

Dancing With Disaster

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In light of the appalling suffering caused by the bad run of major natural, or more accurately, socio-ecological disasters that have assailed various parts of the world in recent years in the guise of sundry cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis and wildfires, my title might well strike some readers as offensively glib. *Dancing with disaster?* Surely this is a metaphor that only someone who has not had to bear the brunt of such catastrophes in their own lives could come up with! I am uncomfortably aware that this might well be the case: certainly, the closest that this kind of disaster has come to my door has been in the relatively benign guise of the odd fallen bough from a gum tree in the garden and occasionally flooded lounge room, thanks to recent wild winds and dramatic downpours in the Dandenongs; that, and the alarming aroma of smoke and cinders wafting in from the bush during fire-prone summers, such as the one that has already wrought such grief and devastation in Victoria, and that is, alas, not over yet. I am nonetheless emboldened to tarry a while with this trope and see where it leads us, not least out of respect for my friend Val Plumwood, herself once such a keen dancer, who expressed great enthusiasm for it when I proposed it as the title for an Earth Philosophies Australia gathering that was to have been held at her home on Plumwood Mountain in the spring of 2006. Sadly, that event did not take place, and it is no longer possible to explore with Val herself the implications for thought and action that might be encoded in the image of 'dancing with disaster'. In retrospect, I think that it appealed to her not only on account of the alluring alliteration, but also because it suggests a way of responding to ongoing crisis and catastrophe that departs from those mainstream environmental management strategies that are underpinned by the ultimately self-defeating standpoint of human-centred rationalistic mastery. As I will argue below, I believe that the metaphor of dancing could prove helpful in articulating and enacting a different kind of rationality, an ecosophical *ratio*, which might better equip us for safeguarding life in a perilously warming world. First, though, I would like to indicate why I consider the question of how we deal with disaster to be so urgent in the present: that is to say, more precisely, in the context of climate change.

Briefly (all too briefly), then, it is beginning to seem highly unlikely that greenhouse gas emissions will be kept below the level necessary to avert catastrophic climate change, especially if that is as low as some scientists now believe i.e. around 325 to 350 parts per million of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, according to the prominent American climatologist James Hansen

(Hansen *et al*). As the Executive Director of ANU's new Climate Change Institute, Will Steffen, has recently observed, since carbon dioxide concentration already stands at 383 ppm, 'according to Hansen, we are now in overshoot and thus need to become not only a zero-carbon emission global society, but a carbon-absorbing global society' (Steffen). While higher concentrations of CO₂ might still be compatible with keeping the global temperature rise below 2 degrees Celsius, our continuing failure to put a brake on emissions, let alone going into reverse, suggests that we could well have to reckon with much higher temperatures by the end of this century, as disappearing ice-caps reduce the cooling effect of reflection at the poles, while thawing permafrost and warming oceans begin pumping ever greater quantities of stored greenhouse gases back into the atmosphere. Just how cataclysmic this would be is hard to say, but it would certainly include the inundation of low lying coastal regions and skyrocketing extinction rates. Even if the direst prognoses turn out to be wrong, the degree of warming that has already been set in train is sufficient significantly to alter global weather patterns, increasing pressure on human food production as well as wildlife habitats, raising sea levels, spreading tropical diseases, and increasing the incidence and severity of what climatologists quaintly refer to as 'weather surprises', including wildfires, droughts, floods, cyclones, hail storms, tornadoes, and heat waves. The consequences of such climatic changes will be all the more worrisome where they are experienced in combination with other stressors, such as military conflict, economic hardship, political repression and habitat destruction. There is a very real danger, moreover, that we could become caught in a vicious circle, whereby our responses to the threat or impact of climate change engender further military conflict, exacerbate economic inequity, heighten political repression, and/or escalate habitat destruction. Indeed, at least two of the current strategies for climate change mitigation, namely biofuels and nuclear energy, both of which are clearly designed to safeguard business-as-usual, harbour one or more of these risky potentials. Clearly, then, there is an urgent need to figure out how we might best adapt to life in a perilously warming world in ways that are mitigation sensitive, environmentally sustainable, socially just, and, I would add, compassionate towards non-human as well human others. Crucially, that means learning how best to safeguard more than only human life in the midst of ongoing crisis and catastrophe.

