the type of cataclysmic iconography considered by Zika. Drawing on the Taiwanese Canadian artist An Te Liu's installation *Cloud* (2008), Read addresses creativity in the face of mass extinction, noting what he terms "nostalgia for uncontaminated skies and terror of cloudless ones."

Susan Broomhall shares Zika and Read's concern with interpreting fire, albeit in the southern rather than the northern hemisphere. In her essay "Encountering *Karl*: Willem de Vlamingh and the VOC on Noongar *Boodjar*," Broomhall examines how the crews of Dutch East India Company (VOC) vessels tasked with exploring Australia sought to understand the makers, purposes, and messages behind the fires that met them on their arrival. Drawing upon a wealth of primary historical documents, Broomhall argues that fire, smoke, and ashes were encoded by East India Company men, whose heightened emotional states inflected their understanding of both fire and Indigenous Australians. Using Willem de Vlamingh's expedition of 1696–97 as a case study, she notes that fire and its traces were regularly interpreted as signifying the presence of Indigenous peoples. By examining the crew's perceptions of fire and the culture surrounding it over fifteen days, Broomhall points to the disjunction between the VOC's understanding of fire and that of the Noongar people for whom fire—or *karl*—held deep cultural, emotional, and spiritual meanings. Her article is particularly sensitive to moments of misunderstanding, while also seeking to convey how this particular expedition led to shifts in the VOC's descriptions and analysis of the emotions surrounding fire.

As Bill Gammage, the eminent fire historian, remarks in his essay for this special issue, fire was a signifier of established custodianship but also of quiet resistance to the Europeans. Explorers like Jan Carstenszoon (whose journeys took in the Gulf of Carpentaria) often used the presence of fire as a marker of an area's suitability for exploration. Attending to the emotional, rather than physical, encounters between Indigenous Australians and the Dutch explorers, Broomhall stresses the European travelers' suspicion of *karl*, while highlighting their disrespect. Further, she addresses their willingness to deploy fire, as she puts it, "to further their own objectives—often violently." Fire and smoke could be used in an attempt to track people, but they could also be harnessed as weapons, as Broomhall comments, "The *karl* that exposed the inabilities of the crew to meet with people who were clearly there would be reflected back in firepower that was the final act of Vlamingh's expedition with regard to the continent." Having ascertained the importance of fire and used it to assert a claim on the land, the VOC crew was thwarted in its attempts to interact with the local people. Broomhall draws on work by Noongar scholars to highlight the generous kinship that Noongar people would have felt toward the foreign mariners, believing that their arrival and assertions of ownership signaled connectedness to the land, perhaps from a previous existence.

Gammage offers a long view of the history of fire in Australia in his essay, which examines the "totem" system of spiritual emblems that defined connections between people and species and connected them to specific regions. As Gammage asserts, for Indigenous Australians fire was and remains an important totem, "and fire totem people and plants devoted their lives to it." Considering Australia before the arrival of Europeans in 1788, Gammage extends arguments from his highly influential work *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (2011), noting the precision with which prescribed burning was carried out before 1788.²¹ He also, moreover, reminds us that the mobility of Indigenous Australians enabled them to live alongside fire, viewing it as a tool to be harnessed, rather than a threat, and observing strict protocols with regard to burning. Gammage cautions against sentimental notions of an uncultivated preinvasion Australia, noting that the first inhabitants crafted the terrain intentionally through the strategic deployment of fire. He argues, furthermore, that the landscape only became "wild" after 1788 and suggests that rather

²¹ Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2011).

than seeking to reduce the number of fires, modern-day farmers and conservationists would do well to “burn more,” recognizing the importance of intense heat to the regeneration of a number of native plants and trees.

Danielle Clode, the historian of science and fire, begins her essay by considering wild-fires in the United States, before focusing on fire emergencies in Australia. Clode is particularly interested in the physiology of responses to fire and the ways in which humans process ideas of fire-related risk. Underpinning her essay is the challenge that fires pose to human (particularly Western) ideas of situatedness. Fires that destroy homes and land undermine feelings of security and a sense of belonging to a place, yet as Clode argues (following Tom Griffiths), societies soon forget the extent of a fire’s devastation and the urge to rebuild can overcome memories of the danger of a particular place. Christine Hansen and Tom Griffiths remind us that fire never stays away for long and that “vegetation, topography and climate conspire to invite it back, no matter what humans do.”²² For Hansen and Griffiths, fire is a “recurrent nightmare,” and they note a similarity in settler responses to fire across time and across continents. As they express it, “The stories generated by the trauma of 2009 were like those of yore; they were about innocence and tragedy, heroism and grim humour.”²³

Clode’s fascinating essay considers the neurological and emotional responses that can take over when fire threatens. In particular, she highlights how adrenaline can cloud the ability to think clearly, stressing the importance of preparedness for those living in fire-prone areas and showing that emotion can work against us in an emergency. While Clode emphasizes real-life scenarios in her essay, a number of the other works in this special issue engage with how fiction can prepare readers for fires and their aftermath. They reveal how art and literature can not only teach about the dangers of fire but also play vital roles in promoting both resilience and recovery. Survivors channel their strong affective responses to fire into art, an act that can allow them to feel as though they are able to manage the fire in some way. Clode highlights the importance of this process through her assertion that “much of the trauma associated with fire tends to involve the loss of control over our environment and lives.” The stories survivors tell about fires can offer a means of reasserting ownership over their surroundings, whether that is through writing a memoir of survival or producing a story or painting that celebrates heroism. The fire story can be therapeutic, cathartic, or regenerative and, importantly, it allows us to feel as though we *know* fire.

