Extractivist Imaginaries in Australia's Latrobe Valley: Slow Violence and True Crime in Chloe Hooper's *The Arsonist* and Tom Doig's *Hazelwood*

Emily Potter

Abstract: This essay considers the active legacies of Australia's co-lonial extractivist imaginaries in the context of the nation's refusal to adequately acknowledge the current climate crisis. It explores these legacies through two recent works of Australian narrative non-fiction writing, Chloe Hooper's *The Arsonist* (2018) and Tom Doig's *Hazelwood* (2020), both of which address major fire events in the Latrobe Valley, a region in south-eastern Australia profoundly shaped by mining and other extractivist practices. While histories of genocide and dispossession are commonly dis-connected from the discourse of Australia's current environmental crisis, Hooper's and Doig's texts connect climate crisis to manifesta-tions of colonial-capitalist violence and examine the contemporary experiences of a community living in the midst of extractivism's material realities. Hooper and Doig present the fires and their con-sequences as true crime accounts of extraordinary events in which the site of culpability seems initially apparent. Through narrative strategies that bring the reader close to what happened, however, Hooper and Doig suggest that, in the face of extractivist colonial legacies, the answer to "who did it?" becomes much less clear. These texts ultimately ask us to consider our complicity in these crimes and the environmental imaginaries that inform them, while point-ing to the possibility of alternative imaginaries that co-exist in the shadows of extractivism's continued dominance.

Keywords: Australian literature, true crime, extractivism, climate crisis, imaginaries, Latrobe Valley

I. Introduction

Australia's international status as a climate change laggard was affirmed in late 2019 at the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP25), with the country accused of "cheating" and offering "false solutions" in a veiled evasion of its emission reduction targets (Morton). Honed over successive federal governments, Australia's resistance to domestic action on climate change was now subverting collective global action. The UN talks coincided with the advent of summer in the southern hemisphere and the beginning of the worst bushfire season that Australia had ever seen. Fires had been blazing for weeks across New South Wales, Victoria, and South Australia in an unprecedented early start to the season. Paradoxically, it is these fires, rather than the nation's attempts to sabotage the latest UN climate talks, that garnered global headlines, although the two are connected. As Henry Fountain relates, bushfire intensification in Australia follows the warming climate closely.

In this article I explore how two recent works of Australian non-fiction—Chloe Hooper's *The Arsonist: A Mind on Fire* (2018) and Tom Doig's *Hazelwood* (2020)—challenge the persistent decoupling of climate crisis from significant Australian fire events. While climate politics are not the focus of either text, they both examine the conditions that give rise to this crisis by narrativizing a complex set of connections between environmental exploitation, extractivist capitalism, neoliberal privatization, and the brutal histories and unresolved legacies of colonization that continue to structure Australia's imaginary and material worlds. While the ongoing fire storm across the nation's southeast (raging from November until well into March) eventually garnered international attention as an extraordinary climate event, Australia's federal government never formally acknowledged it as such and persistently refused to dwell on the fires as an ecology of forces and effects that connect the local and the global in dynamic ecological relationship.

This refusal can be explained, in part, by the fleeting nature of media cycles and by the COVID-19 pandemic that would soon arrest global attention. But I argue that it is also the result of a cultural tendency in non-Indigenous dominated settler-colonial Australia to tell stories about the world—and thus promote imaginaries—that deny historicity

and the interconnection of events and their effects in order to privilege colonial narratives of place, community, and the past. These narratives support and sustain prevailing economic, political, and social arrangements that naturalize and empower exploitative, violent, and unjust human-centric environmental behaviors. They also perpetuate the settler-colonial Australian state's endemic refusal to acknowledge the nation's genocidal origins and racist legacies and the ambition of resource extraction as a driving force behind dispossession and colonial claim. Cognizant of this, Hooper's and Doig's texts interrogate Australia's extractivist past and present through the generic frame of true crime. Each book focuses on specific instances of criminal action and liability: arson in Hooper's text and corporate and governmental malpractice in Doig's. But they also draw persuasive and insistent connections between these instances and their broader context within human and environmental violence and exploitation that do not just belong to the extraordinary and "spectacular" (Nixon 445) disasters they describe.

