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Climate justice in more-than-human worlds

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ABSTRACT

Theories of climate justice retain a persistent tension between transcorporeal entanglement and coherent individuality. The ontology of bodily separation required for accountability for polluters and reparation for the vulnerable enacts a worldview potentially inconsistent with the more-than-human relationality of climate change. Yet theories of material agency and posthuman becoming are criticised for offering limited guidance for political practice. Engaging with the bushfire smoke that blanketed eastern Australia throughout 2019/2020, I seek to revitalise climate justice by engaging with theories of more-than-human transcorporeality. To do so, I articulate an *aspirational climate justice*, where aspiration is understood as a yearning arising from inhibited breath. Aspirational climate justice considers the relationally composed human and non-human bodies that breathe, as well as the relationship – respiration – itself, as subjects, and offers a politics through which we might keep breathing together towards a more liveable world.

KEYWORDS Posthuman; new materialism; toxic embodiment; relational; breath; bushfire smoke

Introduction

Throughout 2019/2020, Australia experienced a catastrophic, unprecedented, climate change-fuelled bushfire season. During the bushfires many parts of eastern Australia, which is where the majority of our human population lives, were shrouded in heavy smoke for months on end, creating a respiratory crisis for billions of creatures, human and not.¹ Toxicity reached up to twenty times the ‘hazardous’ level in some places. Fleeing from fires, many Australians found themselves enveloped in midday skies that were as dark as night, blanketed with the floating remains of forests. Among the smoke, birds rasped and fish gasped in our rivers as the cinders rendered the water, as well as the air, unbreathable. Doctors reported smoke visible in maternity wards as infants took their first breaths. In breathing the smoke, we inhaled incinerated ecosystems, and the tiny particles of charred multispecies bodies made their way into our lungs, our blood, our organs, our brains. The knowledge of this – both scientific knowledge, and the

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embodied knowledge evident in our coughing, sneezing and watery eyes – produced an atmosphere that oscillated between pure panic, sombre shock, and heavy acquiescence throughout the ‘Black Summer.’² No matter our efforts to exclude the smoke from our respiratory systems, it exceeded human capacities, infiltrating our buildings and bodies, contributing to over 400 human deaths (Borchers Arriagada *et al.* 2020) and billions of non-human ones (WWF 2020).

Australia’s smoke is a devastatingly apt example of climate change’s transcorporeal toxicity (Alaimo 2016), of multispecies climate injustice (Celermajer *et al.* 2020) and of the sometimes ambiguous distinction between climatic complicity and vulnerability. In this paper, I dwell with the smoke to explore a persistent tension between transcorporeal entanglement and coherent individuality within ontologies of climate justice. Climate change is increasingly being acknowledged as an uncontrollable, deeply relational, more-than-human phenomenon that humans are part of and that our permeable bodies ‘weather’ (Neimanis and Hamilton 2018, Bawaka Country *et al.* 2020). Attuning to this enmeshment of humans with/as climate is argued to be a crucial and urgent task if we are to both mitigate and adapt to climate change (Tuana 2008). Yet climate justice as it is often understood is premised upon clearly delineated (and usually human) parties, one of which causes harm to the other. The ontology of bodily separation required for accountability for polluters and reparation for the vulnerable enacts a worldview potentially inconsistent with the more-than-human relationality of climate change.

Breathing in, choking on and coughing up minute particles of multi-species worlds, in this paper I consider the smoke’s planetary and bodily diffusions to articulate an *aspirational climate justice*. To aspire can mean to inhale something you shouldn’t, or to aim for something. My aspirational re-imagining of climate justice is inspired by the collective asphyxiation of Australia’s bushfire smoke, and desires more than it can offer, yearning for a relational but robust politics fitting for our entanglement in climatic crises. Building on recent work on multispecies justice that advocates moving beyond individualised anthropocentrism (Tschakert *et al.* 2021) to ‘radically rethink the subject of justice’ (Celermajer *et al.* 2020, p. 8), I seek to revitalise climate justice to better account for and respond to climatic transcorporeality. I begin by outlining some tensions between relational materialist ontologies and climate justice politics, focusing on their differing conceptualisations of subjectivity and the (non) politics that flow from these. Turning to breath as one of the many energetic relations that embed all earthly bodies as participants and products of climate, I explore the ways a transcorporeal and more-than-human understanding of ‘air-and-breathing-bodies’ (Allen 2020) might re-orient climate justice.

Liberal humanism, relational materialism and climate justice

As a 'pluralist' politics, there are multiple different approaches to climate justice, including 'distributive, procedural and recognition-based' (Agyeman *et al.* 2016, p. 327) forms, as well as those that understand justice as the cultivation of the climate vulnerable subjects' capabilities (Schlosberg 2012). These different approaches all seek, in some way, to account for, prevent and/or redress the unfairness and inequality of both the causes and impacts of climate change (Jafry *et al.* 2018, Harris 2019). A politics of climate justice therefore seeks to – in some form or other – bring attention to and transform the unequal socio-economic relations that both drive the production of greenhouse gas emissions and influence (human) people's exposure, vulnerability and resilience to the impacts of climate change (Jafry *et al.* 2018).

