Rupture, Loss, Identity & Place Following the 2009 Victorian Bushfires: A theoretical exploration

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1 Introduction

With the Victorian bushfires of 7th February 2009, life for many was undone in an instant. To provide some indication of their magnitude and destructive power, a Royal Commission referred to reports of flames '*leaping 100 metres into the air, generating heat so intense that aluminium road signs melted'*, with the rate of spread equalling the maximum on record (Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, 2009). Tragically, many were taken by surprise and found themselves trapped in the fires, with 173 people dying as a result. In its Interim Report, the Commission said that:

> *The personal cost cannot be overestimated. The Commission has glimpsed the ruin and observed the raw emotions of those left behind. Whilst physical recovery is underway, many of the losses are permanent…* (Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, 2009).

No wonder the day of these tragic fires has come to be known as 'Black Saturday'.

This article is a reflective piece focussing on post-fire loss and its sources and meanings for bushfire survivors, drawing on insights from Kildonan UnitingCare's evaluation of bushfire response and recovery efforts in conjunction with theoretical approaches and insights that would seem to shed light on the experiential trajectories of survivors.

Kildonan UnitingCare has been one of the key agencies providing support to people in the fire-affected area north west of Melbourne, variously through initial on-the-ground support at a local relief centre, financial counselling, youth services, dedicated 'case management' and facilitation of community development through local networks and programs. Its bushfire response and recovery evaluation has both an internal operational focus and a more broadly contextualising community focus.

The following discussion draws from *Volume One* of Kildonan's bushfire and response evaluation: '*Community Experiences and Service Responses After the 2009 Victorian Bushfires'* (Borrell, Vella and Lane, 2010). (Volume Two documents and analyses Kildonan's operational response). The research design for Volume One included:

- A brief literature overview on disaster response and recovery;
- Kildonan personnel consultations regarding perceived community member experiences (11 consulted, including personnel from affected areas);
- 'Organic', grassroots community development consultations (eight consulted);
- Community consultations (14 consulted); and
- Formal community development consultations (eight consulted).

Forty people were consulted altogether, with only one person being interviewed more than once i.e. as both Kildonan employee and as a community member. The current discussion draws primarily from in–depth interviews with 21 people from the fire affected areas as part of the evaluation, a few of whom performed proactive community development roles in the disaster's aftermath.

In addition, inspiration and ideas from Kildonan service providers including case managers, grief and loss counsellors, financial counsellors and youth workers inevitably form part of the reflective backdrop of this piece (see Borrell & Boulet, 2009), as does my own experience as a part time temporary 'case manager' following the fires in addition to my usual research role. For the interviews, open ended, semi-structured interview schedules were used, addressing the twin foci of community experiences, needs and wishes and the extent to which these were addressed through formal and informal support processes. Advice and suggestions for future disaster responses was also sought. As the interviews unfolded, most interviewees required little prompting to cover the subject areas of interest and narratives were very often provided in a fluid stream, with little 'interruption'. Many interviews went for two hours or more, with some going for three hours.

In reflecting on people's experience of loss following the 2009 Victorian bushfires, it is hard to think of a social theory that would not be relevant in some way, given the all encompassing nature of the disaster and its aftermath. This is because all that was 'social' was suddenly ruptured and broken and needed to be variously rebuilt, renegotiated, changed - or was just lost forever. Thereafter, for the affected individuals, households and communities what is commonly referred to as 'recovery' is usually a long, ongoing process (Camilleri, Healy, MacDonald, Nicholls, Sykes, Winkworth & Woodward, 2007). In the following discussion I reflect on the human and social aftermath of Black Saturday, drawing on various social theorists and philosophers to better understand the experiences of survivors, with particular inspiration drawn from phenomenology and ideas of human immersion in 'place'. While my focus is on rupture and loss, this is not to negate the importance of trauma, especially for those who were caught in the fires and came within a whisker of death – however that would require another expanded discussion. Nevertheless trauma and profound confrontation with mortality are touched on at times as relevant for this exploration, for example in relation to the experience of mastery as part of fixed or changing identity.