Despite Hooper's and Doig's close and affective narrative mapping of the fire events, which draw the reader into a disarming proximity to these specific incidents, the authors ultimately refuse to make these events singular and instead fold them into complex histories of place and modernity that exceed the spatial and temporal limits usually prescribed to such spectacular disasters. In doing so, Hooper and Doig demonstrate the capacity of literary works to make visible the material and imaginary life of extraction and its situation within a field of forces that drive contemporary climate crisis and its historical antecedents. Through non-fiction accounts of two situated events, these texts explore and give voice to the networked and interrelated consequences of capitalism's slow violence as "a long and creeping crisis" (Vorbrugg 451) across time, space, and communities in which colonial histories, environmental exploitation, and post-industrial decline entangle. This situatedness is indicative of the Anthropocene as anthropologist Deborah Rose defines it: a time in which everyone is caught up in the cause and effects of climate crisis, with unevenly dispersed positions of subjection and complicity. Increasingly, scholars are recognizing storytelling for its capacity to enable environmental justice, as it brings unacknowledged

experiences to light and supports the "multiple realities of environmental injury to come together" (Houston, "Environmental" 419). The narrativization of true crime, however, as critics Ross Gibson and Rosalind Smith note, does not necessarily end in revelation or a problem being solved. Despite the visible fire spectacles that drive Hooper's and Doig's texts, the authors ultimately illuminate the lack of a single villain. In doing so, they also "keep the story of slow violence unfinished" (Vorbrugg 459) rather than comfortably resolved for those who consume it. Productively, this story of slow violence, which is multiple and temporally elastic, confronts the limits of extractivist imaginaries and points to other possibilities that may come from extractivist sites.

II. Latrobe Valley Extractivist Histories

The Arsonist and *Hazelwood* focus on two distinct and large-scale fire events that occurred in the Latrobe Valley, which is part of the Gippsland region of eastern Victoria, Australia. While Gippsland is a prime agricultural area—mostly dairy farming—the Latrobe Valley is also historically a mining heartland. It is the site of Australia's largest open-cut mine, located in the town of Morwell, which for many years fed the adjacent brown coal-burning Hazelwood power station. Commissioned in 1964 and operative until 2017, at its height Hazelwood and the mine supplied twenty-five percent of Victoria's electricity and contributed fourteen percent of the state's greenhouse gas emissions. In 2005, the World Wildlife Fund named Hazelwood the least energy efficient power station in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and "one of the world's biggest polluters" (World Wildlife Fund).

The traditional owners of these lands are the Braiakaulung of the Gunaikurnai Nation, who have occupied (what is now named) the Latrobe Valley for tens of thousands of years. Extractivist visions began here with the colonial project, which spread out from the newly occupied Port Phillip (now Melbourne) in the hunt for land and resources. While the Braiakaulung resisted this onslaught, which began in earnest in 1835, their country was ultimately appropriated through violence and dispossession. Many Braiakaulung were forcibly moved to Lake Tyers

Mission in southern Gippsland (known to the Gunaikurnai as Bung Yarnda), one of several Christian mission stations established to corral displaced Indigenous populations throughout Victoria. Gippsland has a notable history of colonial massacre, with at least five documented mass murders of Indigenous peoples between 1840 and 1843 (Centre for 21st Century Humanities). The names of many of the perpetrators of these massacres have remained geographically imprinted on the area, such as the electoral seat of McMillan, established in 1949, which until 2018 bore the name of a pastoralist colloquially remembered as "the butcher of Gippsland" (Payne).

Charles La Trobe, the namesake of the Latrobe Valley, was appointed to his role as superintendent of the Port Phillip District of New South Wales (as Victoria was then known) in 1839 and subsequently was anointed the first lieutenant governor of the new colony of Victoria in 1851. Indicative of the complex, often contradictory, colonial networks of power and value that reshaped the lives and lands of the Gunaikurnai and still structure contemporary Gippsland, La Trobe arbitrated on the case of a wealthy colonial landowner, Frederick Taylor. Taylor was refused the option of purchasing further land in Gippsland due to his role in the massacre of members of the Tarnbee gundidj clan in Victoria's Western Districts (Clark 118). La Trobe supported this move against Taylor, yet during his time in power La Trobe oversaw the decimation of Victoria's Indigenous population by an estimated eighty percent, from ten thousand in 1836 to 1,907 in 1853 (Ryan 257). Taylor, meanwhile, acquired land in Gippsland through joint license and squatted there for more than a decade. No conviction was ever recorded against him for the atrocities he committed (Rogers).

These dark histories sit in tension with Gippsland's early promise to settlers as a "'fertile crescent' of Australia" (Morgan 1) offering rich extractivist opportunities. As Patrick Morgan writes, evoking florid contemporary writings that justified unfettered colonial expansion, "[e]arly Gippslanders believed they had been singularly blessed by Providence in finding the pastures (of Gippsland) . . . hidden away from the rest of the world" (7). By the 1870s, the large pastoral runs gave way to smaller holdings and settler populations grew as land was increasingly cleared

for cattle industries. Within twenty years, the beginnings of a mining industry were in place as the Great Morwell Coal Mining Company's open-cut brown coal mine opened in 1889. The scale of the Latrobe Valley's brown coal resources—what government geologist James Stirling calls its "magnificent deposits," constituting sixteen percent of global reserves (PowerWorks)—became a focus for state energy planning and resulted in the formation of the State Electricity Commission (SEC) in 1919. Demands for energy, rail, and industry became key drivers in the spatial, economic, and imaginative project of nation building and expanded electricity demand.

