Take My Breath Away

Transformations in the Practices of Relatedness and Intimacy through Australia's 2019–2020 Convergent Crises

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ABSTRACT: This article eschews the singularity of much disaster, crisis and catastrophe research to focus on the complex dynamics of convergent crises. It examines the prolonged crises of a summer of bushfire and COVID-19 which converged in Eurobodalla Shire on the south coast of New South Wales (NSW), Australia, in 2019–2020. We focus on air and breathing on the one hand and kinship and the social organisation of survival and recovery on the other. During Australia's summer of bushfires, thick smoke rendered air, airways and breathing a challenge, leaving people open to reflection as well as to struggle. Bushfire smoke created 'aware breathers'. It was aware breathers who were then to experience the invisible and separating threat of COVID-19. These convergent crises impacted the 'mutuality of being' of kinship (after Marshall Sahlins) and the social organisation of survival. Whereas the bushfires in Eurobodalla drew on grandparent-families in survival, the social distancing and lockdown of COVID-19 has cleaved these multi-household families asunder, at least for now. COVID-19 has also made plain how the mingling of breath is a new index of intimacy.

KEYWORDS: breath, bushfire, convergent crises, disaster, kinship, intimacy, pandemic, social distance

Periods of significant societal crisis can bring into focus and make visible the taken-for-granted assumptions and practices of everyday life. Coronavirus did not reach Australia in ordinary times. This novel coronavirus was one of a number of significant crises that converged in Australia over 2019–2020. Here, we focus on two: an extended 'summer' of bushfires (June 2019 to March 2020) and COVID-19 (focussing here especially from January up until the end of June 2020). We ask what happens when crises converge in time and space. Our ethnographic focus is Eurobodalla Shire on the New South Wales (NSW) south coast (Figure 1).

We introduce 'convergent crises' as a key concept for a number of reasons. First, we are convinced that the analysis of complexity and change must be central to the field of catastrophe, crisis, disaster, disruption

and emergency studies. We seek to counter the singularity which typifies much of this literature. Conventional studies focus on a particular type of disruption (for example, earthquakes, cyclones, technological disasters), single out particular instances (such as Hurricane Katrina or the Black Saturday bushfires) or drill down on particular facets of impact and response (such as the management of a virus in aged care facilities).

Singular views of disasters and disaster types have recently been challenged by attention to 'trans-border crises' (see Ansell et al. 2010; and Quarantelli et al. 2018) and to 'disasters without borders' (Hannigan 2012). Importantly, in recent decades the social dimensions and political foundations of crises – even those thought of simply as 'natural' – have been recognised. Attention has also turned to consider risk

Figure 1. Eurobodalla Shire and its context (Spatial Design for LocuSAR).

and resilience (see, for example, Koslowski and Longstaff 2015; Tierney 2014; and Wilson 2015). But in our view, this is not enough. Always complex, crises often compound and interact with others in time and space. With notable exceptions (particularly the important work of Duan Biggs and colleagues [2011] and Michael Moseley [1999]), the systematic study of convergent crises remains an important gap in understanding and application. We therefore ask: how can we better understand what happens to risk, resilience and the social and political dimensions of crisis when a number of crises converge in time and space?

We choose to use ‘crises’ as an ambit term to include a broad range of significant societal challenges (see Hoffman 2020).¹ In the framework we are developing, the process of ‘convergence’ is a fulcrum of attention, analysis and insight. Our usage is not limited to sudden events (like earthquakes or hurricanes or eruptions), nor is it limited to catastrophic

processes that can play out over months or years, like long-term drought, war or the COVID-19 pandemic. And we do not confine convergence to the intersections of causally related crises. Our usage extends to processes like climate change, which unfold over a much longer *durée* spawning a plethora of crises which converge with complex consequences. Our aim is to broaden the purview to intersections of challenge and the twists and turns of crises to ask what happens when things get really complicated.

Here, we present a substantive case study of two convergent crises from Australia – bushfires and COVID-19 – with a particular focus on the Eurobodalla Shire in NSW. Our analysis focusses on two interrelated phenomena thrown into relief by these convergent crises: breathing and air; and kinship and intimacy.

