

The fires we made, the fires that made us: Introducing the Forum

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BIOGRAPHIES

Phiona Stanley is Associate Professor in Intercultural Communications at the Business School, Edinburgh Napier University. Her research is on how people engage in 'intercultural' settings in the broadest sense: heterogeneous assemblages of humans, non-humans, and artefacts. Her new book is *An autoethnography of fitting in: On spinsterhood, fatness, and backpacker tourism*, published 2022 by Routledge as part of the *Writing Lives: Ethnographic Narratives* series.

Daniel Wade Clarke is a Senior Lecturer in Management & Marketing at The University of Dundee School of Business. His scholarship centres around issues related to organizational space and place and he has published work on the sensory retail environment, business management education, craft beer consumption as well as son-father relations and experiences of death, dying and bereavement. His interests are framed by a desire to develop evocative forms of understanding through use of imaginative-creative and expressive representations including autoethnography and research poetry.

Fiona Murray is a Lecturer in Counselling, Psychotherapy and Applied Social Science at the University of Edinburgh and is an Associate Director of the Centre for Creative-Relational Inquiry.

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Abstract

The authors of this article ventured into the Scottish outdoors together for the weekend in September 2020. They made fires to gather round in the early autumn darkness. In this article they return to these fires as they introduce the articles in this collection, writing their way into what stays with them, what changed (with) them, what continues to change (with) them, that weekend.

Key words: outdoors, Scotland, fire, assemblage, nature

Jonathan writes:

It's difficult to write about all those months ago from here. It's difficult to find the then (September 2020) in the now (February 2021) as I look out over a winter Edinburgh landscape of walkers, dogs, prams and bikes on the snow-layered Meadows and the corner of the brutalist architecture of the university library. My imagination is in Perthshire, returning there, seeking it.

We have been talking about that weekend, though our bodies are here and now. Today we are not in the forest, not outdoors (although the sun shines brightly out there, as it did that weekend last autumn). We are sitting around a table, indoors, in Fiona's university office, in Edinburgh. Then, we gathered firewood, drank whisky, and ate good food. Then, we talked and laughed. Today, too, we are talking and laughing and, once again – it's lunch – eating good food and, in place of a fire between us, our laptops are the focus of our gazes. We are arguably the same four people but the *assemblage*¹ – human bodies, laughter, tables, chairs, sunshine, laptops, memories, etc. – is different from our camping weekend.

This difference in the two settings is *why* we are writing, because we are thinking about how and why our shared weekend outside was different from our everyday lives. Making sense of that – that is, the outdoors, the Scottish outdoors in particular, and what it is, does, can do, or can be – is what this Forum is about. Through autoethnographies, our contributors – all with close connections to Scotland – each explores their relationship with the outdoors in Scotland. Here, in this introduction, we locate ourselves, writing our way into what stays with us, what changed (with) us, what continues to change (with) us, that weekend. Our talk takes us to the fires, our fires. We decide to write. We are still, quiet except for the clicking of keys, each of us. Uneven, uncertain. The staccato sound of the keyboards takes us – you can hear it, can't you? There, and again there, if you imagine – to the sound those fires made, “a good time of togetherness and tenderness”, as Zawadzki writes of such occasions of shared imagination and connection.²

The gathering of wood, the collection growing as we foraged, dragging and carrying it back to the camp, breaking it, storing it. Daniel arranging stones or, the second night, finding a discarded drum of a washing machine, as a base, containing our fire. The twigs, the brush needed to take the spark. The gathering, building, dancing of the flames as they grew. How momentum gathered, expanded. The music of the fire playing while we talked and laughed; how its staccato melodies made us talk and laugh, how they were our talk and our laughter, a fifth, sixth, seventh voice in the darkening sky, speaking with us and with the trees that stood with us, still and swaying in the wind, the fire's voice in the breeze, in the moonlight³.

We were drawn there to the forest by Loch Rannoch in Perthshire, Scotland, the four of us, for Jonathan's 60th birthday, gathered for a weekend of camping, hiking, and a brief dip in the loch. This trip came upon us:

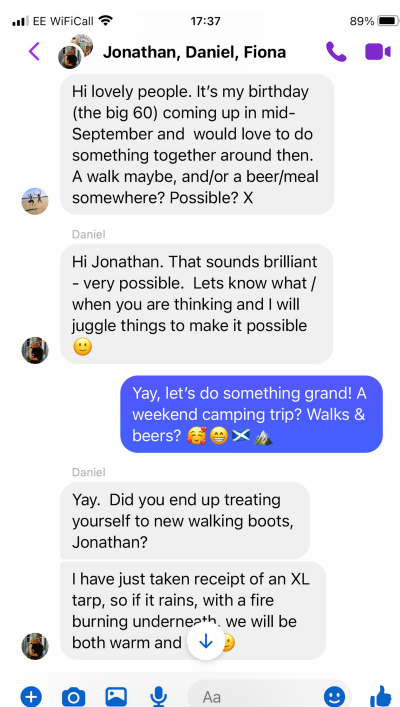


Figure 1: Group message screenshot from Phiona's phone, 19 August 2020. Photo: iPhone screenshot.