2   Normal life in general pre-disaster

The Victorian bushfires of early 2009 hailed in the broadest, deepest, most cataclysmic rupture to everyday life and personal identity imaginable. Many of those affected speak of *before* and *after* Black Saturday ideas of self and mourn for their lost world of places, relationships, daily rhythms and, related to all of these, their sense of self. Before the fires, locals lived with an intimate feeling of continuity and harmony with their beautiful, wooded natural surroundings in small communities and neighbourhoods. For many the bushfire affected areas were a type of haven from the hustle and bustle of city life, while

not being too far away either for pragmatic purposes such as work and services of different sorts. There were distinct sub-cultures and sub groups, aligned with localities, interests, lifestyles and socio-economic status. Walking outside and around the neighbourhood life taken-for-granted was characterised by well known shops, houses of family and friends and regular encounters with acquaintances. People operated inside a web of social relationships defined and punctuated by a variety of associated understandings, communications, habits and rituals. Within the negotiated and recursively adjusted to-and-fro of conversations and interactions their social existence was dynamically defined, as it is for all of us. Stretching over this, time had its own continuity and relative predictability. Things would continue to be the same more or less, unless one decided otherwise.

In Giddens' framing, people had a relative sense of 'ontological security' or confidence in the continuity of their self-identity and the constancy of the surrounding social and material environment for human action and interaction (2001). In general, the world was a solid and reliable place in which they could go about their everyday business without having to constantly contemplate threats to personal and community safety or negotiate fundamental shifts in the backdrop and overall reality of their lived and encountered world.

Within the walls of the home was the comfort of being in one's own place and space, very often created incrementally over long periods of time with organically acquired artefacts of past experiences and events – photos, gifts, momentoes, letters, child's artwork, inherited furniture etc. One imprinted oneself and other inhabitants on the house and the house reflexively mirrored back the objective form of individual and shared psyches and representations of stored memory. As Casey, citing James Joyce, so poignantly puts it, places are active agents, which 'remember events' (2009: 277). There was a recurrent discursive and reinforcing relationship between people and the 'world of objects' (or 'things') in Bourdieu's sense too (1979), with material 'objects' arranged by inhabitants and imbued with meaning – presenting to any visitors who could thence learn more about the people they were visiting, whether intentionally or subliminally. Daily routines and regulated improvisations (or 'habitus' in Bourdieu's [1979] sense) intersected with the material and natural world, with shared understandings embedded in patterns of action and creatively adapted social exchanges.

As Lollar reflects, a house can have *'a symbolic significance that makes it a part of the extended self'* (2010: 269; and also 263 for a personal illustration of this). Citing Belk (1988) and McLuhan (1964, 1994), she explains that this concept of extended self as applied to a house for dwelling recognises the everyday integration of *'possessions, relationships and technologies with human having, doing and being'* (2010: 269).

Also intimately integrated with our lived concept of self and direct experience of the world is our clothing. Fundamentally and literally, survivors lived in their own *clothes* in life before the fires - certainly a parameter of 'normal' life that we all take for granted. Our clothing is very much a part of our routine existence and who we are, performing as a type of outer skin that is deeply implicated in social presentation way beyond its

essential material, protective function. Clothing is very much part of our physical and visual public and social face that also includes eyes, face, expression, gestures and speech – all working together so that others may gain an inkling of who we are (and/or wish to appear as) in an instant.

Crucially connected to people's identity before the fires was their feeling of relative mastery and the deep sense of well-being that goes with this, within their incrementally chosen and relationally constructed world. This included their sense of how they respond and are likely to respond to everyday and greater hardships as well as the good news and usual causes for celebration.

All of these existential parameters and life processes are recursively embedded in our human identities and, in turn, our identities are embedded in them. As noted above, the bushfires introduced a devastating rupture to people's lives and their associated personal and social identities. This theme has resonated strongly throughout Kildonan's bushfire response and recovery research to date, particularly through the in-depth interviews with survivors and those affected by the fires. Drawing on the insights gained through these interviews (against a backdrop of direct support by myself and colleagues and members of the steering group in different ways) further reflections and elaborations are offered in the following discussion.

3   Losses wrought by the fires, with a focus on relationships, roles and identity

With the cataclysm that was Black Saturday great violence was inflicted on many aspects of daily existence, some of which have been outlined above.

Close and proximate relationships were severed and damaged. People lost their loved ones and the intimate bonds and ties that largely defined who they were and gave their life meaning –family members including children, grandchildren, parents and partners, as well as friends and neighbours. Even when others who died weren't close, a neighbourhood of acquaintances and associates was lost along with their houses and the observation of regular interactions and routines. Many people have also been grieving about the loss of their pets, often related to and loved as close family members.

Crucially, people lost their clothes and, at first, many were living in other people's donated ones, before eventually buying new clothes of their own. This had a profound effect on people's sense of identity, destabilising their feelings of orientation in the world by their own reports, a point echoed by Lollar (2010: 265). Not only were they experiencing 'shock' with the suddenness of the tragedy, and an associated disbelief that what they were experiencing was real; not only had they lost the 'hooks' which their life hung on in very many ways, they were not even wearing own clothes. Furthermore, many reportedly lost intimate parts of their public presentation, such as make up, hair pieces, false teeth etc.