An estimated 78.6 per cent of Australians or 15.4 million adults were impacted directly or indirectly by

Australian bushfires in 2019–2020 (Biddle et al. 2020). In the everyday life of most Australians before these widespread wildfires, air was generally invisible and breathing taken-for-granted. During the fires, ‘particulate matter’ from bushfire smoke was blown vast distances. Smoke made ordinarily invisible air visible as it shrouded major cities for days, sometimes for weeks on end. Living with dangerously smoky air turned many Australians into ‘aware breathers’. Aware breathers were primed for COVID-19 restrictions, where the virus hangs in the air but cannot be seen (Setti et al. 2020).

The fires, which surged to the sea on New Year’s Eve 2019–2020 (NYE) in the peak Christmas summer holiday period, also threw into relief a feature of Australian social organisation that often goes unremarked: a key extra-household kindred we term a ‘grandparent-family’. We trace how, in a cruel twist, the grandparent-families that were central in fire survival have been cleaved and fractured along household lines during the coronavirus pandemic. At the same time, the new boundaries serve to emphasise the importance of household insiders. ‘Staying at home’ orders have formed a ‘bubble’ of shared air within households.² And inside a household bubble, the mingling of breath is now a conspicuous act and a marker of intimacy.

Fire and Air

Fresh air fills spaces invisibly and largely unnoticed. Fresh air is forgotten (Dennis 2016) and goes without saying. We notice air most when it smells or is stained by *something in the air*.

Australia’s extended bushfire season in 2019–2020 is now known as our ‘Black Summer’. The reference to summer is misleading. Arguably, this fire season started in Queensland (Qld) during the Australian winter (as early as June 2019). The last fires were extinguished in May 2020. Over this extended time, a constellation of bushfires ignited, burnt, smouldered, spread out of control, and stormed around Australia.³ This continental constellation of combustion was unprecedented in Australian history.

The myriad of fires did not simply ignite, smoulder, rekindle, merge and finally die. They smoked for months on end:

[M]ore than half the adult population [of Australia] (57.0 per cent), or around 11.2 million adults were estimated to have felt physically affected by the smoke from the fires. (Biddle et al. 2020: 4)

Thirty-four people died as a direct consequence of the fires. Some 445 people are estimated to have died as a result of smoke from the 2019–2020 fire season. In Eurobodalla, the first fires began north of Batemans Bay in late November 2020. One resident wrote: “With heavy smoke blanketing the South Coast for weeks on end, the simple act of breathing became a challenge” (Guinery 2020: 7). This smoke was like thick grey smog.⁴

On NYE, the Eurobodalla experienced a new kind of smoke as the Currawong and Clyde Mountain fires developed their own pyro-cumulonimbus weather systems and surged towards the coast. Around the swirling fire fronts, acrid black smoke ‘turned day into night’. One survivor account sets the scene:

Like everyone on New Year’s Eve we fled our house and headed to the beach. I guess just the fact that my sentence can begin with ‘like everyone, we fled our house’ reflects the magnitude of our strange existence where fleeing in fear was the ‘norm’. . . As we were leaving, we saw flames leaping up in the air as trees ignited. Those black leaves that had been falling for days were swirling all around us and we had to dodge branches on fire that were hurtling from the sky.

[T]he heat was so intense that we were forced to head closer to the water. As we cautiously rounded the bend, we saw an ember hit a tree on Pretty Point and watched, stunned, as it burst into angry flames. Things were too dangerous here for us to go any further forward. Fire was everywhere.

Within minutes the whole Point was ablaze and we all prayed it didn’t spread to our little group and force us into the freezing water. There was so much going on – the heat, the darkness, the smoke. (Julie Steadman qtd in Guinery 2020: 56–57)

Figure 2. Malua Bay Beach shrouded in smoke as the NYE fire approaches. Photo courtesy of Lenore Coltheart.

Another eye-witness reported their experience at Malua Bay Beach south of Batemans Bay:

Everyone was on the beach, just covered in ash and smoke . . . There was a strange calmness. People were as close to the water's edge as they could [be]. People were literally just lying on the beach trying to keep out of the smoke and ash. (Smee 2020)