It began as something modest, tentative: a possible drink, meal, walk. But the message exchange escalated to something epic: camping, a weekend, as well as walks and beers. Soon after this, Daniel and Phiona did a two-day hike together in Kintail and generated between them a plan for our weekend trip and these autumn fires in the Scottish outdoors.

Now, it's August 2021, almost a year since the text message exchange. We write now, imagining, as if we were still there, writing with what the fire-assemblage-now-and-then-and-here-and-there evokes, calls forth, in us.

Phiona writes:

What does a fire do? A fire warms. It heats water. But also: it illuminates. This is both a subject thing (we can see by the light of the fire) but also an object thing (we can be seen).

Camping in a big, safe group of four, by the shore of Loch Rannoch last September, being seen was fine. We were warm and we were cooking. We saw and we were seen.

When I camp alone, though, I rarely light a fire. All this week, I've been asking myself why this is. I did sit alone by a fire one weekend in Australia. I'm struggling to think of other times that I've lit a fire when I've camped by myself. This is all I can come up with. It's not Scotland; but it's a memory. Bear with me. On a Thursday night, early springtime, a few years ago, I drove three hours out of Sydney. My plan was to van-camp by the Wollondilly River, at least an hour along the twisty, unsurfaced road past Mittagong. On Thursday night, with few others in the area, I camped alone. Or: I camped alone except for some beautiful lace monitor lizards and one red-bellied black snake that slid noiselessly under my hammock—my breath held, my heart raggedy—as I watched the sunset over the river.

Then, early evening, the cold fell along with the night. In the campervan I had some firewood, and so there, alone, as the sky turned to navy blue and the gum trees silhouetted themselves before disappearing entirely, I lit a fire. Next to this I sat, in my camping chair, with just the lace monitors and the red-bellied black snake for company. Despite this complex assemblage, I was, in human terms, ‘alone’. And, alone like this, I felt visible. Too visible. The light of a fire casts a bright circle and a dark perimeter. The snakes and the lizards were not what I thought about as I sat alone in a spotlight in the Aussie bush.

The next night, Friday, in the same spot, others arrived from Sydney, and now I was not alone, or at least, not alone in quite the same way. Now, around me, women sliced tomatoes, and men fired up barbeques, and kids stumbled around with fishing nets by the river, their mothers calling to them to be careful and their fathers in gruff voices chiding the women for fussing. Then, once meals were made and chairs assembled, I overheard –and giggled to myself– as a woman asked a man, in a singsong tone, of a salad, “yummy?” (Australia still has plenty of the 1950s about it in its gender relations.)

But as I sat by the fire that second night, my aloneness was a new kind of visible: just as dangerous, but differently so. Once darkness fell, it was clear that I was *a woman camping alone*. Did I imagine the concerned whispers? Did I hear, on the breeze, the women’s judgements and the men’s telling them to keep it down?

My visibility was social. Now, in place of basic woman-alone-in-the-world safety, I thought about being judged. I thought about how odd I must seem, so very visible, in my aloneness. Then I got up and, from the van, brought over the second chair, which I arranged around the fire with me. The chair was empty, but maybe it was enough.

So yes, a fire warms and cooks, but also it illuminates.

Daniel writes:

Fire matters

Fire...
speaks,
reminds,
creates/constructs,
spreads and destructs.

It takes up space,
fills the air and
needs other things to make it happen.
Fire is needy.

Going outdoors to celebrate JW’s birthday,
fire marks the passing of time, curating memories.
A good campfire creates
thermal comfort that hits our bodies with force, creating
intensity and desire for:
“More firewood please...”
“It might be suffocating. You need to blow on it...”

“Best put it out before we go to bed”
Like memories, fire is vulnerable and needs tending to keep alive.

Creating new comings-together,
with fire,
things happen.
Fire does not only take place,
it makes place.
And it leaves trace too.
A (camp)fire says ‘You / I was here’.

Voices of the fire speak in other places.
Like smoke that lingers in upholstery
long after the flames have died, fire memories
circulate and co-implicate,
embedding themselves and
making themselves heard elsewhere.

Made of all the voices of previous fires burning,
the voice of fire speaks.
My friend, Holly, gave me a candle for my 40th birthday:
“It’s one of those that sounds like
fire burning. When you light the wick,
it crackles...”.
Burning the candle speaks of the
fireside conversations and moments we’ve
shared together over the years.
Fire speaks, scintillates, and simulates.
Fire does things.

Fiona writes:

And of course, inevitably, we find ourselves back in the office. Fire is ever only temporary, always in the middle, after the earth and the idea, and before the slow rise of the pale sun and the pot of water from the loch that stifles the last muffled crack. The fire was always in the middle of us, creating our arrangements and destroying perfect circles. The air cut through the flames in unpredictable ways as we reassembled our arrangements of chairs to avoid the smoke. Fire is only transformation, simultaneously creating and destroying. It transforms the material to the imaginative and back to the material. There are always stories round the campfire, deities from earth and stone form dragons of twig and kindling.