However, despite being motivated largely by concern for those excluded from justice in Western democracy, most climate justice is founded on Western theories of justice that are in turn based on a liberal-humanist ontology (Gear 2015). The *liberalism* is a belief that the world is primarily composed of rational individuals: discrete entities that can enter into relatively shallow relationships ('connections') with the rest of the world (Barad 2007), but that always do – or should be entitled to – retain their own integrity, sovereignty and independence (Gear 2017). This ontological individuality is often retained even when referring to collectives who are therefore figured as meta-individuals: clearly defined, self-knowing, unified and homogeneous. This emphasis on distinct entities with stable borders risks essentialism, coercing bodies into homogenised and polarised categories (Plumwood 1993, Gabrielson and Parady 2010). The *humanism* is the belief that humans are the only subjects in the world. Humans are considered the only beings able to exert agency, intentionality, or choice and the only ones deserving of moral, ethical, political or legal consideration (Plumwood 1993, Bennett 2010), which is to say, the only ones deserving of justice. While such liberal-humanist philosophies generally advocate equality of all human people in theory, they have systematically excluded all those who are (made) most vulnerable to climate change (women, children, people of colour, poor people, people with disabilities) from their strictly regulated category of the 'human' (Braidotti 2013), often precisely because of their supposed inability to maintain rational control over their bodies (Gabrielson and Parady 2010). In fact, their model of personhood finds its epitome in the disembodied, detached, profit-seeking corporation, meaning such approaches are not only poorly placed to enable climate justice, they are a central part of the system that is creating the climate crisis (Gear 2015, Winter 2020).

Much climate justice activism and scholarship retains remnants of this liberal-humanist ontology despite the risks of exclusion and extractivism that come with the normalisation of rational autonomy (Tschakert *et al.* 2021).

For example, climate justice is typically premised upon the *a priori* existence of three distinct entities: the polluters (humans that cause harm through changing the atmosphere's greenhouse gas concentrations), the climate-vulnerable (those who are impacted by the changes in the climate, also normally humans) and the climate (the mechanism – 'connection' – through which harm is enacted). These entities are understood to be clearly delineated and to pre-exist their relationship, and the climate is considered a medium through which the agency of the polluters affects the vulnerable but that is bereft of agency itself. While many efforts exist trying to broaden the scope of 'who counts' as a subject in environmental justice, from the individual human to human communities and to non-humans, such efforts 'typically move the walls surrounding the human kingdom but leave the fortress intact' (Sharp 2017, p. 159; see also Schlosberg 2012, Celermajer *et al.* 2020). That is, no matter who is included as a subject of climate in/justice – polar bears, communities in the Pacific, coral reefs – they are typically delineated as clear, distinct, coherent entities, even though their vulnerability is premised upon acknowledgement of their porosity and the extensive material and social relations that compose them (Celermajer *et al.* 2020, Tschakert 2020, Méndez 2020).

A wide range of scholarship has troubled the autonomous individuality of liberal-humanism. Indigenous, posthuman, 'new' or feminist/vital materialisms³ and multispecies studies, among others, contend that the world is composed through – or more accurately, *of* – more-than-human relationships: flows of materials, inheritances, interactions with other species, social norms, stories, political structures and other 'material-discursive' phenomena (Barad 2007, Haraway 2008, van Dooren *et al.* 2016, Yunkaporta 2019, Bawaka Country *et al.* 2019). Co-implicated in these relational ontologies is the attention to the agency of all matter (Bennett 2010): the ways it unavoidably infiltrates and disrupts human worlds, decomposing the myth of the autonomous, rational human (Braidotti 2013). Taken together, these two ideas (relationality and material agency) contest that what it is 'to be' is to be continually open to the influence and flux of the world, a world that is not fully knowable, controllable, predictable, nor excludable (Alaimo 2016). Such relational materialisms emphasise ontologies of 'becoming-with' (Haraway 2008): rather than 'being' that is fixed, determined, autonomous and essentialist, becoming-with emphasises that subjectivities and agencies are shifting, distributed, interdependent and heterogeneous, because they are composed, decomposed and recomposed through ever-changing more-than-human relations.

Both liberal-humanist climate justice politics and relational materialist ontologies provide salient analyses of Australia's bushfire smoke. Firstly, a relational materialist approach affords attention to the extensile transcorporeality of the smoke and its material agency. The smoke has made it highly

apparent that all borders are permeable: most Australian housing is very leaky, and we all now know that only the 'P2' facemasks work, and even then only if they are properly fitted and fully sealed, which they rarely are. Its emergence from the intra-actions (Barad 2007) of the global climate and specific situated bodies, combined with its subsequent permeation of these planetary atmospheres and fleshy interiorities, emphasise the uncontrollable, multiscaled, fluctuating entanglements that characterise climate change.