In nearby Canberra, the air quality that day was the worst of any city on the planet. Canberra registered levels 26 times greater than the threshold considered hazardous to health (Fanner 2020). The situation on the Eurobodalla coast where the firestorm grew catastrophically on NYE was considered to be twice as bad: 'In Batemans Bay, where hundreds of homes and structures are believed to have been lost, the concentration of particles in the air was nearly double that of Canberra' (ABC News 2020). Smoke was not just confined to blazes. It blew on the wind and seeped into the nooks and crannies of Australian life. In early November 2019, Brisbane's air quality was worse than Beijing's (Mellor and Powell 2019). The following week, the air on the Gold Coast was listed as worse than the air in Mumbai (Pollard 2019). On a day in late November 2019, Sydney and Adelaide were blanketed under thick smoke haze, with experts urging children, the elderly and people with heart or lung disease to avoid going outdoors. On the same day, Victoria issued a thunderstorm asthma warning and raised the state's fire danger scale to catastrophic (ABC News 2019). In December 2019, smoke was reported to be the 'worst ever' at 12 times the hazardous threshold, and NSW Health – in a prescient move – warned that face masks might be beneficial, and emergency hospital room presentations spiked (Aubusson 2019; Cockburn 2019). For months, Australian bushfire smoke travelled on the wind. Satellites tracked giant smoke plumes leaving Australia's shores on NYE and circumnavigating the globe more than once over a period of one hundred days.

Breath

Tim Ingold (2010) has noted that an average human being breathes approximately 15 litres of air a minute. On average, we inhale and exhale air 20 times a minute. Jane Macnaughton and Havi Carel observe:

Breathing is literally at the centre of our bodies; it is essential to life. Much of the time we are unaware of it, in the same way that we cannot feel our hearts beating or our stomach digesting food. (Macnaughton and Carel 2016: 295)

Breathing – like digestion or our heart beating – is, in everyday moments, heedless (Clarke 2002). In the humanities, social sciences and philosophy, this invisibility is related to the fact that air is hardly perceived as an object; is indistinguishable from its surroundings; and is 'ambience itself' (Macnaughton and Carel 2016: 303). Yet lack of breath is an existential threat: 'The experience of running out of air and time is the ultimate crisis and threat to self' (Clarke 2002: 147).

Breath is a mediator of social interaction, connecting people. It is brought into awareness through mindful meditation as well as in speech and a variety of 'silent' language forms (Hall 1959) – sighing, gasping, cooing.⁵ Breathing becomes the vehicle for representing moods and feelings beyond words (Clarke 2002). The danger of breath is its 'connectiveness, its creative preciousness . . . also its precariousness' (Rosengarten 2020: 342). Breathing and air are intimately entangled: we exhale elements of our body into the world, and we inhale the environment into our bodies (Wainwright 2017). Lungs are open and interacting with an environment and are 'susceptible to the harmful effects of foreign materials carried to their surface with each breath' (Wainwright 2017: 343).

In these convergent crises, air became both conspicuous and distrusted – a new way of '*becoming knowledgeable* in our ways through the world in the course of everyday activities' (Ingold 2010: S121; original emphasis).⁶ Particulate matter and undetected viral droplets suspended in the air – and debates about reach, suspension and 'coalescence phenomenon' – are now the basis of everyday, as well as clinical, speculation (Setti et al. 2020).

Breathing is generally unnoticed in everyday life except when we meditate, gasp, laugh, sob (Macnaughton and Carel 2016) or smoke (Dennis 2006). Conditions like asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease can bring breathing and air into the foreground of consciousness (Clarke 2020; Macnaughton and Carel 2016). Such experiences produce 'aware breathers' (Macnaughton and Carel 2016: 304). More than this,

what is perhaps less apparent about breath . . . is that [breathing] is the only bodily site (other than the skin) where interior and exterior spaces are in constant exchange. We breath in the air and whatever it contains, extract the oxygen we need, and expel carbon dioxide. The air around us, with its pollutants, odours, humidity and heat, becomes internalized briefly, making us beings who are not only *in* the world, but also *of* it. (Macnaughton and Carel 2016: 295)⁷

Bushfire smoke made many Australians 'aware breathers' in 2019–2020. It was as 'aware breathers' that many Australians faced a convergent threat in the air: an invisible viral pandemic.

The Social Life of Bushfires

An ethnographic study of the social lives of bushfires began unexpectedly when one of us (DF) was in the line of fire on NYE in the Eurobodalla Shire.⁸ Over five hundred homes were destroyed and another 274 damaged in Eurobodalla. Some six hundred out-buildings and sheds were destroyed, and 79 per cent of Eurobodalla's landmass was burnt. No lives were lost in Eurobodalla, perhaps because most people live close to the beach. As local Rural Fire Service Captain Ian Aitkin wrote: 'Apart from the surpassing tragedy of losing lives in the bushfires, Batemans Bay and the Eurobodalla Shire was the worst affected region . . . across the nation' (qtd in Guinery 2020: 140).

