Article

A Little Fear: Rethinking Scapes, Structures, Time and the Ordinary

Simone Dennis[1,*], Andrew Dawson[2], Alison Behie[1]

[1]*Australian National University, Canberra, Australia*
[2]*University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia*

Abstract

Treating fear as a kind of scape risks overlooking its peculiar temporality. Fear is, we argue, only ever established as a motivator, for social change for example, after the occurrences that gave rise to it, hence at some point in the future. This retro-clarity poses problems for the commonplace practice of treating fear as a causal explanation for things. Following this warning, we explain fear's peculiar temporality. Fear is, we argue, only ever constituted at the moment of its commission. Indeed, it is this present-ness of fearful events that accounts for the very things that make them so fearful – their appearance as emergent, chaotic and unexpectedly obtrusive within the normalcy of everyday life and the normal flow of time. Finally, we argue, this calls for reconceptualization of fear within Future Studies, away from a focus on fearful future dystopias towards recognition of how the fearfulness of events arises precisely from their present-ness and un-anticipatability.

Introduction

In considering our response to this exciting call for papers – a call made with particular reference to Appadurai's scapes (1996), we each turned to ethnographic data we have all been engaged with over the course of the past year. Dennis and Dawson had been conducting fieldwork in rural Australia in the service of contract research for a private company but quickly found their ethnographic antennae attuned to the ways in which conflict emerged and operated as a generative force in the communities under study, upon which they are now focussing. Dennis and Behie oversee a key institutional research focus on crisis and conflict at the Australian National University, and have an especial research focus on the concurrent social and biological responses people make in the heat of a crisis or, in the case of Australia, the concurrent crises of COVID19 and bushfires. As a result of closely examining the circulation of fear from our different research perspectives, we are agreed that a particular problem with treating fear as a kind of scape – despite the fact that the suffix was used by Appadurai to get us to think specifically of flows, associations and entailments – is that its peculiar temporality may be overlooked. We argue in this paper that so doing is consequential to our understanding of fear.

Conceptualising Fear

Fear has been constituted in the thick of the emergence of COVID-19 as an outcome – of political ineptitude or speed to protect populations from catching the virus; of having to reconstitute and refigure non-cohabiting 'others' as illness vectors; of potential economic ruination, and a host of others – or else as a driver of particular kinds of behaviour. That is, the relationship between event and fear is unwaveringly causal, and fear might occupy the position of either explanans or explanandum. These causal relationships might take structural form: the economic rationalist argument might be that the fear of running low on a commodity like toilet paper is the outcome of a

rational response to limited supply – toilet paper is cheap, will always be used and can be stored for later use. Fear of missing out on essential stock, here the explanans, motivates the rational outcome of stockpiling, the explanandum. The political scientist or sociologist might emphasise how the regular institutionalised patterns of government and administration use fear to secure their political goals or, alternatively, fail to recognise fear as the motivator for 'bad behaviour'. To use the example of toilet paper again, the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison was roundly criticised for admonishing stock pilers of toilet paper as 'selfish'; the gentler and more accurate explanation, according to many commentators, was that stockpiling was a manifestation of fear (see for example Oullette, 2020; Lundstrom, 2020). In March 2020, when the toilet paper situation was at its most dire and fights broke out in major Australian supermarkets, a marketing expert, Michael Callaghan, offered some precision about exactly what kind of fear it was to the online newspaper the *New Daily*: Fear Of Missing Out (see Black, 2020).

Fear, it seems, very quickly becomes an outcome of social and physical forces in the world, or else a cause of action and behaviour but as Robert J. Thornton (2002) has persuasively argued in the case of violence, fear is meaningfully constituted 'only at the moment of its commission'. This fact makes fear, especially mortal fear, 'difficult to accommodate in the ordinary narrative history or the sociological account of social "causes" or "forces"' (Thornton, 2002, p. 41). While cognisant of the differences between violence and fear (which we do not have opportunity to deal with within the limits of this paper) we take Thornton's thesis as the foundation for our conceptualisation of fear. Our reason for so doing is grounded in the ethnographic examples we discuss below.