If, as Val Plumwood argued persuasively in her last book *Environmental Culture*, what the so-called environmental crisis actually manifests is a 'crisis of reason', then anthropogenic climate change discloses this crisis in a particularly stark manner. At the same time, though, it also reveals the absolute indispensability of reason, if we humans and many of our Earth others are to have a chance of continuing to live, and potentially living abundantly—that is to say, freely, justly, equitably, sustainably and, from time to time, joyously—on this planet. It is, after all, scientific reasoning that has uncovered the immediate causes of

global warming and produced the prognoses of its consequences upon which, belatedly, some governments, businesses, communities and individuals are beginning to act. And we are going to need a fair bit of technical reasoning in order to find alternatives to the products and processes that are currently heating things up. That does not mean to say that science and technology hold all the answers, as some scientists, including Will Steffen, erstwhile Director of the ANU's Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, where Val was a research associate, have come to recognize (see e.g. Fischer *et al*). In this context, it is important to recall that the target of Plumwood's critique is not reason *per se*, but a particular historically contingent construction of rationality, the continued adherence to which is looking increasingly irrational. Not unlike Jean-Jacques Rousseau's essay 'On the Origins of Inequality', penned amidst the philosophical ferment that preceded the French Revolution; Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written in the midst of the unprecedented horror of World War Two; or Jacques Derrida's post-1968 deconstruction of '(phal)logocentrism', Plumwood's work is best seen, in my view, as a contribution to the continuing self-critique of the eurowestern enlightenment project. It is not in any sense a celebration of un-reason, advancing a sentimental ethos of the (feminine-coded) 'heart' over the (masculine-coded) 'head': to do that, as she argued in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, would simply leave us trapped in the cavern of 'uncritical reversal' (31-4). Rather, her undertaking entailed a philosophically rigorous—that is to say, rationally defensible—reckoning with the perilous irrationality of imagining that reason was confined to self-conscious human thought and that its application should be directed towards the mastery of the merely material realm of other-than-human 'nature'. Climate change highlights the pitfalls of this standpoint of mastery by disclosing the blindness of assuming said nature to be a more-or-less passive background to human endeavour, fully knowable and infinitely manipulable.

Two qualifications need to be made at this point. Firstly, as a glance at Peter Marshall's *Nature's Web* (1994) readily reveals, such a view has never been uncontested, even within eurowestern modernity. As recent ecocritical research has indicated, the legacy of Enlightenment and Romantic thinking about nature is particularly complex and contradictory (e.g. Sitter; Williams; Hutchings). Secondly, the construction of nature as a more-or-less passive background to human endeavour has not been without a certain historical legitimacy. That is to say, it is not a matter of mere make-believe that can easily be dispelled by education in 'the facts', as rationalist empiricists naively insist, or the invention of a new and better story, as latter-day idealists fondly imagine. Rather, in the way of all sturdy ideologies, the standpoint of mastery emerged out of, and subsequently reinforced, particular historically contingent patterns of relationship both among human groups and between humans and Earth. Within the historiography of ecocritique, estimates as to when this occurred, and why,