Eurobodalla Shire is a significant holiday and retirement destination on the NSW south coast. At the height of the summer holiday period, Eurobodalla's modest population⁹ triples (Eurobodalla Shire Council 2019). Here, we drill down to a small Eurobodalla neighbourhood we dub 'Nanny Bay'.¹⁰ Nanny Bay is a small sandy cove formed between two rugged and erstwhile forested promontories. A thickly wooded creek runs from the surrounding hills into the Bay (Figure 3).

By our preliminary count, 24 residents ('permanents') in 10 separate houses formed this neighbourhood at the end of 2019. Most of these (11) were

Figure 3. Mud map of a neighbourhood in Nanny Bay. Courtesy of Rod Lucas.

retirees whose children had left home and established their own households. Though the homes of retirees dominate Friendly St, two households are composed of nuclear families with working parents and their school-age children. Five houses on Friendly St are 'weekenders': they are owned by people who live and work elsewhere and visit Nanny Bay occasionally on weekends or for holidays. One household was 'in transition' from a weekender to a permanent retirement home.

This situation contrasts with that of Holiday St, which runs parallel to Friendly St across the creek. Only three homes on Holiday St house 'permanents'. The rest are 'weekenders' or short-term rentals. On NYE, there was a holiday household of several young adults in one of those houses.

The Friendly St neighbourhood is known for being hospitable and welcoming. During peak holiday periods, cars cover road verges, and the homes of permanents welcome younger family members, particularly children and their families. The typical two-person households of retirees become temporary 'holiday households' with multiple residents. Our research so far suggests that the dominant structural feature of holiday households is a form of kindred we call a 'grandparent-family'¹¹ (Figure 4 presents an indicative structure of this sort of kindred). Notwithstanding the dissolution of many parental partnerships or the death of family members, in ideal terms a 'grandparent-family' includes the founding couple (the grandparents), their children and their children's children (grandchildren).

In the ideal type, each married or partnered couple founds their own household with their children. Some or all of a grandparent-family might form a temporary holiday household (as for example in Figure 5).

Figure 4. Indicative structure of a grandparent-family circling separate constituent households.

Figure 5. Members of a holiday household might come from part or all members of a grandparent-family.

On NYE, one house-owning couple at the top of Friendly St welcomed 14 members of their grandparent-family for a total of 16 in that holiday household. At the other end of the street, a holiday household numbered five and included the home-owning couple and one (of two) daughters and her two small children. Next door to them was a holiday household of six that included the two permanent householders who were joined by two grandchildren of one, as well as her sister and their elderly mother (a great-grandmother). In 2016–2017, that house had had a holiday household of 11 – the other partner’s two daughters, their husbands and five grandchildren. It is the adult children and grandchildren of this house who call this place Nanny (or ‘Granny’) Bay.

Chrissy Guinery’s book (2020) of survivor accounts makes clear that grandparent-families were a more general feature of social organisation in Eurobodalla during the NYE fire emergency and others that followed it through January and into February 2020. Emergency warnings went out at 6:00 am on NYE. On Friendly St, holiday households worked to prepare their properties before the fire’s unpredictable arrival.

Figure 6. The vegetation around the beach caught too on NYE. Photo Courtesy of Deane Fergie (used with permission).

Within hours, Nanny Bay Point was on fire and burning back around the promontory towards View Circuit. Shortly thereafter, fire crossed George Bass Drive from the opposite direction, and the top of Friendly St was hit by ember attacks and spot fires. Without any command or control, the adult and young adult members of (holiday) households worked to put the spot fires out. As the fire front crossed George Bass Drive and a shed at the top of the *cul-de-sac* began to burn, a neighbour moved down the street, telling people to “Get out, get out!” as he passed each house.

Some families made for Nanny Bay Beach, others for Malua Bay Beach. As most family members found refuge on the beach, a small group of adults went back to fight the fire advancing on Friendly St.

Figure 7. Households huddle on Malua Bay Beach on NYE. Photo courtesy of Lenore Coltheart (used with permission).

On Malua Bay Beach, an estimated two thousand people and their pets huddled in small groups (Figure 7), and most spent the night there. They hugged and comforted each other. On Nanny Bay Beach, around 25 people gathered on the sand (Figure 8). Not all were from the local neighbourhood. Some

Figure 8. Malua Bay Beach surrounded by fire on NYE. Photo courtesy of Judy Fergie (used with permission).

had retreated to Nanny Bay as their homes in the hinterland were engulfed by the fire.