Immediately after the fires, many people took on the role of virtual 'hunter gatherers' in the search for clean water, food and shelter for themselves and others. This evidently

constituted a dramatic role shift and radical reorganisation of life priorities i.e. from the minutiae of 'normal' daily life to meeting urgent survival needs. In fact, one year later, many of those interviewed reported that their newly realised sense of identity and life priorities following the Victorian bushfires had remained, for a range of interconnected reasons. In addition to the adoption of new post-disaster roles, other factors feeding into a changed identity included close encounters with death, loss of loved ones, losing most or all material possessions and sudden unemployment.

Quite a few people appeared to have lost their sense of who they are because of specific events that occurred during and/or after the fires and the repercussions for relationships - specifically a changed perception of their place in the local community and changes in the ways that people related to each other. For example, some who had thought they were part of the community pre-disaster, felt alienated in the aftermath as they were apparently overlooked or forgotten in offers of support or not considered as potential active participants in response and recovery efforts, whether formal or informal. One who had lived part time in the community for many years had a double grief – for loss of home and place and for the loss of identity as being an integral part of the local community. Others felt very much 'out of the loop' and excluded in terms of communication and formal decision-making in the early aftermath. One who was stolen from while roads were still closed early on found a new sense of suspicion of other community members, even while their general faith in selected neighbours remained. More commonly, a strain was put on relationships because of differing experiences of the fire and its consequences e. g. fighting the fire vs being out of the area at the time, preoccupation with what had happened vs wanting to focus on immediate pragmatic tasks; focus on supporting household members vs involvement in broader community recovery and aspirations regarding what to do next - namely rebuild in the same area or relocate.

Nevertheless, while the focus of this exploration is on loss and identity, it would be remiss not to highlight that many community members became much closer following the Victorian bushfires, a point which has been expanded on in greater detail elsewhere (Borrell and Boulet, 2009). Gordon refers to an immediate post-disaster phase of close community bonding as 'fusion', which is typically followed by a phase of community 'cleavages', which certainly seemed to have some resonance in the months following Black Saturday (2004) (even while some community members objected to an implied pathologising of their personal and communal experiences in the interviews). Of relevance for the effects on identity, in many cases during an initial phase of elevated bonding, community boundaries are said to become less permeable and close off according to shared experiences during and after the bushfires. Thus identities were very much aligned with these shared experiences, to put it simply, as 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (See Borrell and Boulet, 2009, for more elaboration on this).

In addition and as touched on above, identity was affected by sudden shifts in roles, necessitated or facilitated by the circumstances of the disaster. Following the fires, one new and unfamiliar role for many was suddenly becoming a 'welfare' recipient', when it has been estimated that 80 per cent of survivors would not have fitted into such a

category beforehand (Gordon, 2009). In fact, people found themselves in a variety of new roles such as victim, survivor or community organiser/leader etc. Older roles might be sacrificed in the process of survival, adjustment and recovery, for example, a loving partner or parent – in the worst scenario because the definer of that role had died. In this case, a loving bond will continue, albeit no longer in conversational, recursive relationship with a living person.

Many shifts occurred in grassroots community leadership. Retirees emerged as community organisers, 'ordinary people' who had not previously been active became 'heroes' even while many such heroes (in terms of self-sacrifice for others) didn't want this label due to survivor guilt. (In fact, in some cases 'guilt' appeared to act as a potent driver for community service). While ordinary people came to the fore as leaders, others who had been 'pillars of the community' slipped into the background perhaps because they were immobilised by trauma and personal loss - or just because their skill set was not a match for the demands of the newly broken world. Some neglected their personal and family relationships while helping other community members, jumping into any of the many practical tasks to be attended to – most immediately medical attention, water, food and shelter. (One might observe that the very fact that people are impelled to 'choose' between domestic and familial relationships and the community probably reflects the shape of our society – with personal relationships privatised and segmented within the walls of houses).

Certainly, the months following the 2009 bushfires saw significant shifts in community alliances and groupings. To draw theoretical inspiration from Capra (2003), it could be observed that cultural fields and their dynamic and semi-permeable boundaries re-formed markedly, along with new and changed identities (2003).