Thus began the utopian state project of the Latrobe Valley, facilitated by the post-war push for state-owned energy resources. Over the next forty years, towns and communities developed at a rapid pace: first Yallourn and its surroundings in the 1920s, followed by Morwell and Churchill in the 1950s and 1960s. Established as dormitory towns to service the mining and energy industries, these towns were designed with the proto-socialist ideals of state-provided housing, certain employment, and well-resourced civic amenities. Manifesting the "high modernism" that James C. Scott identifies in his study of urban planning as a tool of "administrative utopianism," the original visions for these towns embodied values of urban "discipline[,] . . . rational planning, a geometrical environment, and a form of welfarism" (Scott 3). Yallourn, for instance, was intended as a garden city with plentiful green space and was planned so that "SEC employees could 'live close to, yet not be dominated by, the vast open cut brown coal mine'" (Duffy and Whyte 424). The SEC provided work opportunities for thousands of miners and power station employees and was particularly attractive to many post-war migrants from eastern and southern Europe; during these years, the Valley realized near-full employment and significant economic growth (Duffy and Whyte 427).

The power of the state to diminish or enable a good life became apparent in the early 1970s, when the decision was made to relocate the entire town of Yallourn in order to access the brown coal reserves that lay beneath it. Moreover, prior to Yallourn's destruction, the persistent presence of coal dust, the "deep whine of the power station turbines" (Duffy

and Whyte 425), and the administrative force of "Melbourne's domi-
nance" in the lives of Valley residents (Weller 382) compromised the
early garden city dreams for the town. The material realities of extrac-
tive industries that literally shaped the region and its future were always
present, and they increasingly foreclosed other possibilities. By 1963,
the Valley's "original forest cover" was well and truly replaced by a "nox-
ious industrial zone fringed by its own dependent urban areas" (Wilson
31). Most disabling, though, was the termination of Victoria's state-
led development visions with a wave of privatization that began in the
1990s, which echoed neoliberal economies around the world. Within a
decade unemployment rose and Valley populations declined. In 1996,
Morwell and Moe had the highest rates of unemployment for men any-
where in Victoria, with thirty-three percent of men aged twenty-five to
thirty-four unemployed. Subsequent decades saw little improvement:
according to Sally Weller, "despite a series of government task-forces
and reports, the . . . Valley has never managed to rebound from this
crisis"; she cites "a continuing over-reliance on a single industry, a lack of
alternative employment options, a lack of new private sector investment
[and] entrenched social disadvantage" as some of the key reasons behind
this disadvantage (382). In a shift from the nation-building logic of the
SEC, these privatized investments prioritized profits at the expense of
any social or moral contract with their workers, the community, and the
environment in which they were situated.

III. Writing the Fires

Published just over one year apart, Hooper's *The Arsonist* and Doig's
Hazelwood trace proximal events in time and space, with both books
focusing on the Latrobe Valley around the towns of Churchill and
Morwell. Hooper's text concerns a particular set of fires that raged at
the same time as four hundred others reported around Victoria on what
became known as Black Saturday: 7 February 2009. This devastating
day, preceded by years of prolonged drought (one of the worst on record
in southern Australia), saw 173 human deaths and countless animal lives
lost, with two thousand homes destroyed and 4,500 square kilometers
of land burned. Temperatures soared to over forty-five degrees Celsius

across tinder-dry land as strong northerly winds, blowing at more than one hundred kilometers per hour, fuelled these explosive conditions. On the outskirts of Churchill, in the afternoon of Black Saturday, two fires were deliberately lit—the only Black Saturday fires attributed to arson—and these would eventually be linked directly to the deaths of ten people and the loss of 150 homes. The question that leads Hooper's account of these fires is "What kind of person would deliberately set a firestorm?": What does it mean to have a "mind on fire" (Hooper cover)? Hooper's text is investigative long-form non-fiction, but it is also a complex and reflective account of a crime that opens up rather than resolves questions concerning the "kind of person" behind such an event. In contrast, Doig's *Hazelwood* is a "report of one of the worst environmental and public health disasters in Australian history" (Doig cover); while Hooper's text revolves around a central titular figure, Doig's focus is diffused across a community of actors who bore witness and were subject to this disaster. At issue in Doig's text is the fire that ignited in the Hazelwood open-cut coal mine just over five years to the day after Black Saturday. This fire burned for forty-five days, fuelled by converging bushfires, an extreme heatwave, and the highly combustible brown coal in the mine. Volumes of toxic smoke and ash enveloped nearby Morwell and spread across the Valley. *Hazelwood*, which Doig writes as an exposé of corporate and government malpractice as well as a rallying account of community agency and resistance, is interested in the public health authorities' and the mine owners' bewilderingly slow response to this unfolding event and its deep human consequences.

