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## Remembering and Igniting Fires: Prescribed Burns as Memory Work

For better or worse, the Anthropocene is an epoch defined by human relationships with the planet. We are simultaneously noting our impact on the environment and the ways in which we are intimately and vulnerably implicated in complex ecosystems that are not static but in flux. What we know is that in some cases human relationships with the planet are not absolutely extractive and destructive, but can also be about flourishing and making more livable worlds.<sup>1</sup> In this era of realization and awakening to the extent of our planetary destruction, there is an opportunity to learn to “live with” the planet, rather than orchestrate its slow destruction.<sup>2</sup> This process requires an exercise in troubling how we think about the landscapes we come to live in, the policies we enact and work within, and the possible methods we have at our disposal to consider ways to live in the Anthropocene—an era narrated by logics that have pushed us into our present predicament.

The Anthropocene could be figured as an era of reflexivity, an attempt to grapple with how we have lived or failed to live on this planet. My research on wildfire managers and their strategies in Canadian national parks has suggested to me that there are lessons to be learned from those grappling with natural processes that have been in some regions resisted, and in some cases demonized, over the last few centuries. For many years fire has been resisted, contained, and suppressed as a threat to accumulation and to particular visions of nature. The reordering of landscapes, like the reordering of the atmosphere, is one way in which the Anthropocene has been articulated. Other readings of fire can show—and have shown—how fire has played a role in ecosystems across the globe, as a process of renewal and regeneration. In many cases fire has been figured as essential to the maintenance of ecosystems and the survival of certain species.

Today, those encountering the contradictions of management systems that attempt to discipline nature and suppress fire are perhaps well placed to teach us about finding new ways to live with those processes that are often figured as threats and disasters. Fire

1 Rosemary-Claire Collard, Jessica Dempsey, and Juanita Sundberg, “A Manifesto for Abundant Futures,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105, no. 2 (2015): 322–30.

2 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

occupies a strange position in this discussion because it is simultaneously a natural occurrence, and is in fact essential to the lives of many fire-dependent or adapted species, but is also positioned to become a more pronounced and potentially disastrous feature in a warming and drying climate. It also has a charisma that refuses to be ignored. This peculiar position as both a natural process and an anthropogenic disaster could be an opportunity to learn to live in what Anna Tsing calls ruin.<sup>3</sup>

### **Burning Issue: The Importance of Remembering Past Fires**

Environmental history reminds us that our relationship with environments is not apolitical or ahistorical but is instead nested in complex histories and power struggles. In the context of Canada, we have to appreciate that centuries of Indigenous forms of land care<sup>4</sup> were violently replaced as settler colonialism cleared the way for a new relationship to land,<sup>5</sup> and thus also to fire. Fire became inconvenient to settlement and extraction and was also eliminated from so-called pristine wilderness areas like Canada's celebrated national parks. Though the Anthropocene is often framed as an era of universal human impact, Zoe Todd reminds us that the "negative" impacts of the Anthropocene need be traced back to seats of power and imperial control and that there are human relationships with the planet that exist that do not necessarily spell out planetary destruction.<sup>6</sup> Whether through the capitalist logics of various iterations of forestry,<sup>7</sup> the settlement of grasslands into farmlands,<sup>8</sup> or the shattering of landscapes into a manageable grid of control,<sup>9</sup> much of Canadian colonialism could be understood as a change in how (and which) humans relate to the land. The reordering of landscapes via institutions

3 Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

4 Throughout my fieldwork, fire managers have noted Indigenous land practices with fire in management plans and/or in interviews. Indigenous fire practice and care is relatively under-researched.

5 For more on relations to land see Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

6 Zoe Todd, "Indigenizing the Anthropocene," in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environment, and Epistemology*, ed. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, 241–54 (London: Open Humanities Press, 2015). See also Heather Davis and Zoe Todd. "On the Importance of a Date, or, Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 16, no. 4 (2017): 761–80.

7 Bruce Braun, *The Intemperate Rainforest: Nature, Culture, and Power on Canada's West Coast* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Gregory Simon, *Flame and Fortune in the American West: Urban Development, Environmental Change, and the Great Oakland Hills Fire* vol. 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

8 Candace Savage, *A Geography of Blood: Unearthing Memory from a Prairie Landscape* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2012).