In our informants' accounts and photographs, it is clear that many people stood, sat and huddled on the beach in small holiday households. At the heart of many were grandparent-families.

Kinship

Marshall Sahlins has sought to solve the gnarly anthropological problem of 'what is kinship', responding that it is in essence a 'mutuality of being' (2013: ix):¹²

Kinsfolk are members of one another, intrinsic to each other's identity and existence. Coming in various degrees and forms, such intersubjective relations of being . . . account for performative or 'made' kinship as well as relations of procreation. Persons participate in each other's existence by a variety of meaningful attributes beside the presumed connections of 'biology' or even common substance. (Sahlins 2013: 62)

Research about Australian kinship is dominated by analyses of Indigenous forms. Allon Uhlmann's book *Family, Gender and Kinship in Australia* (2006) is an important exception. Uhlmann demonstrated that 'the nuclear-family household remains the dominant form of household among Australians of Anglo-Celtic decent' (2006: 32). He also drew attention to the dynamic, cyclical nature of Australian kinship.

The visibility of households – and the prominence of grandparent-families – in these fires resonates with Uhlmann's ethnography of kinship in the Australian city of Newcastle. He observed:

Family-ness not only organizes the relationships within nuclear-family households. It also shapes relationships between households of related people . . . In principle, what connects households to one another is the fact that members in the different households are still members of the same family, as is most typically the case with independent adults and their parents or siblings . . . Such networks often operate as mutual aid and support networks. They also greatly overlap with ceremonial kindred groupings, such as the descendants of elderly people who might get together at Christmas. (Uhlmann 2006: 39)

During the NYE fire emergency, holiday households, typically grandparent-families, operated as 'mutual aid and support groups'. In the face of the NYE fire-storm, these kin put their 'mutuality of being' into practice.

Convergent Crises

The date of 26 November 2019 was the date of the first bushfire in Eurobodalla (Guinery 2020). Nine days earlier, far away in China, the first person is believed to have been infected with a novel coronavirus (Ma 2020). Both crises reached a key point on NYE. That was the day of the fire emergency in Eurobodalla and south to Victoria's coast. On that same day, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced a cluster of pneumonia-like cases in Wuhan, China. The number of cases grew. The resulting contagious disease was named COVID-19.

In the first months of 2020, COVID-19 overlapped with the bushfire crisis. Relief came to Eurobodalla on 16 February 2020 (Guinery 2020). Fire was quenched by flood. Australia's extended fire season ended at the beginning of March 2020. By the end of March, the first national lockdown began in Australia. Australians were locked down as households. 'Separate households of related people', including the separate constituent households of grandparent-families (Figure 9), found themselves irretrievably *out of touch*.

Physical Distancing and Atomising Families

Sahlins (2013: 87) has written that, in societies where cognation or kindred networks prevail, the active participation of people in each other's existence is a more likely basis of kin relationship. Our enquiries into Australia's convergent crises in 2019–2020 makes clear that the curtailment of active participation in the existence of others undermines mutuality of being. Physical distancing was a key feature of strategies to mitigate the contagion of COVID-19. The Australian government told citizens:

Keep your distance

One way to slow the spread of viruses, such as coronavirus, is physical distancing. The more space between you and others, the harder it is for the virus to spread.¹³

On 31 March, it became law in NSW that a person must not, without reasonable excuse, leave their place of residence. People most at risk included those aged over 65. Most grandparents were at risk.

Safety for households lay in locking down and locking out non-members. As Josien de Klerk has written of his own experience in the Netherlands:

Social distancing has created this strange demarcation. We – [in his case] our family unit – are the safe

ones. But those who were extensions of our safe unit – our parents, siblings, friends – are the dangerous others to whom we are dangerous too. (De Klerk 2020: 1)

In Australia, grandparent-families were atomised and cleaved along household lines:

Figure 9. The fracturing of grandparent-family groups along household lines.