Such an understanding of transcorporeality is used to explain climatic vulnerability in justice-oriented politics. It enables us to recognise that some groups of (human) Australians are more vulnerable to the smoke, whether because their bodies are more sensitive to it (e.g. children, the elderly, those with asthma or other respiratory issues) or more exposed to it (e.g. the homeless, those that work outside, those that live in poor quality housing). A multispecies climate justice approach brings moral consideration to the non-humans whose climatic transcorporeality rendered them vulnerable, such as the flora, fauna and fungi who suffocated, or indeed were incinerated and became the smoke (Tschakert *et al.* 2021). But in order to make claims about the *injustice* (rather than just tragedy) of this, borders are articulated between these vulnerable groups and the polluters, such as fossil fuel companies and their advocates.

Yet a more thoroughgoing relational materialist approach might blur these borders between 'polluter' and 'vulnerable.' The smoke – that is, the pollution – is most directly 'caused' by the forests burning, which is to say, by the incineration of the trees, shrubs, wildflowers, frogs, wombats, and wallabies, who are evidently the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. The 2019/2020 bushfires were estimated to have approximately doubled Australia's annual greenhouse gas emissions, as well as creating more localised pollution in the form of the smoke lingering at ground level. While the vulnerable are thus becoming pollution, we also have accounts of polluters becoming vulnerable. As some commentators put it, 'you can't make this stuff up' (SBS News 2020): coal companies complained that the smoke hurt their profits, and during the summer coal mines and coal fired power stations were closed and evacuated because they were at risk from the fires. On 10 December 2019, even our Prime Minister Scott Morrison who infamously brought coal into parliament claiming 'coal can't hurt you' was trapped in a building due to smoke alarms shutting down the elevators. Hence the smoke shows that rather than clearly delineable boundaries between the polluters and the vulnerable, polluters are becoming-vulnerable and the vulnerable becoming-pollution. (Figure 1)

This highlights some of the risks of relational approaches to material agency: without attention to *power* and its historical patterns we are left with rather naïve, and even dangerous, analysis. For example, many of the climate-denying responses to the bushfires blame the vegetation for the fires



Figure 1. *Becoming vulnerable, becoming complicit.* Bushfire smoke visible from the dashboard of my fossil-fuelled car, as I drove the 850 km from my parents' house in Bendigo to Sydney, on 5 January, after my summer holiday. The smoke was this thick for almost the entirety of that trip, as it had been when I made the original trip south on December 22. Image: Author.

and argue for more and more 'hazard reduction' (i.e. burning vegetation in winter so that it cannot burn in summer), a politics that maps easily onto an ontology that positions the forests as the source of the material agency. For such reasons, important interrogations have been made of the politics – or lack of – of relational materialisms (Jackson 2015, Clare 2016). There are concerns that emphasizing relationality and permeable boundaries leads to apolitical ontologies by eroding the distinct subjectivities that politics depends on (Neimanis 2017). If we are all connected, co-constitutive and co-emergent, then how can we trace the exertion of power of one party over another? For example, Washick and Wingrove worry that relational materialism's destabilization of sovereignty may make 'it difficult to name and so hold in view the continuities, durabilities and often monotonous predictabilities that characterize systems of power asymmetry' (Washick *et al.* 2015, p. 65). That is, surely if we want to hold polluters to account we need to delineate and draw boundaries between those people that cause and benefit from greenhouse gas emissions and those beings who suffer the consequences?

But for many relational materialists, universalized, grand, prescriptive or generalized politics exert violence on the world (Reardon *et al.* 2015, Jamal and Hales 2016). Such approaches often contend that all responses should be cobbled together from locally emergent conditions, attuning to, working with and responding as our specific, emplaced, unique relations (Kayumova *et al.* 2019, Bawaka Country *et al.* 2019). To do otherwise would be to reinstate anthropocentric (read: misogynistic, racist, homophobic, ableist, speciesist) myths of omniscient and omnipotent morality. Practicing ‘doing little justices’ that ‘can be as small as a movement, a word, an image, or an idea that brings care and attention to the fragilities, entanglements, and uncertainties of life in the Anthropocene’ (Rousell 2018, p. 2) certainly protects from authoritarianism. Yet I worry that what is premised as resistance to the violence of generalizable politics may justify highly privileged micro-actions that do next to nothing to challenge the global hegemony of transnational colonial-capitalism. While a hero complex is certainly undesirable, climate justice seems to require movements that coalesce around similarities and differences to transform systemic globalised injustice (Tokar 2018).

As outlined so far, between climate justice’s remnant individualism and relational materialism’s ambiguous politics we are left without an ability to ‘change the system, not the climate.’ As Sharp articulates, ‘the more radical philosophical outlook all but ignores practical considerations, but the practical approach is overly modest with respect to the metaphysical topography’ (2017, p. 159). Of course, the contrast outlined above errs towards a caricature of both fields; there are more relational climate justices (Ulloa 2017, Yaka 2019, Winter 2019, Whyte 2020) political posthumanisms (Neimanis 2017, Cielemeńska and Åsberg 2019), and an emerging field of multispecies justice (Celermajer *et al.* 2020, Tschakert *et al.* 2021). Collectively, this work suggests that the political contours of climate in/justice are relationally enacted. In the following sections, I build on such work so as to articulate a relational, more-than-human climate justice emerging from the ashes of Australia’s Black Summer. Working with a relational climate ontology, I foreground the dilemmas between boundaries and permeability, and stability and change, in order to re-figure the subject of climate in/justice in two key ways.