vary considerably. Carolyn Merchant, for example, points to the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, stressing that among the various philosophies of nature that were in circulation at this time, those that legitimated unlimited human power over a disenchanted realm of brute matter proved most congenial to a capitalist modernity in the making. Some years previously, however, Lynn White Jnr. had argued that the crucial shift actually occurred in the early Middle Ages, in the wake of the invention of the heavy iron plough in northwestern Europe, which altered patterns of land-use and land ownership and fostered a more aggressively human supremacist interpretation of the biblical creation narrative in Genesis 1. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, meanwhile, Plumwood went back further still, showing how Plato's historically influential 'philosophy of death' was informed by the dissociation from the necessities of corporeal existence in the production and sustenance of life afforded privileged men in the patriarchal and slave-owning society of ancient Athens. As I have argued elsewhere ('Writing After Nature'), I think that an even longer historical bow can be drawn, namely to the emergence of the very concept of 'nature' as distinct from 'culture', which cannot be pinned down precisely, but which evidently postdates the development of agrarian civilizations in the Middle East, China and Meso-America. Certainly, no such distinction is made within Australian Indigenous languages, while the English word 'country', as it has come to be widely used within Aboriginal English, signals a continuing resistance to the settler Australian assumption of a nature-culture divide (Rose, "'Moral Friends'").¹

If the construction of 'nature' as a more-or-less passive background to human endeavour does indeed have as one of its necessary, if not sufficient, historical preconditions the invention of agrarian civilisations, then it is also worth bringing to mind the environmental preconditions for this momentous alteration in the pattern of human relationships with one another and with Earth. Among these were the existence of a stable climate with a reasonably regular seasonal cycle and fairly reliable rainfall, as well as the availability of domesticable animals and plants, along with nutrient rich soils on which to raise them (Diamond). Such conditions, by and large, have apparently never existed in Australia, which is presumably why Aboriginal people have generally chosen to cultivate a non-agrarian way of life better suited to what the land and sea of this climatically unruly yet biotically abundant continent afforded. In those parts of the world where such conditions did exist, it was on the basis of the agricultural and subsequently urban and industrial ways of life, which they facilitated, that it

¹ To point to the historical contingency of the concept of nature is not necessarily to argue against the deployment of this heavily freighted term, although Bruno Latour (2004) and Timothy Morton (2007), for example, have both provided strong ecopolitical grounds for doing so. Although I also consider this a highly problematic term, I am sympathetic to Plumwood's view ('Nature as Agency') that it still has purchase in some contexts, and so I am not among those who would proscribe it entirely.

became possible to conceive of such a thing as 'nature' in the first place, and in eurowestern modernity in particular, to construe said nature as a more-or-less passive background to human endeavour, fully knowable and infinitely manipulable.

From the perspective of this very long history, then, the standpoint of mastery can be seen to have been premised, among other things, on the experience in some parts of the world of a high degree of climatic stability. Is it then not deliciously ironic that our very endeavours to extend human mastery—by, among other things, ensconcing ourselves in climate-controlled built environments, as well as defying distance with high-speed transportation and denying the night with countless electric lights—are undoing the very environmental preconditions that rendered such a project conceivable, and, to a degree, achievable? This irony, moreover, is no mere quirk of fate. Our failure to reckon with the potential impact of climate change when we embraced a fossil-fuelled economy at the time of the industrial revolution should not be seen simply as a regrettable contingency that could have been avoided with greater knowledge of climatology. For this is but one—undoubtedly the most monumental and momentous—of a whole series of unforeseen adverse outcomes of particular techno-scientific advances, such as the unhappy invention of what turned out to be carcinogenic pesticides and herbicides and ozone-depleting coolants and propellants. Such instances should not just be brushed aside as random cock-ups, for they betray a systematic tendency to over-estimate the extent of human knowledge and control. They are predicated on the premise of predictability, whereby predictability implies that you are in possession of all the relevant facts that are needed to predetermine the consequences of a particular course of action. Time and again we have discovered that things were far more complex than we had assumed. Yet the premise of predictability continues to underpin much techno-scientific research, including genetic engineering, the potential benefits of which I would not dispute, but which is likely to be no less feral in its unforeseen outcomes than the invention of biocides and CFCs or the combustion of vast quantities of variously fossilized and liquefied ancient plant and animal matter. Some of the more Promethean proposals for countering global warming, such as the deployment of an array of mirrors in space to deflect some of the sun's rays, manifest this same fatal tendency to overestimate human knowledge and control to what should be seen as a patently absurd degree. That such proposals are instead seen by some as worthy of serious consideration, despite all the stuff-ups of the past, including the monumental and momentous stuff-up of global warming itself, should alert us to the fact that what we are dealing with here is not a rational belief, but rather a deeply held assumption operating largely below the level of consciousness to uphold certain notions of human identity, along with certain patterns of relationship both among humans and between humans and Earth. What climate change discloses, then, in a