Interesting and striking in the examples of toilet paper hoarding and related admonishment is that fear is only ever established as a motivator or outcome after the fact, at some point in the future. It is regarded as explicable in the sense that we are not really able to say where or how fear will make some outcome or other manifest, or itself be the outcome of some event, *before* it actually takes place. It was predicted of course, that COVID-19 would be frightening, but we could not say when, where, or how it would establish itself or who it would involve. It is only after things have happened that we can say, 'toilet paper hoarding stood metonymically for the fear of being unable to take basic care of oneself and one's cohabitators during COVID-19', or things like 'the abuse of Chinese Australians occurred as the ultimate symbol of the fear of the other as a vector of contagion'. These examples, drawn from generalised responses to COVID-19 that made the evening news every night for the first several weeks of the crisis seem like fairly predictable occurrences during a period of disruption to supply chains and widespread knowledge of the origin of the COVID-19, but perhaps the sureness of their motivation is a function of the clarity of retrospective – at some point in the future - explication.

Perhaps also, we should take that retro-clarity as evidence of the problem with treating fear as part of causal explanations for things. If we can only declare fear the motivator or outcome after the fact, then, as Thornton puts it in the case of violence, 'how could it ever be declared the final cause of social forms and actions?' (Thornton, 2002, p. 45). In this paper, we favour, following Thornton, an emergent understanding of fear that unhitches it from structural circumstance and recognises its temporal specificity – as 'precisely chaotic, emergent, situational' (Thornton, 2002, p. 45) and, in fact, ordinary. An emergent take on fear refuses to accept that firm structures give rise to fear, and that fear arises in a temporal sequence as either motivator or outcome. A multiplicity of complex elements give rise to fear, rather than a singular cause. A focus on the presence (and indeed present-ness) of fear in the ordinary acknowledges that, sometimes, things are frightening precisely because of their capacity to appear in situations of homeliness. Home is a fecund context for experiencing fear, not simply because of its ordinariness, but also because it is so intimately enmeshed within personal identity. As Rapport and Dawson put it, "home is where one knows oneself best" (Rapport & Dawson, 1998, p. 19), and it has multiple dimensions.

One can be at home in time, in which pasts are known, presents predicted and futures anticipated. And, crucially, an effect of fearful events can be to render pasts unknown, presents unpredicted and futures un-anticipatable, such that one's being – homeliness – is destabilised. Foresight and futures research is an evolving and diverse field encompassing a number of different epistemological, methodological and, indeed, temporal trajectories – from deductive studies concerned with accurately identifying probabilities, to inductive studies, such as within 'Critical Futures Research' (Hideg, 2002), that are concerned more with the impact of ideas of the future on the organisation of the present, and through to the more contemporary vogue for abductive research (Kuosa, 2011). However, when considering fear and the future all share a concern - with 'imaginaries' of the future, and dystopic imaginaries particularly. However, in our view the particular force of fearful events obtruding unexpectedly within ordinary

time is less to render the future dystopian as it is to render it un-anticipatable, and fearfully so.

And, of course, one can be at home in familiar places. Fearful events are especially fearful in this respect. Anyone who has ever watched a horror film knows the importance of fearful disruption – the knife wielding murderer erupts into the morning or evening ritual of taking a shower. Anyone who has ever watched a Mafia drama knows that transgressors are led to their deaths by way of perfectly ordinary invitations to dinner, or being instructed to run everyday errands for superiors that end in an unceremonious shot to the head at the pick up or delivery point. The same corruption of the ordinary is relied upon in works of fiction. As Australian author Patricia Wrightson indicates in her 1983 novel *A Little Fear*, the irruption of fear into the everyday is a powerful precondition for its effects. When describing the capacity of a central character in the book, the Njimbin – a small, ancient Indigenous being – to drive away an elderly lady who has unexpectedly moved into the house it has camped in for decades, Wrightson notes that the Njimbin:

> Knew how to build terror out of small things. It knew that ordinary, expected things, if they behaved in an unexpected way, could start a little unreasonable fear that went jumping along the nerves; and unreason was the dark that turned fear into terror. (Wrightson, 1983, p. 80)

Wrightson also notes that this technique permitted a being of small power, unable to make and win outright confrontations on its own, to become terrible. The terror it could effect depended on 'moments' of everyday disruption. These included the unexpected way in which the ants sent into the old lady's house by the Njimbin behaved; by colonising her bed covers and building a nest within them, rather than, as might be expected of ants, stealing a little sugar; the way that frogs began to occupy her home in a very un-froglike manner, and the ways in which veritable storm clouds of midges arrived in the night in numbers so vast that the old woman was forced to imagine her own autopsied lungs filled with the winged fluff that she worried would cause her to suffocate to death.

That the Njimbin's small, terrifying power was prosecuted in the home, rendering its ordinary comforts unhomely in spatial and temporal terms, is interesting for our imaginary of fear. The old woman mused to herself that, at this time of year, frogs had available to them a lush and green world, ideal for their kind; why at this time of year they should choose the shelter of her cottage baffled and worried her. It was untimely, out of step with natural rhythms; if one was to discover a frog inside a home, it would surely be in the hottest part of the year, and in the darkest and dampest recesses of the laundry or bathroom – certainly not amongst one's soft furnishings during the rainy season. Like COVID-19, the presence of frogs in the front room is so very frightening precisely because of its obtrusion into the flow of 'normal', everyday existence. In order to understand fear and its evocations, we seek to understand it in the context of ordinary life, in the flow of the day-to day, and in the everyday activities, emotions and thoughts of ordinary people. As we show in our paper, if we treat fear as Thornton treats violence, precisely 'as a kind of social pattern that is temporal in character, and contingent though unpredictable' (Thornton, 2002, p. 46), then several important consequences emerge. One of these, drawn from our ethnographic explorations in COVID-19 and bushfire ravaged communities, is that fear might have important generative qualities that serve to orient people in the thickness and heat of the moment. We argue that fear can be productively imagined as a creative force that makes and orients relations – both positive and negative – between people. This in turn permits us to make some observations about communities and their formation under conditions of frightening viruses and fearsome bushfires, not least because both fundamentally rearranged the most ordinary relations we have with our homes and with our fellows in communities.

Ethnographic Inspirations for Rethinking Fear

As the COVID-19 crisis hit Australia, fear emerged as a principle notion in two key ways – first, as an ungovernable threat that could set Australia asunder and render it socially, economically, politically and physically vulnerable, and second, as a device by which governance of the populace could be conducted (see, for example Agamben, 2020). The fearsome threat of contracting COVID-19 provided compelling undergirding for self-isolation and social distancing in respect of the latter of these. In the case of the former, careful decisions had to be taken about how to reign in the fear of mass unemployment, economic freefall, widespread panic, widespread infection, and how to ensure that the government turned in a competent management strategy on all of these fronts. Soothing television and internet advertisements appeared on how to protect ourselves and others, how to apply for the various economic

presentation packages on offer, and how to maintain sociality at distance. Clear communications, simple rules and the distribution of financial resources provided the buffers between 'getting through this together' and succumbing to the fear that would rent Australia apart.

But COVID-19 struck an Australia already exhausted and terrorised by a bushfire crisis. In our field sites, which include townships at the southern NSW coast and in East Gippsland, many communities were hit hard by the bushfires that raged from late 2019 until early 2020. In Mallacoota, in East Gippsland Victoria, permanent residents and visitors alike were cut off for several days and experienced food and basic supplies shortages before they were evacuated by the Australian Navy. Several residents died or were seriously injured in the fires. The extensive property damage meant that many returned to face conditions of effective homelessness. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the route to post-fire regeneration for Mallacoota's 1,063 permanent residents would have been tourism, from which its income is principally drawn (ABS, 2016). However, in the context of the pandemic this did not eventuate. Besides social distancing and prohibitions on travel, a significant number of local residents, politicians and relevant professionals discouraged visitors, especially because of the township's relatively aged demographic profile and, hence its heightened vulnerability to the pandemic (Lazzaro & Costa, 2020). In the aftermath of the bushfires, strong, positive associations between community members were celebrated as the principal means by which people survived and would be able to recover. However, manifestations of association between community members, such as donations of material goods, labour and accommodation were simultaneously undermined by conflict, as locals blamed one another for the fires' causes, accused one another of not coming to the assistance of neighbours if they fled the inferno, and argued bitterly over the allocation of post-fire relief.