Following the fires many people could not think, operate or function at their previous level, to the point that a major service of 'case managers' after the fires was assisting people fill in forms and make various types of applications, for example for financial support and insurance claims. At the relief centres, which were set up as central points for assisting survivors, people milled around in a daze in the immediate aftermath with an evidently impaired ability to focus and concentrate, leaving them later without memory of arrangements that they had made at that point. A similar absence of usual ability to think and process information post house fire is reflected on by Lollar (2010: 266), leading her to lament her associated loss of a sense of competence and mastery within her world, in stark contrast to her normal '*capable and confident self*' (2010: 267).

With the sudden rupture to life as they knew it, people fundamentally lost their 'ontological security'. Many wandered in a daze and quite a few were too shocked and disoriented after the fires to find their way 'off the mountain' to nearby relief centres, until later located by concerned neighbours and helpers. One interviewee observed that many were unwilling to leave the burnt out area for medical treatment:

On Sunday a GP (general practitioner) came. There were so many traumatised people. Burnt people. They didn't want to leave the mountain to access medical help in Whittlesea because they wanted to stay on the mountain and protect their properties from fires. The GP lived in the area. He set up a little stand and wrote out scripts and prescriptions for people…

People also lost their specific feeling of being physically safe in their now-devastated neighbourhoods with the disappearance of their familiar and predictable world. In particular, many felt very fearful of the following summer's fire season and very often experienced hallucinations and/or panic attacks with sounds, sights or smells that even hinted at fire.

As already noted, many felt excluded from public life, specifically in relation to rebuilding and recovery decisions that were being made by authorities, with this only continuing with time. There was widespread disenchantment with formal institutions and feelings of alienation with the perception of being overlooked in key decision making around recovery and rebuilding. Some community members who had been very active in supporting their community and who wanted to continue their involvement expressed disappointment and disillusionment as well as a need to have the efforts of themselves and others financially supported in some way. As already noted, many others just felt 'out of the loop' and excluded from communication and information dissemination, whether this be from formal or informal sources

While some of those who organised relief for people and communities immediately after the fires later felt quite disillusioned at organisation happening 'from above', at the same time many were very grateful for the efforts of authorities and, especially, the evident good will and generosity of the outside community, especially in view of the large sums of money that were donated and disseminated over time by the newly formed Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority. Thus there was much ambivalence, with conflicting emotions, such as anger and appreciation, mixed with associated feelings of guilt and confusion.

Most fundamentally*,* people's habitual, dispositional orientations lost focus and meaning with the sudden absence of daily routines and imperatives and also the shared understandings of how they should be and behave without the 'props' and cues of everyday life, particularly within the defined milieus of small out-of-the-way communities. Evidently, life lost its orienting shape of structured and improvised actions, responsibilities, relationships and routines, to the very minutiae of going to work, dropping children at school, buying bread, milk and newspaper, greeting neighbours and acquaintances, making sure delicate plants are watered, feeding the cat etc. One doesn't even navigate oneself through the day by usual rote i.e. getting up, going to the shower and reaching for clothes to wear. In fact, all the clothes are gone along with the house, garage, car and neighbourhood. In her exploration of 'home' as an extension of self, Lollar gives a first hand example of the devastating vacuum that is left when usual home, domestic objects and pets are suddenly not there (2010: 265). This

echoes the experience of many of the bushfire survivors, one of whom spoke of feeling 'empty' in the experienced 'nothingness' of her new context:

> *I had to go through it – from a 'dream' to 'this is it; it really did happen'. The surreal is pleasant. Real – then it leaves you empty. I don't know how to push on from nothing. It totally stripped everything… I felt nothing. How to pick up the pieces from here when I don't know who I am anymore? Where to from here? It is painful where you came from. It is painful where you are going. It is painful where you are now – lost identity of who you are. Lost in limbo…*

4   Loss wrought by the fires, with reflections and exploration of 'place' through a phenomenological lens

Of all theoretical orientations, phenomenology is best placed to describe and explore the dynamic and embodied continuity with the world that people experience day-to-day and which was ruptured so suddenly and cruelly for many survivors of the Victorian bushfires. Through this approach we can draw on what we know through our own living as we experience it, specifically that we are an integral part of the world we are immersed in and do not and cannot really exist without it. Certainly, only limited light, if any, can be shed on the interconnectedness of people and their living world in all of its dimensions through reductionist, compartmentalised analyses. Such attempts tend to obscure rather than enlighten, as people do not really live, breathe, suffer and recover in such compartments, as evidenced in the testimony of bushfire survivors (Borrell, Vella & Lane, 2010).

In particular, phenomenology would appear to offer the most articulate and resonant account of what is routinely held and valued (whether consciously or subliminally) and was therefore lost with the cataclysm of Black Saturday, in terms of the mutual implication of bodies and places and in the cross implication of social, natural and built environments (Arriagada, 2009; Heidegger, 1996; Merleau Ponty, 2002; Thoma, 2006).