particularly powerful way, and not without a potentially tragic irony, is the crisis of a way of thinking and acting that has long laid claim to the mantle of reason, not entirely unreasonably, but that can now be seen to constitute an ideological and ultimately irrational foreshortening of the promise of rational inquiry and reflection.

That promise, we should recall, was not simply one of mastery, but also of human freedom and right relationship, both among humans and, in some variants, between humans and non-humans (which for most of Western history were assumed to include heavenly as well as earthly others). During the European Enlightenment, at least up until the time of the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, that promise was frequently tied to the concept of Providence—that is to say, the optimistic belief, inspired by the physico-theology of William Derham and Lord Shaftesbury, that the natural order, as it was beginning to be disclosed by rational inquiry, manifested the wisdom and goodness of its divine creator, commonly referred to as ‘God’. Thus, for example, English Catholic poet Alexander Pope could exclaim in his influential ‘Essay on Man’ of 1733:

Who finds not Providence all good and wise,
Alike in what it gives, and what denies?
[...]
All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;
All Discord, Harmony, not understood;
All partial Evil, universal Good:
And, in spite of Pride, in erring Reason’s spite,
One truth is clear, ‘WHATEVER IS, IS RIGHT’.
(Pope, lines 205-6; 289-94)

That last line should not be taken to refer to worldly relations: Pope is not necessarily saying that all is well in state and society. What he is claiming, however, is that what monotheists (or, in the case of Christians such as himself, Trinitarians) call Creation, specifically as manifest in the *oikos* of Earth, possessed its own rightness, its own rationality, even though this was only partially visible to human understanding. While the trope of the Book of Nature is an old one, what is new here is the critique of human presumption that accompanies its redeployment by Pope: the Pride to which he is referring is that of assuming that human Reason is capable of discerning what is valuable in Nature and what is dispensable or in need of correction. Because we are ourselves a part of Nature, we cannot see it as a whole (60). Moreover, we tend to evaluate other parts of the whole from a very biased perspective, namely in relation to how they might

serve or hinder what we consider to be our own interests. In treating the Earth as if it were intended only for our 'use' (132), we risk damaging the natural order that makes our own existence possible: 'From Nature's chain whatever link you strike,/Ten or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike' (245-46).

For Pope, God is not only the guarantor of the goodness and wisdom of creation with which we meddle at our peril. God is also conceived as entering into creation on the model of Renaissance neo-Platonism, namely as the 'soul of the world':

That, chang'd thro' all, and yet in all the same,
Great in the earth, as in th' aethereal frame,
Warms in the sun, refreshes in the breeze,
Glowes in the stars, and blossoms in the trees,
Lives thro' all life, extends thro' all extent,
Spreads undivided, operates unspent,
Breathes in our soul, informs our mortal part,
As full, as perfect, in a hair as heart;
As full, as perfect, in vile Man that mourns,
As the rapt Seraph that adores and burns;
To him no high, no low, no great, no small;
He fills, he bounds, connects, and equals all.