9 Nicholas Blomley, "Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence: The Frontier, the Survey, and the Grid," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 93, no. 1 (2003): 121–41.

of colonial and capitalist control brought about a different set of anthropocenic relations, relations often (but not exclusively) articulated by the suppression of fire rather than the active use of it. As environmental historian Stephen Pyne notes, Canada's relationship with combustion moves from the wildland fire of forest, meadow, and wetland to that of the engine and industrial production.<sup>10</sup> Combustion of various sorts both gives life to Canada's economy and threatens its productivity as uncontrolled fires interrupt highways, tourism dollars, and potentially even extractive ventures in the heart of the very flammable Boreal forest of Canada.

Much of my work today focuses on how fire managers in national parks attempt to "return" and "suppress" fire. These managers and ecologists, operating within a national network of personnel, must look to the past and into the future in order to get their work done. What I've learned from wildfire managers, and scholars interested in fire, is that fires are not contained events but happenings thousands of years in the making.<sup>11</sup> Given that fire has been excluded in some national park landscapes for over a century, managers must bring back fire themselves, articulating their nested vision of a fire regime. One way in which this is achieved is through prescribed fires, an orchestrated burn that attempts to achieve institutional goals of improving "ecological integrity" and, in some cases, through the manipulation of the landscape and fire regime to mitigate the risk of uncontrolled blazes in the future. In order to make these fires happen, they lean on a kind of memory work, whereby different sources of memories are used to inform actions, where memories of past fires prompt new ones.

### **Integrating Memories of Fire into Contemporary Management Practices**

In their attempt to understand wildfire and its return, and even in its suppression, managers are informed by various attempts to remember what things used to be like. I use the word "remember" to encompass a set of practices for recalling the past. Fire managers are not necessarily attempting to envision a premodern nature when it comes to returning fire to national parks—there is a recognition that these landscapes are in flux—but instead their work is an attempt to piece memories and present circumstances together. They are

10 Stephen J. Pyne, *Awful Splendour: A Fire History of Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011).

11 Natasha Myers, "Becoming Sensor in Sentient Worlds: A More-than-Natural History of a Black Oak Savannah," in *Between Matter and Method: Encounters in Anthropology and Art*, ed. Gretchen Bakke and Marina Peterson, 73–96 (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 73.

also very much aware that they cannot remember everything because the contemporary landscape is something that has been made as much by ecology as by culture. A national park, though a natural place, is a nature narrated by those that manage it.

This said, that narration is not absolutely human. Even though fire has been disrupted for a century or more in different national parks, memories of past fires and adaptations to fire are to be found in the landscape itself, positioning the landscape as a place with its own material memory to offer park staff. Fire managers and ecologists, often in concert with external scholars, piece together various forms of proxy data, where hints of former fires are literally burnt into landscapes, leaving behind a record of historical fire patterns. This is a practice of multispecies remembering, whereby different temporal rhythms, marked for example into the bodies of trees that survived past fires, help bring new futures into being.<sup>12</sup> This information is understood to be partial and incomplete, a memory, narrated in part by the species that endure, but managers are able to use it to consider how the encroachment of certain species, or the absence of others known to be fire-dependent and historically present, might inform not only the temporal rhythm of a fire regime but the location and breadth of past (and future) fires. Landscapes and bodies become what this issue is calling “sites of remembering”—sites composed of a cacophony of lively (and not-so-lively) beings, reminding us that the memories of fire are living on in the landscapes these managers are tasked with governing. It is a process that must both remember how landscapes are undone and how they can be remade, whereby the process of crafting a future is not solely a human affair.

In addition to the landscape itself, and the bodies that render it living, managers also look to their own memories, their “own” being the institutional archive of land management policies, practices, and personal memory. Policies and management plans may have been superseded by other initiatives over the decades, but they have still left their mark on landscapes, interrupting existing fire regimes or igniting new ones, and shaping the cycles of fire presence and fire’s impact on particular places. For example, a suppression policy may allow some species to flourish while leaving others to die in the shade of an overgrown forest. Managers are well acquainted with the successes and failures of past fire management in the landscapes they come to govern and care

<sup>12</sup> Laura A. Ogden, *Swamplife: People, Gators, and Mangroves Entangled in the Everglades* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

for, and are not ignorant of institutional mistakes, though their ability and authority to manage landscapes differently makes working with fire an institutionally and ecologically complex task. At various stages of the fire prescription process, the impacts and echoes of past policies come to inform choices and approaches but also the ecologies with which they work; after all, many of the prescribed fires are perceived as signifying not the maintenance of a fire regime but the return of one.