Embodiment and sensuous connection

Certainly, with the fires came deep damage and severance of the usual intimate relationships between *body and habitual, proximate space and the sensual interface with the world*. People lost their immediate place for dwelling, movement and recurrent sensuous immersion and interaction with the world. With the bushfire's severance of the dynamically negotiated relationship between body, air, objects, scenes, visions and smells, they lost the intimate and the familiar of their immediate and embodied encounters. Just as Lollar fundamentally conceptualises her house as an extension of who she is, it is probably not surprising that she experiences its burnt shell as feeling 'cold and dead' and, in turn, feeling the same way herself (2010: 266). Thus, as she and her house lived together so they seemed to die together, at least for a time.

Along with their physically and sensuously encountered world, people lost the associated continuity of experienced life across time, along with the daily incremental changes emerging from the interactional flow between all living things (including self) and the material, social and natural world. They lost this familiar, embodied and sensuously experienced interface with the world in both time and place in relation to their house and its surrounds and the local area and neighbourhood, with the relevant 'surrounds' varying in size depending on the routine movements of the inhabitants. In addition, they lost the porous boundaries of houses which allow inward and outward flowings of embodied moving-through-time-and-space existence for both dwellers and visitors (Capra, 2003; Borrell, 2008; Thoma, 2006).

Belonging

The *sense of belonging* as intricately associated with both space and people in dynamic relationship, was also ruptured and assaulted with the 2009 Victorian bushfires, on a range of fronts. As Thoma notes, the sense of belonging is layered, with some of the layers existing at a deeper level and with more persistent influence (2006: 88). In particular, the inhabiting of spaces constitutes an intimate type of experienced ownership and belonging, even while such inhabiting is necessarily individually idiosyncratic (Thoma, 2006: 89).

Thoma proposes that *belonging* is defined by the desire of closeness with aspects of the world, wherever that might be (2006). (This 'desire' of closeness may be seen as a rather more poetic and resonant version of what is commonly codified as 'community connectedness', albeit with much broader and more fluid reference to include places as well as people). Belonging as also defined by *experiences* of closeness (as well as desire) can also be seen as including the physical, social and sensuous relationships with places, sites of gathering and interaction and configurations of peopled relationships i.e. as belonging to people, networks and places that a person is associated with. Again, much of such 'belonging' came to a violent halt with the fires of February 2009.

A place is characterised and imbued with the relationships and processes that happen there over time – between people and networks of people, between the social world of people and the world of objects that they create as part of their shared tapestry and between people and the sensual and natural world. Many such particular places were obliterated, and can never be exactly re-created, a point that has slowly dawned on and saddened many survivors over time, since the fires.

Many also lost their place of work, which carries particular practical and socially symbolic meanings. Certainly paid work is a core definer of who we are and a potent gauge of social value in contemporary society - as a place to 'go' and 'do' in a way that is humanly meaningful. Businesses were lost for a variety of fire-related reasons - because work places burnt down (theirs or others), because the business lost its customer base, because employers (who may also have been friends) were lost, because the worker was too fragile to continue or too preoccupied with basic survival and/or assisting other community members to survive or because new life priorities had been forged in the

trauma of the fires and their aftermath. One reflected on the importance of work in adjustment and recovery:

> *Some didn't want to leave the mountain and they got stuck in a rut. They had to go to work with people who didn't have the same situation, 'normal people'. I was lucky, I knew my work mates would support me. Other people didn't have such support at work, so it was hard. There was disconnection with mates from off the mountain…*

Connected to the above points and as noted in the previous section, survivors lost their lived, dynamic, sensuous and negotiated reality along with their daily rhythms and rituals and their routine habits of interaction. What do you *do* if you are very suddenly living in a new rented property or in a caravan in a friend's driveway? What do you *do* if your work is abruptly gone, along with your normal tasks and responsibilities, and you no longer meet and interact with the people you normally meet and interact with in the course of your work?

Identity and standing in physical and moral space

With Black Saturday, *identity as connected with a person's standing in physical and 'moral' space* was disrupted as were modes of dwelling, which are integrally implicated in basic human existence.