The closeness and comfort of non-residential kin, especially grandparents, has been heavily impacted by COVID-19. Informants have made this plain. One participant describes what they missed most during lockdown: ‘Because of bushfires and road closures and COVID-19 restrictions, I have not seen my son, daughter in-law and my granddaughters since December last year. I miss them terribly’. Another wrote that what they missed most was ‘not being able to see our children and grandchildren and not being able to fly/drive [interstate] to see my mother in hospital’. People also noted that they missed the ‘ceremonial occasions’ in which non-resident kin get together. Easter, Mother’s Day, significant birthdays, family weddings, funerals and cultural events were each mentioned by a number of respondents. Some commented more fully about family occasions they had missed and about how they felt:

Easter with family, [not] having grandson for holidays, [made me feel] upset.

Other respondents signalled the significant caring role they have in their grandchildren’s lives. One respondent who missed their grandson’s third birthday during lockdown wrote:

A new granddaughter was only four months old at the start and [I] will not see her until sometime in June. Also [I] did not see both grandchildren living locally for over six weeks. This was by far the hardest part of isolation as I look after the little ones that live locally twice a week, and see the other two at least

every three weeks. It was unbelievably sad not to see them, and altered the structure of our lives.

This respondent was not alone. The ‘structure’ of many lives was altered. In pre-COVID times, many grandparents were integral to the lives of their children and grandchildren. This is clear from a simple review of Australian childcare arrangements. A 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011) study reported that 937,000 (or 25 per cent of all children under 12 or 49 per cent of children in regular care) received regular grandparental care. More recently, Kelly Emerton (2018) reported that grandparental care in Australia averages 58 hours a month. Indeed, Julie Hare (2020) has described grandparents as ‘the sticky tape that holds Australia’s overly complicated childcare system tenuously together’. Caring for grandchildren is a significant and quantified way in which many grandparent-families and their mutuality of being are constituted in the practices of everyday life.

COVID Breath

In the coronavirus epidemic, breath has become explicated (see Dennis 2016). Breathlessness is central to the diagnosis of COVID-19 and a sign of disease progression (Macnaughton and Carel 2020). Social distancing is the policing of intimate and personal space, buffering and distancing us from breathing dangerous air in or out of our bodies: ‘Alongside concerns for radioactive fallout, air pollution or ungenteel smell, the COVID-19 pandemic calls forth an obsession with spray . . . [that] culminates in the certainly justified impulse to disrupt airborne mutualities’ (Harms 2020: 1). The enumeration of space and the measuring of social distance became conspicuous during the COVID-19 lockdown. Intimate, personal and household spaces were reconfigured as something of which we should all be aware and about which we should maintain constant vigilance. Choirs have emerged as potential ‘super spreaders’ of coronavirus. Singing propels respiratory droplets and aerosols – a ‘shower of secretions’ – described by a fluid physics expert as a ‘viral weather system’ (Cockburn 2020). Similar concerns have been raised about talking and also blowing out candles on birthday cakes (see McCutcheon 2020).

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, Ingold (2010: S122) noted that the ‘normal’ admixture of substances – particulates and aerosols – makes air a ‘volatile medium’. In our convergent crises, Australians confronted dangerous and choking particulate

matter, and then dangerous droplets and aerosols. Many participants in our ethnography remain ‘aware breathers’ as a result. Guinery reflected back on her experience of the fires in the Eurobodalla:

I take a big breath. Inhale and exhale loudly. I can do that now, and it doesn’t hurt my lungs. And I don’t have a coughing fit afterwards. . . . In the thick of it our chests hurt from the smoke that filled our lungs and fires threatened to consume our peace and possessions. (Guinery 2020:163–164)

A respondent wrote how their experience of the summer of 2019–2020 ‘gave us a new respect for fresh air – the lack of it enraged me’. Another who was severely impacted by bushfire indicated that when COVID-19 came they ‘started looking for viruses everywhere’. Their worry resonates with a report about the radical lockdown of high-rise social housing towers in Melbourne over July 2020. One liaison person reported of some residents that ‘they’ve got paranoia about the virus, they don’t want to go out, say they are scared of the air’ (Button et al. 2020). One of the participant-observers in our study has developed a ‘COVID setting’ in which seating is staggered and off-set along the now fully extended dining table ‘so that no one at the table is breathing directly on anyone else’. Australians are now making an effort to police themselves:

I didn’t go out as much, and when I did it was uncomfortable and draining, especially with friends as I had to consciously stop from slipping into old habits: no hugging hello, standing close to chat, no café tables to sit at. In fact, I found seeing friends more stressful than dealing with strangers at the supermarket.