We share stories.

We aim to make space here around the fire of this forum. Fire creates community. You were always there anyway. And Phiona’s van has enough blankets for us all.

*Leaning in*⁴, assembling a *we*⁵, this Forum presents six articles, organised as follows:

In *Face North*, Janis MacKay reflects on the awfulness of the Highland Clearances, writing with curiosity and wonder. She describes her passionate search for home and writes with

geopoetic and ecopoetic prose of the loss of place. Colour, seasonality, Scottish ancestry, and heritage are woven throughout her writing. However, in reflecting on the Clearances, Janis observes that some places are not really *there* anymore. If you were to look on Google maps, for example, Strathnaver is no longer there. There is nothing to see, precisely because what once was there has been invaded and ‘cleared’.

From nothing to see (in the clouds on the mountain) to nobody to see (alone in the bothy), Keith Evans takes us in search of *Connection*. Where do men go to be alone? Keith goes alone thought the wild, into the elements, and at a time of year normally associated with togetherness and family. This sense of aloneness pervades the text. At a time when experiences of loneliness and being alone threaten mental health and well-being, especially for men (Thurnell-Read, 2021)⁶, Keith writes in praise and defence of a different kind of aloneness: *with* and *in* nature. Achieving more-than-human connection(s) to the outdoors fills his spirit, and he troubles the concept of being alone through writing that highlights feeling-being connected.

Phiona Stanley connects with both Mackay and Evans, writing of campervan driving in Scotland and/against the theme of enclosures. She returns to and troubles the idea of aloneness in the outdoors, adding a gendered perspective: she is a woman hiking and camping ‘alone’ during a global pandemic, a time when the Highlands have been uniquely crowded. Bringing our attention to the lines we and others draw around ourselves, Stanley contemplates enclosure(s) and how it feels to be enclosed, not least during Covid-19.

Writing of/from privilege Sarah Helps writes beautifully into and troubles second-homers from outside Scotland finding place within rural Scottish communities. Sarah’s writing is oriented within contemporary debates around community, belonging, insider/outsider, privilege, financial status, sustainability, green living, travel, energy and consumption

Just like our experience of sitting around the campfire depends upon our angle of arrival, with multiple of ways of reading Andrew Gillott’s text, our experience of being with *Lines of inquiry* will be coloured by our angle of arrival. Andrew plots lines in spacetimes and finds implications for the (re)tracings of a family life lived through a landscape, and a landscape lived through family life.

In *A political ecology of ecologies*, David Clarke discusses a day spent with a group of students in Glen Almond, Perthshire, in 2018. He situates his present thinking in the story and to think with the idea of a political ecology of ecologies, derived from an immanent ethics. He speculates that competing ecologies are themselves ecological as they perform materially in the world, and that creative research of the everyday enactments of multiple ecologies provides a form of critical environmental and social education.

We, the four of us, write:

Putting this Forum together has given us a chance to return, to gather around the fires we made, our own fires for our own sake; a chance to keep on gathering, to remember and re-experience. We have enjoyed that.

However, the Forum does the more urgent and more important work of creating anew with others, our contributors. It makes new writing-fires of the Scottish outdoors, writing-fires that you have joined and that, in turn, make, and continue to make, us.

We imagine us together, all of us, hearing our contributors tell their tales, feeling their stories find their way, finding their echoes in ourselves, taking us all somewhere else, in order to make a difference. We are with Zawadzki when he writes:

“We are witnessing a systematic erosion of public goods and collective imaginations, drained by neoliberal capitalism and the ideology of psychopathic individualism, both freezing our social thermostats. This [Forum] gives us a chance to gather by the fire again, restore the collective sensemaking about our fragile lives, and invent new worlds...”⁷

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2004).

² Michal Zawadzki, “Book Review: The Imagined Organization: Spaces, Dreams and Places.” *Management Learning* (March 2021) <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076211002025>, p. 1.

³ We catch ourselves, here in this moment, in this place: How should we acknowledge the big picture politics of fires? Phiona’s section later in the article works with these politics, focusing on gender, but here we’re meaning *our* fire, which we present as warming and controlled. Our friend. But what about those whose homes, whose lives, whose livestock, have recently been threatened and lost by those fires in California, Greece, Australia and elsewhere?

⁴ Ronald J. Pelias, *Leaning: A poetics of personal relations* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁵ Stacy Holman Jones, “Assembling a we in critical qualitative inquiry), in *Qualitative Inquiry in Neoliberal Times*, eds Norman K. Denzin and Michael Giardina (London, Routledge, 2017), 130-135.

⁶ Thomans Thurnell-Read, “‘If they weren’t in the pub, they probably wouldn’t even know each other’: Alcohol, sociability and pub-based leisure,” *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure* 4, no. 1 (2021), 61-78.

⁷Zawadzki, 3