Firstly, a more-than-human climate justice destabilises the rational autonomous human (or other clearly delineated entity) as its subject, through an appreciation of the inherent porosity, dynamism and entanglement of all worldly matter. It moves towards conceptualising the subjects of climate justice – including polluters – to be made, remade and unmade through the ever-changing material-energetic-socio-political flows of climate change, meaning that they not only become-with, but also know-with and act-with climate change (Verlie 2022). This enables closer attention to the ways

subjects, as fluctuating more-than-human conglomerations, and the power relations they inhabit, are consolidated and/or transformed through climate change. Secondly, and relatedly, working towards a more-than-human climate justice entails considering relations, rather than entities (no matter how distributed or multispecies), as the subject of climate in/justice. As Yaka argues, we need to attend to the ‘*coexistence* of human societies and non-human ecologies’ (2019, p. 365, original emphasis), or as Ulloa puts it, the ‘circulation of life’ (Ulloa 2017, p. 179).

Aspirational climate justice

A relational more-than-human climate justice begins by recognising that climate *is* more-than-human relationality. Climate is not an entity that can ever be clearly bounded or coherently located. Any effort to delineate it from its constitutive parts is immediately compromised. Climate infiltrates and emerges from every planetary being, place and process. It is inherently an outcome, a phenomenon, an event that is both everywhere, all the time, and yet never fully anywhere, ever. While it has no body, all bodies are part of it (Sasser 2016). Rather than an entity, climate is a ‘set of relationships’ (Knox 2015, p. 103) and the qualities of these relationships both contribute to and are affected by climate (Whyte 2020, Bawaka Country *et al.* 2020). All earthly bodies participate in and emerge from their entanglements with climate (Neimanis and Hamilton 2018), making climate change a felt, or affective, phenomenon (Verlie 2022), a ‘sentient commons’ and an ‘organising force’ (Todd 2016, p. 20, 8). Thus, climate is a process of relation, one that is both composed by and catalytic of relations between beings, and which contributes to the very substance and capacities of them.

One of the key relations that constitutes climate is breath, or respiration, which has been recognised, in various ways, by many cultures (Oxley and Russell 2020). Indigenous climate ontologies often connect breath, spirit, knowledge and climate/weather (see e.g. Qitsualik cited in Todd 2016, p. 5, Bawaka Country *et al.* 2020), and even the English language acknowledges the intrinsic connection between air, breath and soul as our terminology of *respiration* and related words stem from *spirit* (Leduc 2007). Breath is an enlivening more-than-human transcorporeal practice through which ‘air-and-breathing-bodies collaboratively and continually make and remake one another and the world we inhabit’ (Allen 2020, p. 11). Technically, breath is the process of moving air between the ‘internal’ body and the ‘external’ atmosphere, and respiration the cellular process through which living organisms use that air to convert matter into energy that their bodies can use. For almost all multicellular life – plants, animals, fungi, etc – respiration requires oxygen, and carbon dioxide is created as a by-product and returned to the atmosphere. Thus, while respiration occurs in individuated and always

locally and historically situated bodies, breath enmeshes each body with the planet's atmosphere, and thus each and every other planetary body, through their transcorporeal exchange and manufacturing of gaseous matter. This makes breath both situated and distributed, and something that is always differentiated even as it speaks to our common embodiment as cellular earthly beings (Choy 2016, Górska 2016). As the process of energizing, breath is crucial to processes of ongoingness as well as to change and becoming.

The fossil fuelled bushfires and smoke of Australia's 2019/2020 summer ruptured multiple climatic relationships; breath is just one but it is most certainly a 'vital' one (Bennett 2010). As the conversion of matter into energy through interaction with oxygen, respiration is chemically a similar process to combustion. However, respiration happens within and energises living cells, whereas combustion occurs within and energises the non-cellular atmosphere. Thus, we can understand global climate change as a systematic and self-reinforcing increase in combustion relative to respiration. The combustion of fossil fuels (compressed, ancient, decomposed bodies that were produced through respiration) produces greenhouse gases that retain excess energy within the planet's atmosphere, which, through complex ecological processes, fuelled the rampant combustion of living bodies that we saw over the 2019/2020 Australian bushfires. Through the combustion of the forests, the 18 million hectares of plants, the 3 billion or so vertebrates, and the insects, fungi, microbes and other forms of life there *expired*: they died, they stopped breathing, they stopped *re-spiring*. And in so doing, they became a carbon source, rather than a sink. As a surface level form of pollution, the burnt bodies also inhibited the respiration of those that survived the flames.