(269-80)

Within Pope's new epistle, not only all men, but all things, human and otherwise, were made equal by a panentheistic deity, that is, one that dwells at once within and beyond the physical world. Importantly, though, they were not made alike, and Pope is eager to honour the diverse qualities and capabilities of God's 'people', human and otherwise, such as the 'sagacious' hound's keen sense of smell or the 'spider's touch, how exquisitely fine!' that 'Feels at each thread, and lives along the line' (213-18). These varied sensual and mental powers are viewed hierarchically by Pope, and he does reserve a special place for Reason, which marks out 'Man's imperial race' (209), but without being claimed for him exclusively (the elephant, for instance, is said to be 'half-reas'ning' (222)). To the extent that Pope privileges human intellectual and moral capacities, though, it is to the end of enjoining responsible rulership, based on respect for the integrity of creation and the diversity of God's creatures. Our vocation is not to act as 'the Wit and Tyrant of the whole' (50), but to become that divinely favoured being who 'cares for all' (57). By expanding the realm of human understanding by means of rational inquiry into Nature's laws, coupled with an ethos of care, we might have a better chance of living in greater harmony

with the rest of Creation, as well as with one another: this, then, was the promise of the Age of Reason, and its guarantor, for believers like Pope, was God.²

Contrary to those who accuse Christianity of engendering ecological crisis, one could well argue on the basis of the historical evidence (although I will not be able to do so in detail here) that it was precisely the loss or marginalization of this perception of Nature as God's wondrous creation in the following centuries that smoothed the way ideologically for the industrial ravaging of an increasingly disenchanting Earth. As I have shown elsewhere ('Discoursing on Disaster'), the Earth itself played a part in denting the kind of faith in Creation evinced by Pope, namely in the guise of the Great Lisbon Earthquake, which led many European intellectuals, among the most prominent of whom was Voltaire, to ditch physico-theology for a moral humanism within which the other-than-human realm of mere materiality is stripped of both communicative capability and ethical considerability. In the longer term, though, the suppression or circumscription of reverence for creation (in effect, its confinement to aesthetic experiences enjoyed after work) was driven largely by the imperatives of modern state formation and capital accumulation. While it is doubtless true that most versions of Christianity have always tended to privilege the human to a greater or lesser degree, as well as construing other-than-human nature as intended, again to a greater or lesser degree, for human use, it was only within the political economy of industrial modernity that the countervailing tendencies of wonder and care were side-lined in favour of more ruthlessly exploitative attitudes and actions.

Something similar, it must be said, has been true of the sciences, both 'human' and 'natural', the division of which has itself contributed to the ecological crisis of reason, not least by rendering it so very difficult adequately to diagnose and remedy. Clearly, though, this does not mean for one moment that we should reject science, any more than the historical failings of the churches imply that Christians should abandon their faith. As I averred at the outset, we are going to need the very best science and the greatest technical ingenuity that we can muster both in moving towards a post-fossil-fuel economy and in preparing ourselves for the potentially catastrophic climate change impacts that are now already inevitable. However, climate change is not just a technical problem requiring a technical 'fix'. Both in its causes and effects it is also a socio-economic, political, cultural, and ethical problem. Just as people of different faith communities are increasingly finding common ground in caring for creation, as indicated for example by the commitment of Parliament of World Religions that is meeting in Melbourne next year to 'Make a World of Difference' by 'Hearing

² For an extended discussion of God and Nature in Augustan verse, see Sitter. Linda Williams also provides a lively defense of Enlightenment discourses of nature, which runs counter to Merchant's rather one-sided historical reconstruction.

Each Other Healing the Earth' (Parliament of World Religions), so too tackling climate change, along with other ecosocial woes, demands the development of more integrated forms of multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural knowledge. Importantly, moreover, these new forms of knowledge will need to come from a different epistemological, ontological and ethical place from that afforded by the standpoint of mastery. What is required, then, are not only new forms of technology and knowledge—*techne* and *logos*—but, more fundamentally, a new *ethos*, and perhaps also a new *eros*, as Freya Mathews has suggested: a mode of relating to others, human and otherwise, that is enlivening and dialogical rather than objectifying and dominological.