Heidegger proposed that our condition as spatial beings is primary and fundamental to our very being and existence (1996). In other words, space is part of who and what we are, not an external 'object' as rationalised within a Western dualistic conceptual framework. In similar vein, Casey argues that *place* has existential primacy; it is felt bodily first of all and we feel the presence of places by and in our bodies even more than we see or think or recollect them: '*Places are not so much the direct objects of sight or thought or recollection as what we feel with and around, under and above, before and behind our lived bodies…*' (2009: 313). In relation to the specific spaces we inhabit and are encompassed by, such as apartments, houses, neighbourhoods, cities and states he says that:

> *Although their fit is looser* (than rooms) *you are also distinguished by these places. You are in them not as a puppet stuffed in a box – as would be true on a strict container view of place – but as living in them, indeed through them. They too are living rooms. They serve to implace you, to anchor and orient you, finally becoming an integral part of your identity…* (2009: 22, 23). (bracketed insert mine).

In similar vein while drawing on Heidegger and Taylor, Arriagada argues that personal identity and space '*are inexorably tied and dependent on one another*', with space as a transcendental condition for the possibility of human agency, providing the very place where questions of identity are possible and 'answers' might be found - thus pointing to our moral orientations and capabilities. Given the primacy of place for human being and

existence, he argues that world 'implacement' is crucial for questions of human morality, meaning and identity, specifically in the presence of a background from which we can draw out the meaning of moral questions (2009: 22).

These insights about the foundational nature of places for existence, identity and morality would appear to go some way to explain the deep psychic loss, 'vacancy' and disorientation of Black Saturday survivors as evidenced though Kildonan's research and many other sources, with trauma associated with the sudden absence of both *physical place* and *place-in–the-world*, in addition to the near death experiences of being caught in the smoke and roar of the fires and not seeing a clear way to safety. Furthermore, the sudden ruptures to pre-existing connections between self and place led some survivors to radically reorganise their life priorities and associated moral directions. One, who had fundamentally changed her aspirations and values said:

> *It's rediscovering who you are. I have problems with people who don't understand who you are. I'm fascinated with what my priorities were at the time* (before the fires). *When I re-read it I think – who is this person?*

They later added: *'Now I do what is in my heart not my head. The materialistic stuff is gone…'*

Ontological security and home

As suggested in the previous section, with the cataclysm of Black Saturday, *'ontological security'* was lost for individuals and on a mass scale. Here it is elaborated on with specific reference to the 'place' of house and home. Of particular relevance, Newton, citing Douglas (1991) and others, discusses ontological security associated with home making and dwelling:

> *There is 'regularity imposed on furniture and flows of people' and an 'orientation in space', usually clear insider and outside boundaries and a front-back axis. The structured domesticity' of a home creates its own rhythms and spatial effects. It regulates 'vision and perception of distance' and it 'anticipates and coordinates' life cycle rhythms.*

Nestled in the spatialities and regularities of home, a 'place' for families and close others is provided. Both home and family are arguably fundamental to notions and experiences of lived identity, even in their absence. In turn, both personal identity and ongoing implacement are core to experiences of ontological security. Thus, Newton argues that housing and residential arrangements are crucial to any contemporary analysis of ontological security (2008). This is certainly consistent with the profound insecurity and distress reported by Victorian bushfire survivors in Kildonan's research and via many personal stories available in the public domain, particularly as many still had no permanent home over a year after the fires. No wonder Lollar reported feeling empty and lost with the sudden loss of her own home in a fire (2010: 267).

One of the Victorian bushfire survivors spoke of the sense of unreality and alienation when their familiar neighbourhood was turned into a 'crime scene':

> *After the bushfires I left the house for six weeks, I didn't want to be up the mountain. It was like living under lockdown for three months – the area was declared a crime scene. Living in the destruction, often seeing body bags on the street. You would see guys in white suits – nothing was hidden. It was surreal. This was happening but it was hard to absorb. Nothing was covered up; it was all in your face. It was like living in a science fiction movie. Lives have changed forever…*

Another spoke of longing for their old place:

> *People just want to be in their own home. In the village there's a lot of people. In my kids' home there are three kids in one room. Lots of other people are in the same boat. They just want their houses back and it's not happening.*

Yet another highlighted the importance of addressing ontological insecurity in formal service responses to disasters: '*From the service system in parallel* (to the community situation) *– people need to feel they are safe, they need to see a sense of calm, that someone is in control. This was needed at every level…*'

Culture and building

With Black Saturday, the loss and disruption to 'place' and implacement had implications for *identity,* specifically in relation to *disrupted culture, built environment and natural landscape.* As articulated so well by Casey, identity is integral to the fundamental way we experience our being, specifically our embodied presence within places in our experienced world (2009: 36). According to Casey and as noted above, places underpin and constitute our being and identity in a range of inter-connected ways. Places anchor and orient us. Furthermore, they bind occasions that we are positionally and interactionally part of within particular times and spaces, while establishing our situatedness in a common social world (Casey, 2009: 23). Certainly, we exist in our social relationships, albeit implaced and in culture, with particular meaning imbued through our intimate bonds with close others. In fact, Casey points out that place and culture are mutually implicated (Casey, 2009: 31), elaborating on this point with:

> *Places are also primary in the order of culture. Just as there can be no disembodied experience of landscape, so there can be no unimplaced cultures. If 'things that exist are somewhere', among these existing things are human cultures; they too are in place.*
> *Thus we are driven to acknowledge the truth of two related but distinct propositions: just as every place is encultured, so every culture is implaced…* (2009: 31).

Rather pertinently, given the mass loss of housing on Black Saturday and all that these houses held and enfolded for their inhabitants, Casey points out that a building condenses a culture in one place (2009: 32). With the obliteration of these house-places in the fires, many situated cultures were lost, to be made anew in some other places and buildings (or not), inevitably drawing from strands of culture reaching beyond those walls that are gone.

Cultures evidently change too with the transformation of disaster. Old ones may dissolve with places while new ones are forged, in particular in relation to efforts toward collective recovery. One survivor described feeling divided between affected and non-affected communities, with their differential levels of understanding and ability to empathise:

> *I am torn between being off the mountain with people who don't understand and being on the mountain with people* (who are also suffering). *Some who have lost their homes are not on the mountain and didn't lose people* (close to them). *I lost my* (close family member), *my income, friends and friend's properties…*

Landscape

'Landscape' as a broader holding world-space is also an important part of our human implacement, dynamically and recursively integral to embodied, sensuous, thinking and feeling, being and identity. Once more I turn to Casey to articulate this point:

> *Body and landscape present themselves as coeval epicentres around which particular places pivot and radiate. They are, at the very least, the bounds of places. In my embodied being I am just at a place as its inner boundary; a surrounding landscape, on the other hand is just beyond that place as its outer boundary. Between the two boundaries – and very much as a function of their differential interplay - implacement occurs. Place is what takes place between body and landscape. Thanks to the double horizon that body and landscape provide, a place is a locale bounded on both sides, near and far. Unlike the double-bind of time, however, the double bound of place is open-ended. Far from being constrictive in the manner of a deadline, the lifeline extending from body to landscape (and back again) is as porous as a sieve…* (2009: 29).

Certainly, landscape, surroundings (near and far) and horizon became unhinged and strange through the wiping out of whole forests on Black Saturday. In our research, quite a few interviewees expressed disorientation, consternation, regret and anxiety at the new landscape of their home-site or neighbourhood. In the months after the fires the ground became muddy to walk on without the usual ground cover and a multitude of black sticks appeared where there had been forests of trees. Local residents remarked that even the sound of nature had changed and there were (unwelcome) views of the city that were not there before. One commented that it was like a ghost town as there was no one around and that the local neighbourhood had 'gone'.

One described his attempts to get home immediately after the fires, impeded by fallen trees, and his shock and disorientation at the change in his surroundings: *'…It was devoid of people. I ended up walking back in. I walked around the mountain, ankle deep in ash. It freaked me out, being able to see the mountain and the city…'*

A service provider spoke of people mourning for their lost neighbourhood and surroundings: *'… They sit at home and cry. When they look out the window and front door all they can see is devastation…'*

Another local resident remarked that: *'Acres and acres were burnt. I think to myself I couldn't live here. It is too much in the face. Here I feel better in myself as I can rebuild...'*

Displacement and reimplacement

Arguments to explain the fundamental nature of implacement lend naturally to arguments that explain the crucial nature of *displacement* (along with the great demands of re-implacement) and vice versa. In fact, the reflections of this piece spring largely from the compelling, presenting phenomena of displacement, leading me to ponder backwards – to what we usually take for granted about existence and social life and what, then, has gone awry leading to evident anguish and soul-sickness.

With all of the above inter-related points in mind, it is no wonder that people experience severe disorientation, emotional fatigue and mental health problems when displaced – whether due to processes of colonisation and land dispossession or due to natural disasters such as bushfires (Casey, 2009: 351) – especially keeping in mind that not to be 'in place' is not to exist (Casey, 2009: 37). With displacement, not only is mere 'place' lost – with it all dimensions fundamental to being, existence, social life, memory and culture are put under stress and/or vanish.