Focusing on breath as one transcorporeal more-than-human relation that was disrupted by the 2019/2020 bushfires in Australia, I propose an *aspirational climate justice*. To aspire, medically speaking, is to inhale something you should not. Most commonly this involves food or liquid going down your windpipe instead of your oesophagus, but inhaling bushfire smoke is also a kind of aspiration. In common English though, to aspire is to aim for something, and etymologically it means to breathe towards something. What I am tentatively calling aspirational climate justice then, is a politics of climate justice emerging from the smouldering remains of south-eastern Australia in 2020, a still-elusive climate justice that we can breathe towards, together. It is aspirational in two senses. Firstly, it is an embodied politics arising from the situated knowledges (Haraway 1988) of choking on burnt multispecies bodies. Secondly, it is both a theory and a situation that I am yearning for: we are yet to achieve such aspirational justice, in part because we have more conceptual work to do (Reardon *et al.* 2015, Jamal and Hales 2016). As specific means of

breathing towards this desired climate justice, I explore the dispersed, more-than-human dimensions of respiration (keeping breathing), inspiration (enlivening change), and conspiration (breathing together). These dimensions in some ways complement and in other ways potentially contradict each other. Collectively, they explore how breath – as a relational multispecies enactment – can attune us to a transcorporeal and more-than-human politics of climate justice.

Respiration

Respiration refers to more-than-human bodies' abilities to *keep breathing*. Aspirational climate justice thus asks 'whose lives are breathable and whose loss of breath is grievable' (Górska 2016, p. 30). Through this respirational focus, it draws on a transcorporeal ontology where breath enacts us as fleshy (or woody, succulent or fungal) conglomerations that are both the producers and products of gaseous worlds (Allen 2020). As such, it situates the subjects of climate justice as open, extensile, atmospheric beings who are nonetheless resistant, durable and situated in particular place-times (Gabrielson and Parady 2010). This enables a focus on the ways that specific bodies are exposed to, and made vulnerable to, the infiltration of particular toxic airs, as well as how those toxins accumulate within those bodies rather than flowing straight back out again (Cielemęcka and Åsberg 2019). This is a 'viscous porosity' (Tuana 2008) operating between air-and-breathing-bodies (Allen 2020), where gaseous matter both flows through, and is retained and transformed within, different bodies. Through attending to specific, embodied, localised and differently enabled practices of respiration, aspirational climate justice can encompass the 'vast relationalities' of the more-than-human world without succumbing to 'undifferentiated approaches to embodiment' (Górska 2016, p. 31).

For example, although the smoke blanketed large swathes of the nation and even the globe, respiratory vulnerabilities to it were neither similar nor equal. A focus on respiration enables consideration of the different ways, and different significances, of how different bodies, in different times and places, struggle to keep breathing because of their specific entanglements with climate change and the systems that re/produce oppression. Understanding atmospheres as always both material (chemical, climatic, ecological) and discursive (social, cultural, emotional, affective, political) (Verlie 2022) means toxic atmospheres are saturated not only with pollutants but with patriarchy, settler-colonialism, and neoliberalism that they circulate and disperse (Simmons 2017). Thus, while racism can feel *like* violent weather

(Ahmed 2014), we also know that violent weather *is* racialised (Elliott and Pais 2006), and that ‘people’s ability to breathe freely . . . depends on privilege’ (Kenner 2018, p. 20).

For example, as fires closed in on Lithgow (a two-hour drive west of Sydney) in late 2019, while other Lithgow residents were evacuated, authorities made the decision to keep prisoners in the Correctional Centre. Approximately one quarter of the inmates there are Indigenous, compared to the national population that is roughly 3% (Hayman-Reber 2019). Images of thick smoke and encroaching flames surrounding Lithgow Correctional Centre exemplify Maynard’s analysis that ‘Australia’s carceral system weaponises more-than-human forces, like the weather’ to actively create and further perpetuate ‘deeply embodied’ and racialised violences and vulnerabilities that ‘effect something as simple as the act of breathing’ (2019, n.p.). Vulnerability is always in-the-making, and is a process, not a quality (Whyte 2017). In Lithgow, Indigenous prisoners became climate-vulnerable, as panic, fear, and abandonment were materialised through agential, more-than-human climatic events and practices, which reiteratively solidified racism and put pressure on specific, situated bodies’ abilities to breathe. Of course, it is not just about humans’ politicised transcorporeality: reports of pets wheezing during the Black Summer remind us that our non-human kin also had their respiration reduced, inhibited, disrupted or terminated in particular ways because of the smoke’s relational, but highly unequal, materialisations. (Figure 2)

Aspirational climate justice can attend to the ways that particular bodies are *made to be* vulnerable to climate change through socio-ecological systems of disempowerment and marginalization that expose different people to different material flows (Gabrielson and Parady 2010, Fox and Alldred 2019). With an awareness of the conditions that enable respiration for some bodies in some places, and not others, aspirational climate justice can bring attention to how the subjects of power relations are in processes of becoming, being reworked through political contestation even as, and indeed because, these ongoing transcorporeal processes can solidify existing hierarchies (Clare 2016, Jamal and Hales 2016). Aspirational climate justice thus enables a politics closely attuned to the ongoing, dynamic, more-than-human processes through which power is distributed, asserted, consolidated, exerted and resisted.