Both rifts and positive associations might have been compounded by the physical disassociation wrought by the social distancing required during the pandemic, but access to various internet platforms permitted community members to continue to engage with one another virtually. The possibility of relating to one another this way itself caused conflict between local people as they disputed the relative benefits (for health) and costs (for community life) of local services, including the town's bakery, going exclusively online. Despite this and other new conflicts emerging, other new grounds for association between locals have emerged as a result of the crises. Notably, locals in situ have come together in an emerging discourse of exclusion, disassociation and conflict - what Dawson and Dennis label 'disaster nativism' (Dawson & Dennis, 2020a). In the cases of both fire and the pandemic, 'outsiders', especially urbanites – 'sea/tree-changers', weekend home-owners, caravan owners and holiday makers have emerged as supposed agents of the crises. In the case of the bushfires, they brought, so the narrative goes, the 'green values' that disrupted 'burn off', a traditional method of fire prevention. In the case of the pandemic they bear contagion. This narrative has served to re-make some associations between locals that were undermined in the course of the fires, and served also to forge new ones between residents who had previously been fragmented by, for example differences over the grounds for claiming belonging - in terms of ancestral residency or, conversely knowledge of local ways of being for example (see also Dawson, 1998).

It might seem that feelings about the caravanners and greenie out of towners who brought economic security to the village, turned on a dime; they went from frogs in the greenery to frogs in the front room, unwelcome, out of place, arriving at exactly the wrong moment, and they were frightening. Perhaps they would bring COVID-19 with them. Perhaps they would spread it among locals as they gathered up resources from the local shop, as they turned from contributors to the local economy into drainers of the limited supplies. But fears took multiple forms and travelled down different paths, drawing different people together in configurations made of the moment. That is, concurrently with the evident tensions between identifiable interest groups (locals and outsiders) disaster nativism has served also to unmake erstwhile apparently firm associations, between permanent and weekender residents and even between permanent residents and other permanent residents. Some permanent residents have become caught in a bind between wanting weekenders (and others) to return with their cash, a much much-needed resource in the context of post-fire reconstruction. Simultaneously, others willed the weekenders to stay away lest they bring contagion. A motif of a toxic dependency has emerged that corrodes association. In more extreme cases, such as those of weekenders returning to their holiday homes for isolation and safety or to secure necessities such as toilet paper that had been exhausted in urban centres, overt conflict ensued.

In these contexts, fear cannot be simply asserted to be a singular causal agent that produces particular identifiable outcomes, after the fact. Configurations of the kinds we have described above may be erstwhile and long lasting, or they may be momentary and short lived. They may last until fear again reorients associations and informs conflicts, or they may evaporate and, depending on the moment, they may do both or neither. Rather than taking traceable

linear form, fear is generative and productive, driving people into the arms of unexpected allies, or repelling them from one another's company (see also, Dawson & Dennis, 2020b; Fergie, Lucas, & Harrington, 2020). Despite the fact that Appadurai is at pains to emphasize the "fluid, irregular shapes" of scapes, and notes that, like a landscape, they do not appear the same from every angle or point of view but rather depend on the position of the spectator (Appadurai, 1996), the scape yet preserves the fiction that there is something 'out there', like media, information or fear, that we might observe and use from each of our positions (see, for example Amit & Rapport, 2002). Our imaginary of fear differs; we propose that the ministry of time disallows the settling certainty of scape, and that rather than observing something like a fearscape from a certain position, the conditions of the fearful moment generate ideas and actions that make and unmake relations, short lived and enduring, between parties already united and those divided. The unpredictability of fear not only suggests its creative potential; it also suggests it is always in the offing, an attendant to the everyday – much like violence, romantic love, and familial and employment relations.