And that returns me, at last, to my title. Climate change challenges us to explore ways of thinking and acting that depart from the mainline of modernity, calling us into relationship with others across the boundaries of 'race', class, religion, nation and, as Deborah Rose (2006) has insisted, species: unless we can respond to this call on a collective level, we are likely to descend into the most appalling barbarism. Additionally, it demands that we accustom ourselves to living under far more violent and chaotic climatic conditions than most of the world has known for some 10,000 years. Under these conditions, the premise of predictability, which has for the past few centuries enabled great technical feats, but at a great and growing cost, will be rendered increasingly dysfunctional. In particular, in the face of more frequent and extreme weather events, we will need to get a good deal better at contingency planning, recognizing that we might need to change tack at any moment in response to unforeseen eventualities. As one of Australia's leading climate scientists, Amanda Lynch, observed in a recent talk in the Faculty of Business and Economics at Monash University, '[w]e keep on looking for a big one-off solution when I think we need to expand our thinking to include more modest policy initiatives: we should be allowing ourselves to fail many times while we harvest what works. While we don't allow ourselves, and our politicians, to fail, we are robbing ourselves of potential opportunities' (Lynch). Rather than seeking to be always in command of our environment, one that has only grown more unruly as we have endeavoured to bend it our will, we would do better to learn how to adapt ourselves to the surprises that it has in store for us, recognizing that we will never have all the facts that we need to predict with confidence the outcome of any one course of action: in other words, we need to hone our skills of 'dancing with disaster'.

The kind of 'dance' that I have in mind here is not a formal dance, whether ballroom or barnyard, where everybody knows the steps in advance. It's more improvisational than that. But nor is it the quasi-solo style of improvisation that I learnt to engage in, alluringly, or so I thought, in my teens. It's more like the practice of 'contact improvisation', about which one of my doctoral students, Hellene Gronda, wrote a brilliant thesis a few years back. In this kind of dance, you cannot enjoy the comfort of distance, but are obliged to endure the risk of

constant touch. To do it well—and nobody can do it perfectly—you need to be responsive, but not passive; ready to take the initiative, but able to go with the flow; strong, but flexible; and, above all, you need to know how to fall in a way that causes minimum harm both to yourself and your partner.

Now, there are people in this country who have had plenty of opportunity to hone their skills of contact improvisation with an environment that has long been prone to the kind of climatic variability with low predictability and frequent extremes that is currently going global: in this land of fire, flood and drought, weather surprises have always been the rule rather than the exception (Rose, 'Rhythms'). In my view, the rest of the world would do well to look to the eco-cultural attitudes and practices of Indigenous Australians, as well as those of our more land-wise farmers, if they want to get an idea of what it might mean to dance with disaster in a perilously warming world.

Take drought and fire, for example, both of which are expected to become more frequent and severe in much of south-eastern Australia as a consequence of climate change. Hailing from the least fire-prone continent on the planet, and generally from regions that enjoy frequent and regular rainfall, it is hardly surprising that Euro-Australians have tended to construe drought and fire as enemies to be conquered at all cost. The amateur poet who published under the name of 'Bushman' (aka Joseph Kelly, a school teacher) in the *Queanbeyan Age* in the 1860s exemplifies this view in his poem 'Drought', in which this settler's scourge is mythologised as a dragon: 'Fiery and hot, like a dragon's breath,/Bloweth the parching north-west gale'. Kelly's metaphorical demonisation of drought is reinforced in the following lines in the image of the 'red sun' that 'sinks in a sea of blood,/With an angry and ominous frown', while 'lurid pillars of vivid light,/In tow'ring column o'er the tree-tops rise' and a 'low sad moan from the flame-capped hills,/Like the plaint of one who in sorrow grieves,/Creeps through the woods and by silent rills,/And waketh the wail of the withering leaves'. Having recalled the toll that the drought had already taken on stock and crops, bringing famine, sickness and death upon embattled farming families, Kelly devotes his final three stanzas to exhorting his readers to pin their hope of salvation on 'That Holy One whose blood was spilt/To cleanse us from sin and its loathsome slime'. Kelly's imagery positions the naturally arid and fire-prone country of the Canberra area within the frame of a cosmic battle of good and evil, as articulated through the emphatically British myth of St George and the dragon. In so doing, this Australian place is assimilated to a European cultural imaginary in a manner that militates against any accommodation to its old ways, such as might have been facilitated by entering into a respectful dialogue with the colonised people and their land.