Inspiration

To inspire is to *enliven*: through inhaling we begin the process of energising the body and thus catalyse processes of change, becoming and difference. Through its focus on inspiration, aspirational climate justice engages with the creative and affective transformation that re-imagining ourselves as



Figure 2. *Burnt bodies.* Eucalyptus leaves encountered in my inner-city Sydney backyard, hundreds of kilometres from the nearest fires, a memento of the billions of non-humans whose respiration was extinguished, either through flames or other non-humans' dispersed remains. Image: Author.

atmospheric be(com)ings can offer. Inspired by Todd's articulation of climate as a 'sentient commons' (2016, p. 20), Allen's recognition that 'breathing, emotions and affects are deeply entwined' (2020, p. 17) and the premise that imagining that 'things could be otherwise . . . is a precondition for any deliberate attempt, large- or small scale, to make them such' (Washick *et al.* 2015, p. 84), aspirational climate justice inspires us to yearn for, prefigure and enact alternative ways of relating. This is less a metabolic and more a spiritual and emotional kind of energising, where respirational transcorporeality enables us to articulate and live our subjectivities as expansive more-than-human assemblages who are constituted through and responsive to shared atmospheres, both those that re-generate and those that destabilise us. Attuning to our embodied experience as deeply relational coalescences of earthly matter works politically through 'alter[ing] the perceptual field – the style of sensing and feeling and thus also thinking' (Washick *et al.* 2015, p. 83) and can cultivate empathy with others that are both similar and yet exceedingly different to us (Neimanis 2017).

Exploring our shared inheritances of cellular respiration across distributed and differentiated embodiment can therefore inspire the alternative knowledges, visions and actions necessary for climate just worlds, moving beyond ideals of rational autonomy. For example, in the context of Australia's bushfire smoke, we might ask questions about what it may feel like for trees, fungi and frogs to suffocate amongst forests that are aflame. As we become mindful of the taste (spicy? dirty?), smell (eucalyptus? camp fire? cigarette smoke?), colour (white? yellow? red? brown? black?) and/or texture (heavy? thick? warm?) of the smoke on different days, we might also consider whether and in what ways the koalas, eucalypts, and critically endangered species such as the nightcap oak and Kangaroo Island dunnart, 'live on' as we inhale and absorb their remains, and what it might mean to be becoming (with) the bodies of potentially extinct species. That such explorations raise dizzying, destabilising and unanswerable questions about incorporation, un/knowledgeability, dis/similarity, hierarchy and accountability demonstrates climate change's ability to trouble the notion of coherent subjectivity.

Choking on the smoke prompted such embodied contemplation for many in Australia, and even those around the world, who were inspired by months of multispecies suffocation to protest government climate inaction or to care for wildlife. Artists, poets and therapists documented losses and facilitated mourning rituals, challenging a culture otherwise insensitive to ecocide. Others turned to Indigenous fire practitioners for wisdom, such as Victor Steffensen (2020), and pushed our national conversations to consider spirited Indigenous practices of cultural burning rather than simply 'hazard reduction' (Hooper 2020). In response, some settler landholders collaborated with Indigenous knowledge holders to return right fire to right Country, in the right conditions at the right time, establishing different relations with fire, smoke, forests and ancestors.⁴ Through these varied responses, people enrolled themselves in different relations with other people (living and not, human and not), and in so doing, became different versions of themselves, as they enacted alternative politics and worlds. These people were becoming-with the smoke, fires and climate (Verlie 2022). In response to recognition of inhibited breath throughout the more-than-human world, new life was breathed into the climate justice movement. (Figure 3)

Through highlighting and amplifying our more-than-human relationality, aspirational justice attends to the promising possibilities of becoming. An emphasis on the ways that we are made and remade, and can be undone through, our entanglements with others opens us to the exciting potential that other worlds are possible. This anti-essentialism emphasizes that 'humanity' is not inherently ecologically destructive: what it is to be human is itself available for contestation, and more promising ways are possible – and indeed, have been enacted for millennia (TallBear 2015, Fox and Alldred 2019). Embedding ourselves in different relations, we can 'become other than



Figure 3. *Becoming-activists.* Local inner-city school protest organised in solidarity with schools across the country. For middle-class settler families to be connecting individual respiratory illness to planetary malady demonstrates an emerging capability to attune and respond to human-climate transcorporeality. Image: Author.

ourselves' (Neimanis 2019, p. 503) and cultivate more caring, non-colonial, anti-anthropocentric subjectivities. Through reinvigorating climate justice with affective figurations of self-climate-world relations, aspirational climate justice's emphasis on inspiration can contribute to our efforts to prefigure and enact more promising worlds.