Central to both bushfire and COVID-19 crises has been the site of the home itself, in which many of the aforementioned relations might flourish, flounder, or both. The home was spoken of as bastion as the fire approached Mallacoota. In another of our field sites, Cobargo - on the southern coast of NSW - the surety of local unity against outsider tree changers was unsettled as fires savaged the town. Locals found themselves in ugly conflicts with one after the event as they came into contact with one another in the days after the fire had passed through. For some local residents, defence of homes required the hasty founding of cooperatives with other locals - with whom they might have had only cursory prior dealings. Banding together in the heat of the moment, they turned together to save homes under threat. For others, the abandonment of the home was the only possible response to the fire that many described as so fiercely aggressive that it could no longer be called a fire – it was something else, something they'd never seen before, and they fled from it. In the days following, those who had fled found themselves pariahs and were actively prevented from accessing bushfire relief, neighbour gatherings and the status of belonging. For those who left, the homeliness of the local neighbourhood has evaporated. Inside homes in the thick of COVID-19 which has rendered those outside of cohabitation relations dangerous and distant, an anticipatory fear grows in relation to the time at which isolation ends, and pariahs will once again have to face their accusers. The singular, locked down unitary home may here serve as a safe haven from those who were, prior to COVID-19, arriving on the doorsteps of abandoners to vent their fury, but it certainly isn't just that. As for many people, homes have become unhomely sites as they accommodate work, school, familial relations. Their limitations become manifest and it is no longer possible to regard the home itself as a familiar backdrop against which the social action of familial life plays out. As Miller (1995) notes, sites not only contain, but *wield* the histories created by those who preceded us in their very structures, even in such a thing as a home built anew after a bushfire. Their designs cajole, indicate, prompt us into the everyday revolutions of domestic life, as offices and schools do in their own contexts, meaning that they have generative and powerful effects. Fear lurks in all of them, as an everyday possibility that might emerge depending on the moment.

Conclusion

The Australian government's campaign to have one such possibility prevented is here telling. In a advertisement delivered on television and media platforms, a message is promulgated about the ways in which homes, which were never meant to accommodate all that they presently must, might become a site for violence that was never there before, to erupt. The *Help is Here* campaign includes advertising across television, digital, social media, radio, magazines and newspapers as well as in shopping centres, hospitals and GP surgeries. The Minister for Women, Senator the Hon. Marise Payne, and Minister for Families and Social Services, Senator the Hon. Anne Ruston, said the campaign had two clear messages that help is here and tough times do not excuse tougher times at home.

"For many weeks, Australians have been heeding the Government's call to stay at home to control the spread of COVID-19. However, for many women and children, home is not a safe place to be," Minister Payne said (see https://ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/5791).

The campaign coincides with reported elevated rates of domestic abuse, including entirely new cases that are resultant of confinement to the home in 'tough times'. The campaign served to recognise the terror of small things, out of order and kilter, like the pressure of kids yelling and running while a parent was trying to conduct a Zoom

meeting, the oddness of doing a load of washing while concurrently 'being' at work, the ridiculousness of housing an ergonomic desk in a room designed for sleeping or eating; the futility of attempting to routinize home schooling and reconciling it with home working and home living. Fears arose – the fear of not being able to deliver the work. Or not having the trained patience of a school-teacher, and the fear that so many frogs in the front room might turn frustration into violence. Our point is not that fear of domestic violence ought be thought of as ordinary; it is, rather, that the potential for fear arises in the very context of the safe home haven – something that domestic violence advocates and sufferers have always known—and that it arises in the specificity of the moment. At best, then, we could imagine a mythical scape that is lurking and ever present but only makes itself visible at certain times, in the manner of a disappearing lake. Its unknown effects, also, only appear as people respond to its appearance and disappearance, generating associations, conflicts, communities, as they do.

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