Shared Air and Intimacy

When survivors of the fires met family, friends and close neighbours for the first time after the immediate emergency had passed, many hugged and sobbed their relief. There was a contagion of hugging. A pop-up café in a caravan just out of Mogo offered ‘hugs free’ on their price list. Hugging and crying together was an indicator for many of an intimacy founded in a shared traumatic experience. Such physical closeness does not happen in public during the traumas of COVID-19 times.

Lockdown and social distancing have underscored the household ‘bubbles’ of co-residents. Whereas in many cultures shared food has a capacity to generate kinship (Sahlins 2013: 6), in COVID-19 the sharing

Figure 10. Touch, New Year’s Day 2020. Photo courtesy of Jessie Rowan (used with permission).

of air is now a key marker of mutuality (cf. Harms 2020). Household bubbles are full of air. All members of a household share air, at least indirectly. Outside air is dangerous. As one respondent commented, the worst thing about the first national lockdown was

. . . having to constantly ‘be aware’ while I was out. Having to self-talk when other people that live in the same complex were not following the rules: ‘Not my problem. Let it go. Just don’t touch the stair rails’, or at the supermarket (where, several times, I accidentally swore at someone who brushed past me way too close). Just being on constant edge, but at the same time knowing I was better off than 99 percent of the world’s population and that historically I’d got it light: I wasn’t going to bed wondering if my house would still be standing in the morning, was I?

What made outside air dangerous was that the breath of others might, unseen, carry the virus and leave it hanging in the air, able to infect if we breathed it in or touched where it had landed. The distancing of breath marks social distance.

Uhlmann (2006) writes of the Australian family as a site for the containment of familiar practices. COVID-19 has seen this containment made both explicit and curtailed, as some close kin – such as grandparents and cousins – are excluded from the intimacy of day-to-day kinship. This reinforces the closeness, as well as the separateness, of the (ideal) nuclear family in both representation and practice. For Uhlmann, family is a boundary device, excluding outsiders. The scope of this ‘outsiderness’ has tightened under COVID-19 restrictions, with lockdowns and enumerated spatial rules reconfiguring both the boundary and containment of intimate kin. In this novel coronavirus world of awareness, the ultimate practice of intimacy is the unfettered and direct mingling of breath between people. Indeed, a marker of the greatest intimacy during COVID-19 is the direct mingling and sharing of breath without heed.

Intimacy is not universal within household bubbles. One of our informants described how their young adult children spent lockdown almost entirely in their separate bedroom bubbles, avoiding siblings as well as parents. Similarly, 'group' or non-kin housemates (what Americans might refer to as 'roommates') may share air indirectly within their household bubble while maintaining strenuous regimens of cleaning and hygiene and keeping more than a breath away from each other.

Mingling breath without heeding it is an indicator of intimacy in COVID-19 times. Shared air, touch and the exchange of bodily fluids are indicia of the sexual intimacy of lovers (Figure 11):

Figure 11. Take my breath away. A 3D image by Christoph Burgstedt.¹⁴

But parents and their small children can also share the breath of intimacy. Reflecting on 116 days of lockdown because of a medical condition, Tim Jonze described a favourite game with his children:

The Slide Game normally ends with a bear hug; her trapped wriggling under my arms as I press our faces together, wondering how long I can get away with not letting her go . . . At least she can wriggle free, unlike her brother, who has little say in accepting my shower of soggy kisses and chubby thigh squeezes.

In a world starved of physical contact, I'm a guilty glutton, squirrelled away with my plentiful supply, entangled in a cornucopia of limbs; feet in my ribs; fingers in my nostrils. My kids slip soapily down my body when I shower them, murmur gently when I hug them close, spray hay fever sneezes across my face like the super-spreaders of love they are, I can't get enough. (Jonze 2020)

Conclusion

In 2019–2020, Australia has experienced convergent crises. In this article, we have sought to demonstrate – by focussing on two and giving attention to kinship

and intimacy on the one hand and air and breathing on the other – some twists that come with convergence and the reflexivity that can come with crises.

As COVID-19 has made breath and shared air visible, it has also rendered kin living in other households more distant. We are held apart from them and their air by apprehensions of danger. Grandparents, many of whom are significant child-carers, and who were at the heart of the holiday households which faced the fires on NYE, are now estranged and cut off. If bushfires and their smoke made us aware breathers open to embrace those living in other households, COVID-19 times have made us aware of the need to stay apart and breath different air. Shared air and the mingled breath of intimacy have become recognisable markers of our mutuality of being.