Managers also rely on the memories of fires they have personally encountered. Through a series of techniques too complex to reiterate here, fire managers, ecologists, and fire crews come to interact with processes of combustion and vegetal life in ways that are informed by their past memories with other fires. Through the diversity of landscapes, these individuals come to interact with the nested diversity of species and geography particular to each burn site; their memories help inform but do not dictate their interaction with each new fire.

Thus, planning for prescribed fires means not only remembering the physical landscape, but the institutional landscape as well, prompting another understanding of where and what may constitute a site of remembering. Whether through the review of various policies, aerial photos of the parks that turn up in government archives, or even more recent reports of prescribed fires taking place throughout the park system, fire managers dig through these files, the institutional memory of these places, for clues as to how best to manage and “correct” fire presence in diverse ecosystems. These are moments of reflexive thinking—fire managers grapple with past relationships to fire as they work through the process of attempting to build new ones. This said, their work is constrained and interrupted by the fact that authority and jurisdiction over landscapes has been shattered into a mosaic of management agencies, each with its own nested approach to working with fire and flammable landscapes.

In some national parks, ecologists and fire managers have partnered with First Nations to bring back fire to landscapes and to integrate what managers refer to as Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) into national park vegetation management and fire management plans. Here the memories and contemporary practices of others are used to help with decisions about future prescribed fires and other kinds of ecological management. It cannot be ignored that these memories are not always accessible or completely intact across the country, nor are all communities willing (nor are they obliged) to share

these memories with federal and provincial governments. Canada's assault on Indigenous knowledge, along with the historical expulsion of Indigenous people from many national park lands, has—in some cases violently—erased the possibility of these kinds of partnerships when it comes to fire management. Canada has been in the business of forgetting for some time, and it has cost everyone dearly.

These are still colonial landscapes—national parks—and like much of the colonial world, they are places where Indigenous relationships with landscapes have been actively excluded, or at the very least circumscribed, until quite recently. In Canada some fire-dependent ecosystems have flourished under the direction of Indigenous-led land practices. Practices of remembering expose the relationships that fires had with others before colonial bureaucracies moved in, and challenge current land managers of all kinds to build new relationships in the context of changing landscapes and changing climates. Fires in many Canadian contexts have been social affairs; ironically, it was the colonial quest to “manage” fire, which forgot the role it played in human societies, that has created some of the most “unnatural” landscapes in the country.

Where memory is available, and relationships can be built, fire managers with Parks Canada have been able to bring in yet another layer of memory through participation from neighboring Indigenous communities. These approaches to fire are more than operational, and from the perspective of those I have interviewed are about a kind of care that go beyond the kind of mandates Parks Canada is emboldened and constrained by. Memory is political, and fire is an opportunity for fire managers to remember differently, to consider how fire might be an opportunity to build not only new relationships with the planet, but with people who have been excluded from land management processes.<sup>13</sup>

### **Igniting new directions**

Setting fires, at its core, is about building new relationships with landscapes. Though fire managers remain constrained by institutional borders, contradictory mandates, and a violent colonial past and present, the return of fire is about remembering pasts and

<sup>13</sup> Emilie Cameron reminds us that remembering differently in settler-colonial Canada is a political act; Emilie Cameron, *Far off Metal River: Inuit Lands, Settler Stories, and the Making of the Contemporary Arctic* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015).

igniting new futures. By virtue of the changing set of relationships between people, policies, and landscapes, memory work must be coupled with “imagining work,” answering countless calls for us to see the Anthropocene as an opportunity to become otherwise than we are now.<sup>14</sup> National park fire managers and ecologists are grappling with how fire will fit into wider processes and challenges and, through a kind of diplomacy, they are making the case for fire in landscapes where fire may be resisted. They are compelled to come up with approaches and tactics that bring back fire in a way that does not disrupt other park mandates or rub neighboring landholders up the wrong way, while also rewriting national park narratives of a human-less wilderness with a more honest portrayal of human-environment relations. There is still a great deal of work to do and many memories to consider.

14 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*. See also Myers, “Becoming Sensor,” 73.