Returning home to a different place is referred to by Casey as 'reimplacement'. As dynamic, reciprocal sites of human embeddedness, places inevitably change over time. When ruptures and disturbances are sudden and all encompassing, as with the 2009 Victorian bushfires, this imposes a great psychological burden on returning inhabitants, who must then renegotiate the place and surrounds anew, with all the layers and dimensions of existence that are carried in this individual and collective exercise – even while still pining for the old for quite some time. Referring to Turner's state of 'betwixt and between' with its associated stress, emotional reactivity and opportunity, Lollar describes her own painful transition between the old home-world that has gone and the new one that must be forged with others (2010: 265). The following quote is typical of reflections on survivor experiences of living in provisional housing in burnt out surroundings:

> *It was winter, it was cold. People started to get depressed. It brought peoples' moods down. People living in caravans were cramped and cluttered with things*

they had started to get to replace their belongings. There was an increase in mental health issues. The cold weather made people depressed. I kept wishing for nicer weather to help raise peoples' spirits.

Many bushfire survivors took both nourishment and comfort from the self organisation of communal meals, arguably dealing with their forced displacement as well as moves to collectively 'move back into place'. One reflected on the meaning of this:

We need to focus on a lot more community gathering. So much healing happened (in community dining). It was for the community only. It was our space. After the fires we were overwhelmed with new people to support us, which was great, but sometimes you just want your own space. It's been a really good healing place. Everyone realizes we're all in this together, we've all been in the same boat. It's easier as a collective. That needs to be supported. More community gathering…

Casey's assertion that: '*when places change I change'* (2009: 307) certainly resonates with bushfire survivor accounts on many levels. This renegotiation of identity in relation to place, buildings, landscapes and other people is deeply implicated in rebuilding of new and changed identities. Furthermore, this renegotiation is political as well as personal and social. For example, in terms of public buildings, great angst was expressed through interviews as part of Kildonan's ongoing research as well as through the media about the shape, function and location of new buildings and landmarks (Dowling, 2009). The common specific complaint is that the new building does not reflect the *true* character of the local community (incidentally begging the question of what is 'true', given the many and highly divergent views held by community members on a range of local matters). Quite a few have complained at different times about insufficient consultation for such rebuilding by local authorities. At a household level, relationships have been placed under stress due to differences in rebuilding imperatives and aspirations, with either conscious or subliminal awareness of the implications for these major life decisions on future connections and identity. Casey succinctly describes this connection between people and their places as a 'person-in-place' unit, with 'place alienation' arising when this is disrupted (2009: 305), which certainly occurred on a mass scale with Black Saturday. There is evidently added complexity when changing person-in-place units splinter within relationships, along with divergent post-fire trajectories.

In relation to natural world displacement after black Saturday, many survivors lost the natural word that was literally on their doorstep. Many have borne the psychological brunt of living in a different place – devastated, bare and blackened, especially those who remained on their burnt-out properties in caravans and makeshift shelters. While the thick, green opulence of trees and forests disappeared in many places, vertical 'poles' of trees still remained fifteen months later, albeit with green growth creeping back over trunks and ground and with some areas much bushier than others. (The unpredictable fires left spots of green untouched as well). As noted before, in place of thick enveloping forest, new unexpected views opened up in quite a few places, through gaping burnt out holes in the landscape - for example of the city and its lights that many locals migrated

here to escape from. Some observed that even the wind sounds different. So, even for those who never left, there is grief for the old place. Of course, this grief extends to whole peopled neighbourhoods as well as the treasured landscape that has largely vanished in many fire-affected areas.

One of the fundamental ongoing sources of grief and loss for many survivors has been the slow realisation that life changed forever with the destruction of their place and the many living strands of interconnected life it held. The old world has gone and a new one must be forged somehow – either in the same longitude and latitude spatiality or somewhere else – either with people from the old community or only with some of them, knowing full well that it can take years for strangers to become friends and for new places to become home.

Conclusion

Drawing on various theoretical strands, I have explored the dynamic continuity that people have with their social, physical and natural world, in order to better understand the profound loss and disorientation that survivors of Black Saturday have experienced and continue to experience. In particular, phenomenology appears to offer the most meaningful, resonant and rich accounts, shedding light on processes of implacement, displacement and reimplacement.

In addition, the survivor interviewees who so generously shared their experiences and insights with Kildonan researchers also, very often, reported some benefit in having their story listened to, documented and then having the chance to correct and/or elaborate on the transcript. From their own accounts, this seemed to assist them in making some sense and order of the chaos and pain they had been through and are usually still suffering from. Certainly this would be consistent with Lollar's idea of narrative as helping to make sense of catastrophic events and thereby facilitating possibilities of healing and transformation (2010).

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