Conspiration

To conspire etymologically means to *breathe together*, and we now use the word to mean to collectively plan something (Choy 2016, Habtom and Scribe 2020). While climate discussions surely do not need more conspiracy theories, aspirational climate justice focuses on conspuration: the relationship composed by multitudes intra-acting with the atmosphere through breath. Beginning with acknowledgement that more-than-human relationships are the primary ontological units (Barad 2007), a more-than-human climate justice considers those relationships as subjects that can be recognised, enabled to participate politically, and have their capabilities amplified and power redistributed to them (or be disregarded, disabled, have their

capabilities decreased and have power distributed away from them). Given that contemporary social, economic and ecological conditions are coalescing to create 'a world that more and more [human and nonhuman] people are finding increasingly unbreathable' (Kenner 2018, p. 4), we might follow Yaka who suggests taking 'the *relationality* of human and non-human worlds,' in this case, conspiracy, 'as a matter of justice' (Yaka 2019, p. 360, my emphasis).

Working towards conspiracy then, is about enabling the capabilities of the parties-in-relation needed for the relationship to continue functioning – but not necessarily for the parties themselves (see Schlosberg 2012 for a related discussion). Enabling conspiracy is about cultivating a mutually enabling system of relations that situates all bodies not just as consumers who have rights to an 'ecosystem service' but as obligated co-producers of local and global transcorporeal respiratory relations. Ecologically destructive practices, harmful economic structures or health systems that increase breathability for a small minority can still inhibit or decrease conspiracy. A focus on conspiracy is about justice for breathable relations, not respiration of particular bodies. It calls us into our responsibilities to others, known and unknown, and those that do not exist yet, through cultivating the conditions in which they might breathe freely (Antadze 2019).

During Australia's climate-fueled bushfires and smoke we were collectively unable to breathe because the patterns of relating that enable conspiracy were disrupted. The long-term combustion of fossil fuels, which always produces localised air pollution, had also contributed to a hotter global climate. This in turn sparked ravaging bushfires in Australia that either directly incinerated or asphyxiated creatures across the continent. The smoke arising from their burned bodies subsequently contributed to the concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and all of this made conspiracy less possible at a systemic level. Aspirational climate justice would not lead primarily to suggestions to use P2 face masks, air conditioners and/or air purifiers for the privileged humans who can afford them, because climate justice 'cannot be about fortifying our own havens' (Neimanis and Hamilton 2018, p. 82).

Rather, the attention would be on what conditions would maximise the potential for conspiracy as a process, as a relation, to continue so that all kinds of beings can continue to breathe together. As Kenner argues, we need to 'knit together new webs of care' in order to develop 'more just and creative' respiratory 'carescapes' (2018, p. 183). What kinds of responses would enable the Holocene relationship between atmospheres and bodies to be maintained, to enable its capacities to continue existing, to ensure it had the resources necessary for it to keep participating in the world? Conspiracy requires a decrease in combustion, because excessive smoke makes life less breathable for all and is dependent on the expiration of some

(such as living or long dead forests). Conspiracy also requires photosynthesis (another transcorporeal atmosphere-body relationship) to produce the oxygen that the vast majority of organisms breathe. From this perspective, hazard reduction that seeks to reduce overall levels of combustion but not increase forest vitality does not increase conspiracy. By contrast cultural burning, which prevents rampant bushfires through low intensity fires that produce gentle white smoke that cleans leaves of pathogens and invigorates forests, does contribute to conspiracy (Steffensen 2020). Other actions taken to reduce combustion of fossil fuels and revitalise forests would similarly contribute to conspiracy. (Figure 4)

Crucially, this focus on the relationship as the subject of justice is not a romantic approach. As Choy insightfully states, ‘breathing together rarely means breathing the same’ (2016, n.p.). Respiration is the release of energy, energy that must be attained through the consumption or out-competition of others. To breathe together is therefore ‘non-innocent’ (Haraway 2008), and may at times contradict claims made for respirational justice. Through an advocacy of conspiracy, aspirational climate justice focuses less on individualised experiences of respiration – as transcorporeal as they may be. However, these are clearly inter-related with the wellbeing of conspiracy. As the Combahee River Collective (2000) argued at the birth of the concept of intersectionality, when we make worlds liveable for the most marginalised, we tend to

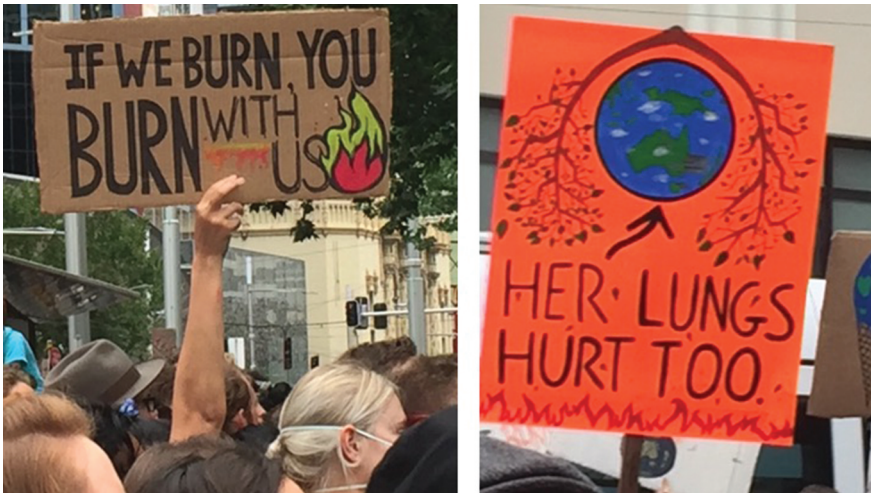


Figure 4. *Protest signs at snap Sydney climate rally.* These signs speak to a nascent sense of conspirational injustice: that the conditions of breathability are systemically under threat. Image: Author.

make them more liveable for all. Through practices that seek to restore conspiracy, we might make life more breathable for those beings currently under threat of extinction. In that world, many of us are likely to breathe more easily.

