Between Here and There

9 April 2020
Matter of Degrees,Series

By **Anna Pilz**

I have never set foot on the continent called Australia. I am unfamiliar with its beaches, bushlands, deserts, and cityscapes, with their sounds and smells, colours and textures. It is a place far away that I encountered mostly in my studies on nineteenth-century Ireland. I have travelled there in my imagination alongside thousands of Irish migrants who were shipped to or set sail for the new colony in attempts to leave famine-stricken Ireland. I imagined what the lengthy journey across oceans must have been like for the 4,000 orphaned Irish girls whose arrival is marked by a Famine Rock in the Melbourne suburb of Williamstown. Stepping onto land with uncertainty and fear in an unfamiliar environment. Miles and miles away from home, survival depending on their resourcefulness as well as the goodwill of and help from strangers and the migrant community. Victims of an environmental catastrophe, these orphaned Irish girls are part of a wider historical migration that is part of that continent's history. Commemorating those who died during the Famine of 1845 to 1852, the Famine Rock acknowledges the attendant violence of new arrivals: "In sorrow for the dispossession of the Bunurong and Woiworung people built in a spirit of reconciliation. In solidarity with all those who suffer hunger today."

Now, in January 2020, a bushfire crisis is blazing, and the soaring temperatures are feeding the fire. Crops and habitats destroyed for human and animal alike. Since last summer, I have been sharing an office at the RCC with Kate Wright. She is sitting with her back to me on the desk in my line of sight. I can see her screen. Often over the past weeks, she has the map of Australia open with thick clusters of red dots indicating the burned and burning areas of the country that is her home. I wonder about her emotions as she keeps switching between the map and the word processing document of her latest research paper. I wonder about the degree to which her feelings in response to the map

travel across into the deep matter of her academic work. One day, she showed me a video her dad sent of a wallaby eating a carrot in the backyard of her parents' house. The carrot an offering of solidarity. The wallaby is holding it tight between both front paws, looking straight at the camera. A relationship is forged, even if it only lasts for a few minutes. She tells me that the animals are struggling to find food because of the drought. A snapshot from the shared lifeworlds we live in. Lifeworlds that demand solidarity. I am watching this from the safety of our office in the heart of Munich, where I can turn the heat up and down, where the air quality is good when I open the window, but where the absence of snow in the midst of winter indicates a changing climate.

Kate, her partner, and three-year-old son Rory will be in Munich until the summer. I am glad that they are able to escape the worst of the fires—this year. I am worried about little Rory's exposure to smoke and I wonder how someone of that age will make sense of the world. He'll have spent one year in Bavaria. How will he experience the return to his home? What are his sensory memories of that place? Most of my early childhood memories are conjured up by smells and sounds. Will his senses recognise home as €˜home'? Will he be able to connect what he left behind and will return to when he steps off that plane later in the year?

Another Carson Fellow, **Jayne Regan**, left for Canberra in mid-January. Jayne regularly attended my writing group while she worked on a chapter on urban development in Sydney in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries. She showed me historic photographs of Sydney's waterfront and more recent pictures she'd taken on the foreshore on a bright and sunny day. The Sydney Harbour Bridge is sharp on the edges against the blue sky, the image is clear. A few weeks later, one of *The Guardian*'s news stories has a picture of Sydney's iconic waterfront where everything is cloaked in a thick haze of smoke. Only a few days after Jayne left Munich, I read that the capital city had the worst air quality index of any major city in the world. I imagine Jayne stepping off the plane, the smoky air travelling down her lungs and nestling there. I feel guilty stepping outside my apartment and breathing in the good Bavarian air on a mild winter day when others do not have the fortune to do so. I feel guilty for feeling relief that I am living in continental Europe where the effects of climate change are not yet hitting our senses on a daily basis. I am worried about Jayne.

The RCC is a transient community of fellows, bringing together people from across the globe. A hub of ever-widening social networks with constant arrivals and departures that leave their imprints on this collective of relational connections. When I look at the map of the Australian bushfires, I look at an emotional map where each location and area of a bushfire is evaluated according to its degrees of proximity to the people I've come to get to know and who have become friends. I've listened to their stories and worries about their loved ones, human and non-human alike. I see the red flames that indicate the different scales of magnitude of the fires. I am thinking, "This is where Kate's parents live. This is where Jayne lives. This is where Su works. This is where Kelly's husky Bella is awaiting her return." I am trying to imagine what it must feel and smell like on the ground. I cannot imagine it. It is too much. And these are only individual stories, nodes of connection that carry me across continents. What are the limitations of these relational connections? How can I offer solidarity from here? How is that solidarity compromised by desires and needs to stay safe? These stories have to be multiplied by millions to acknowledge the emotional, embodied, lived experiences of animals and humans, and the multitude of living and non-living beings that make up our world. The map of my emotional connection to the Australian bushfire crisis is spreading out; my thoughts travel across a great distance. The distance between here and there diminishing. As my thoughts return to the here and now of Munich in January 2020, the view out is no longer the same.