For Kelly, drought and fire can only connote disorder, and the response that he recommends implies a flight from the earthly, insofar as this is construed as

afflicted by evil and conducing to sinfulness. The counterpart of this metaphysical solution to the hostility towards human godliness assumed to inhere in the physical world is the quest for technological mastery. Indeed, this response too is inherent in Kelly's evocation of the dragon, for although he calls his readers explicitly to prayer, implicitly his poem awakens the desire for a slayer. The persistence of this mythic urge is evident in some of the responses to the Canberra firestorm, notably in the call for more aggressive burning and even logging of the dense forests in which the fires took hold (similar calls are of course also now being heard in Victoria). In Plumwood's view:

The demand for ruthless and extensive fuel reduction to prevent fires in extreme drought years is [...] nothing more than a fantasy of a malleable, obedient land in which we can somehow intervene, even in extreme conditions, to substitute more 'convenient', cooler bushfires that do not impinge so much on our areas of possession. (Plumwood, 'Wide-scale')

Far from being a rational belief, I would add, this fantasy is ghosted by the mythos of Kelly's fire-breathing dragon that can and must be slain. Against this dream of dominion, Plumwood recommends an ethic of negotiation with the land: instead of seeking to slay the dragon, then, we would do better to follow the Indigenous example of entering into partnership with it. Such an ethic of partnership is all the more urgently needed as we face the climatic changes set in train, ironically, by our previous attempts to refashion the environment for our convenience. If we could learn how to dance with fire in the increasingly arid and combustible regions of this land, we might be better placed to minimise the disastrousness of those climatic changes that we have inadvertently brought upon ourselves and our Earth others.

In the case of major flooding and cyclones, both of which are also on the rise, other dance steps will be required: here it is more a case of learning how to enhance our flexibility and mobility with a view to simply getting out of the way, fast. Indeed, as the appalling death toll from the Victorian firestorm shows, getting out in a timely manner might also be preferable in the face of this kind of mega-sized, super-hot, fast-moving blaze. The agile dodging movements learnt in various martial arts could serve as an apt model for dancing with such overwhelming forces. However we seek to improvise our *modus vivendi* with these and other potentially devastating manifestations of encroaching climate chaos, though, it is in my view ethically imperative that we also endeavour to partner other-than-human creatures in the dance: for example, by safeguarding and extending the habitat corridors and connectivities that will enable those species who can do so to migrate to more congenial climes; and by supporting and expanding the efforts of those who seek to come to the rescue of animals caught up in the catastrophes that we have brought upon them. With direct

reference to the Victorian bushfires, the Ecological Humanities research community:

acknowledges the entangled accountability of human beings in this, and other, anthropogenic 'natural disasters'. We are brought into a space of grief: for the suffering and loss across so many kinds of living beings, and for our own involvement—sharing the suffering but also acknowledging our very real responsibilities. (Victorian Bushfires)

While such events summon us into mourning, they could also spur us into action, both to prevent a more dire degree of warming than we are already in for, and to discover ways of responding creatively, compassionately, equitably and sustainably to those potentially catastrophic impacts of climate change that can no longer be forestalled. In this context, cultivating the art of ecosophical contact improvisation might help us to 'travel hopefully', as Martin Mulligan puts it, on a doubtless difficult journey, the destination of which has become profoundly uncertain, but which we can be sure will be full of surprises—most, but perhaps not all of them, unpleasant—along the way.

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