John Schauble, who is a firefighter with an academic interest in fire, begins his essay by considering what he sees as the absence of truly great novels about fire, noting that its spectacular qualities make it an ideal subject for visual artists but more difficult to render on the page. Schauble’s essay offers a helpful survey of works featuring fire from the 1850s to the present, showing a dropping off in the representation of fire in the twentieth century, which was followed by a resurgence of postmillennial interest that coincides with the more frequent fires of recent years. He notes of the Australian novel that “bushfire is one of the tribulations of the bush, helping to build the imagery of the landscape and, arguably, the national character. So, fire became a defining characteristic of ‘Australianness’ at a time when the colonies were debating whether they should federate into a single nation.” Schauble suggests that the battle against fire has been absorbed into settler identity in Australia. Fire could leave settlers feeling alienated from the land, hurling their sense of belonging into chaos through its rapid destruction—an

²² Hansen and Griffiths, *Living with Fire*, 93.

²³ *Ibid.*, 94.

experience not unlike the trauma reported by modern-day survivors of natural disasters. Like Gammage, Schauble stresses the difficulties that European settlers and their descendants have faced in understanding the “alien” landscape of the southern hemisphere.

My own essay uses George R. Stewart's 1948 novel *Fire* to think about the importance of collaboration and reciprocity in fighting fires. While it has the pace and tone of a thriller—with fire as the villain—Stewart's novel is deeply attentive to environmental issues and the more-than-human world, as is his later and more famous science fiction work *Earth Abides* (1949). In *Fire*, Stewart uncannily anticipates our own present day, with his visions of the “melting of the polar ice . . . the erosion of a near-by hillside” (77), and he also shows the relentlessness of fire during the Californian dry season. Through an examination of the camaraderie and teamwork required to subdue a fire, my essay asks how, and if, we will be able to manage fire as it becomes ever more prevalent.

In the Western world, we have made our homes in, or adjacent to, areas that were traditionally prone to burning. In denying fire its place in the world, we have stored up problems for the future and, as Stephen J. Pyne expresses it, “The more we try to remove fire from places that have coevolved with it, the more violently fire will return.”²⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty has commented of the Australian “Black Summer” blazes that “it looked as if the whole continent was on fire,”²⁵ and as David Carle reminds us, this is not a uniquely Australian problem: “Over eight million Californians live . . . near the edge of wildlands subject to periodic wildfires.”²⁶ Furthermore, Pyne notes that while 4.2 million acres burned in California in 2020, that figure would have been closer to 10 million in the preindustrial period, and suppressed fire can only be held off for so long.²⁷ Stewart's depiction of firefighting teamwork opens up questions for our hotter future, when fire seasons across the world will overlap and expertise will be thinly spread.

The final article in this special issue is by poet, novelist, and critic Cassandra Atherton. Her contribution on the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911 engages with the research behind one of her own short stories, “Raining Blood and Money” (2013, also reproduced as part of this issue), and ponders the role of creative nonfiction in providing the dead with a voice. This Manhattan fire caused the deaths of 146 working-class factory operatives, most of whom were women, and many of whom were migrants. It is remembered for its role in the radical overhaul of fire safety regulations in the US as well as its exposure of the deplorable conditions endured by workers in the clothing trade.

Using E. Ann Kaplan's compelling study of “vicarious trauma”—in which she argues that disasters can collapse into one another for their survivors, with new events acting as triggers for buried recollections—Atherton scrutinizes her own affective investment in the events of March 25, 1911. She goes on to think more broadly about the roles that memory and anticipation play in the lives of survivors. Atherton reveals a revival of interest in the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in the wake of September 11, 2001, which leads her to examine the press's role in mediating and disseminating trauma, which is not always suffered firsthand. By comparing accounts of those forced to jump from burning buildings at the beginning of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries,

²⁴ Stephen J. Pyne, *The Pyrocene: How We Created an Age of Fire, and What Happens Next* (Oakland: University Of California Press, 2021), 3.

²⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 219.

²⁶ David Carle, *Introduction to Fire in California*, 2nd ed. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021), xiv.

²⁷ Pyne, *Pyrocene*, 3.

Atherton considers interpretations of the victims' devastating bid to escape the flames, emphasizing the desperation behind their choices. She also writes candidly of her own emotional connection to both events, documenting the extreme responses that they induced as she researched and wrote, while acknowledging the power of photographs and the stories they might tell.

As Atherton asserts, "Creative nonfiction can return its reader to the moment of a tragedy by recontextualizing and reanimating the facts with literary creativity." She draws on the affect theorist Brian Massumi to consider the horror and power behind the vision of women jumping from the flames in 1911, before turning to Richard Drew's photograph *The Falling Man* (published September 12, 2001) to consider its comparable haunting properties. Massumi's work on "fear of future fire" is pivotal to understanding how memories of disasters past can come to bear on the present, as the traumatized anticipate the tragedy yet-to-come.

Atherton's essay outlines a fear that looks set to haunt many more people in the years ahead. Massumi's "future fire" is, as he might express it, a clear and present danger in this era of climate change.²⁸ While the control of fire is an impossibility, a better understanding of its history and environmental effects will help to make sense of our paradoxical dependence on and fear of the element. The flames of the future are a "not yet fully emergent threat,"²⁹ but as Hansen and Griffiths have cautioned, fire always returns, and knowledge of its long history can help in the face of its looming arrival.³⁰ A

²⁸ Brian Massumi, "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat" in Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, ed., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 55.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Hansen and Griffiths, *Living with Fire*, 163.