We have focussed on air and breathing in this article because stark differences in the experience of breathing air during the fires and then in COVID-19 times highlight complex twists and turns as crises converge. It is well accepted in the literature that social organisation underpins how people and social groups survive, fight and recover from crises. We have shown how in this case social organisation contorted and changed between the two crises. More broadly, we have asked: Should the convolutions of convergent crises be at the heart of enquiry and analysis? Should such complexity be reflected in policy, planning and practice? These questions now drive our enquiries.

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Notes

1. We adopt the term 'crises' over other available labels (catastrophe, disaster, disruption, emergency) in our work to avoid the ongoing and, in our view, ultimately unproductive debate about what defines and distinguishes a catastrophe, crisis, disaster, disruption or emergency (see, for example, Hannigan 2012; Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999; Tierney 2019; and Vollmer 2013). We acknowledge that these definitions can have consequences for levels of planning, response and funding, but they have also impoverished enquiry and obscured broader contexts, social processes and analysis of complexity.
2. Clearly, lockdown also made household violence more invisible and made some people much more vulnerable (ActionAid 2020; Cormack 2020). An article which considers this and other aspects of 'home' is in preparation.
3. Across Australia, more than 46 million acres (72,000 square miles) of land burnt. At least 3,500 homes and nearly six thousand other structures were lost (Wikipedia 2020). More than a billion animals are estimated to have perished (Center for Disaster Philanthropy 2019).
4. One of our informants talked about how she dried her washing inside because, were she to put it on the clothes line as she ordinarily would have done, the smoky smell would have ultimately been brought back into the house.
5. Hall indicates that vocalisation in the 'intimate space' is a very minor part of communication, 'which is carried mainly by other channels' (Hall 1966: 117). Hall quotes the linguist Martin Joos: 'An intimate utterance pointedly avoids giving the addressee information from outside of the speaker's skin' (Hall 1966: 118).
6. 'Breathing with every step they take, wayfarers walk at once in the air and on the ground. This walking is itself a process of thinking and knowing.' (Ingold 2010: S121). 'A living, breathing body is at once a body-on-the-ground and a body-in-the-air' (2010: S122).
7. See also Wainwright (2017: 342–343).
8. A pilot project called 'The Social Life of Bushfires' was conceived as DF, an experienced ethnographer, sat on a beach as the fire surged to the sea on the Eurobodalla coast on NYE. Some weeks later, in-depth interviews began with a number of key informants. Interviews were interrupted by COVID-19 social distancing. The project has now expanded in scope to include the impact of COVID-19 on people who also experienced bushfire. The larger project is titled 'Convergent Crises: Southern NSW and the ACT, 2019–20 (Incorporating The Social Life of Bushfires)' and takes in local government areas from the southern border of NSW through the Snowy Mountains to Canberra in the Australian Capital Territory and back to the coast south of Nowra. Our team project is founded on participant-observation, interviews, electronic questionnaires, documentary research, media monitoring, literature review and participant collections.
9. 37,700 in the 2016 census.
10. We use aliases for place names in this case study. In this instance, we have adopted the name given to this bay by the grandchildren of one resident couple. For them, going to 'Nanny Bay' means a visit to their grandparents. The significance of the reference to grandparents will become evident later in this article.
11. We use 'grandparent-family (group)' as an analytic concept rather than as a phrase in ordinary everyday speech. We note also that we have identified 'granny's groups' in our analysis of some contemporary Aboriginal social structures (see Fergie and Lucas 2020). A key difference between Aboriginal granny's groups and the non-Aboriginal grandparent-family discussed here is that over three or more generations granny's groups can develop into surnamed descent groups or 'families of polity' (after Sutton 1998).
12. He argues 'that "mutuality of being" will cover the variety of ethnographically documented ways that kinship is locally constituted, whether by procreation, social construction, or some combination of these. Moreover, it will apply equally to interpersonal kinship relations, whether "consanguineal" or "affinal", as well as group arrangements of de-

scent. Finally, “mutuality of being” will logically motivate certain otherwise enigmatic effects of kinship bonds – often called “mystical”, whereby what one person does or suffers also happens to others’ (Sahlins 2013: 2).

13. <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/how-to-protect-yourself-and-others-from-coronavirus-covid-19/physical-distancing-for-coronavirus-covid-19>.
14. <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-illustration/transmission-pathogens-by-droplet-infection-via-1671823549>.
15. www.locusar.com.au.

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