Towards climate justice in more-than-human worlds

The dilemma I have considered is whether advocating for climate justice within a western ideology reproduces the very logics we are trying to resist. The premise here is that given that the metaphysics of individualism fuels extractivism (Plumwood 1993), the delineation of discrete entities can lead us back to a ‘politics of disembodiment’ (Gear 2015, p. 98) that fails to fully situate the subjects of climate justice as *of* the climate. Of course, climate justice often employs a transcorporeal ontology when it comes to accounting for the porosity of the bodies of the climate vulnerable. Yet when it comes to approaching responsibility and activism, both the polluters and vulnerable are figured as autonomous, rational subjects who know who they are, what they want and what they are doing (Maclure 2008), and climate takes a back seat as the mechanism through which human power is exerted. Relational materialism’s emphasis on the agency of the non-human and its capacity to infiltrate and (re)make us challenges this notion of stable, homogeneous human actors. Rejecting the positioning of the non-human as mere background, relational materialists emphasise that matter’s lively diffusions influence, shape, enable and constrain our ideals, norms, practices, structures and subjectivities. Yet the centrality of the notion of *solidarity* to social and environmental justice activism aptly expresses the limitations of an ontology that emphasizes unrestrained fluidity (Tuana 2008). It would seem that for a viable climate justice politics we may need to engage in a momentary ‘fixing’ of an underlying complexity’ (Gear 2017, p. 14) that is ‘made for a particular purpose and at a particular time’ (Tuana 2008, p. 192), reminiscent of Spivak’s ‘strategic essentialism’ (1990).

Dwelling with this dilemma, I have sought to revitalise climate justice politics through articulating an aspirational climate justice. Emerging from, and thus enacted with, Australia’s chronic bushfire smoke, this seeks to provide a politics that can enable individuals to keep breathing, together, to invigorate alternative, more breathable, worlds. The main strategies are to foreground the more-than-human transcorporeality, and dynamic instability, of the subjects of climate justice (including polluters), as well as to consider relationships themselves as subjects deserving justice. Focusing on the capabilities of ‘individuals’ to keep breathing is enabled by tracing the entanglements of matter and power that render some bodies more vulnerable to particular flows of pollution. Acknowledging the agency of bodily-and-atmospheric material accounts for the fact that bodies are not passive vessels that atmospheric matter flows in and out of unchanged. Rather, bodily

metabolisms accumulate and transform matter, meaning that bodies are both subject to the toxicities of the atmosphere as well as active manufacturers of climatic conditions. This moves beyond essentialist accounts of both vulnerability and complicity to acknowledge that bodies-and-climates are constantly co-emerging and differentiating themselves, even when these processes consolidate existing power hierarchies. Retaining this attunement to differentiation and becoming, especially of the perpetrators of climate violence, is fundamental, Bennett argues, if we are to ‘encourage, motivate or enliven the will to contest and re-form unjust and hegemonic forms of organization’ (Washick *et al.* 2015, p. 83). Engaging with the climatic transcorporeality of all bodies can inspire non-anthropocentric imaginaries, yearnings and enactments. These aspirations – motivations arising from suffocation – that enable embodied experiences of multispecies entanglement can prompt recognition of the importance of relationships and push us to consider them as worthy subjects of justice.

This is an admittedly exploratory approach to a more-than-human climate justice. I hope that it can open up how we think about climate justice, as there is much more to be done and this exploration leaves much unanswered. This is the other sense in which it is aspirational: I am hungry for theorisations of climate justice that take human enmeshment with climate seriously yet provide robust politics. Considering Audre Lorde’s (1984) contention that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house, I nevertheless hold onto the promise of justice, because justice retains an emphasis on inequality and historical accountability. If relational materialisms are to provide pragmatic politics, and if climate justice is to avoid perpetuating (Western, heteropatriarchal) ideals of autonomy, impermeability and sovereignty, then more work dreaming and living radical explorations of climate justice are required.

Notes

1. Other respiratory crises of 2020 that deserve acknowledgement here include the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuation of racialised police brutality suffocating black people, encapsulated in George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement’s words ‘I can’t breathe.’ For the sake of brevity and focus, these crises are not explored in this paper.
2. Fires were burning at emergency level for months before ‘summer’ began.
3. There have been worthy feminist and Indigenous criticisms of the supposed newness of this scholarship. (See Todd 2016, Ahmed 2008).
4. Sincere thanks to Den Barber and Koori Country Firesticks Aboriginal Corporation who ran a cultural burning workshop I attended.

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