Fire writing is an established tradition in Australia and the phenomenon of bushfires—as Hooper explains in *The Arsonist*—is a preoccupation of colonial literature that communicates the threat of the uncleared native environment and its original inhabitants. This literature focuses on the capacity of fire to be used by Indigenous peoples to fight back against colonizing forces: fire as a "form of warfare" (Hooper, *The Arsonist* 55). Hooper writes that "postcolonial history is full of stories about flames being used less out of madness than revenge" (55). These stories extend beyond narratives that specifically evoke frontier conflict to

focus on the horror of the bushfire—the sound of which Henry Lawson calls "the most hellish of all to hear"—and the phenomenon of the arsonist in general (Moore). As Michelle Smith suggests, even colonial children's literature shares this concern, and she argues that "the greatest and most enduring anxieties about the Australian environment are reserved for the phenomenon that is, in reality, least able to be controlled and conquered: fire" (3). Grace Moore tracks the appearance of bushfire in Australian literary history, from a device to drive plot conceits to a more malevolent force that shapes darker narratives of loss, madness, and trauma in nineteenth-century fiction (41). In the twentieth century, Australian literature shifted to represent fire in an increasingly naturalized way—as an intrinsic part of Australian life.

Offering a complementary analysis of Australian colonial crime fiction, Stephen Knight notes the phenomenon of reprisal in which the land enacts revenge on a criminal transgressor. In these narratives, in which the crime is always within the explicit circuit of settler society, "bush fires are the favourite force of vengeance" (Knight 20). Environmental historian Tom Griffiths writes about bushfire disasters pre-dating Black Saturday in terms that accord with this version of malevolent nature: a 1939 fire event (known as Black Friday), he argues, represents a "loss of innocence on a cataclysmic scale" (viii). These accounts stand in strong contrast to Indigenous narratives and understandings of fire, in which bushfires signal "ecological necessity and social complexity" (Neale et al. 345). While the Black Saturday fires left Australians "terrified" of fire, Aboriginal author Bruce Pascoe writes that this "wasn't always the case" (115). Far from representing malevolence or threat, fire is a key part of long-established pre-colonial strategies for environmental management and food cultivation (Steffenson). The widespread dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their traditional lands contributed to the increasing unruliness and intensity of bushfires. Forest wildfires of the sort that burned on Black Saturday "were largely unknown before the arrival of Europeans" (Pascoe 116).

Into the new millennium, the increasing public recognition of Indigenous environmental knowledge and an intensifying related discourse

of post-colonial reckoning in Australia drew attention to the settler-colonial actions deeply implicated in bushfire disasters. As a part of this reckoning, the prevailing colonial narrative of the bushfire as an existential and symbolic threat to the settler-colonial project of *settling* in place has been challenged by more critically reflective literary responses. Australian writing renewed its focus on bushfires in the wake of Black Saturday in 2009, and much of this work, both non-fiction and fiction, explicitly links bushfire disaster to the shortcomings of modernity and the settler-colonial project.[1] The alienation of humans from fire as a result of industrialization (Pyne 7) becomes in these works a particular pathology of the settler-colonial condition. The anxious recognition of non-Indigenous un-belonging and the injustices of colonization latent in early colonial fiction now finds explicit voice in contemporary non-Indigenous Australian writing, which represents climate change and the exploitations of settler-colonialism in a common frame to understand the growing magnitude of bushfire threat on the continent.

Hooper and Doig belong to this field of literary response, but they also offer especially generative ways of approaching the intersecting histories that figuratively and literally fuelled these fires. Both texts seek an understanding of their respective fire events through a situated account: they resolutely connect the local to regional, national, and global forces. Despite varying textual structures and frames of focus, Hooper and Doig each deploy literary techniques that invoke proximity—even intimacy—on the part of the reader to suggest their entanglement in the unfolding events. The histories of the Latrobe Valley are critical to making sense of the actions and characters that populate the texts, but in Hooper's and Doig's hands these histories are not isolated as parochial instances that can only be explained through local referents. The motif of crime and its manifestation of slow violence against humans and environments is central. By thinking through their respective fires as part of a long colonial history of extractivism in the Latrobe Valley in the nineteenth and twentieth century, *The Arsonist* and *Hazelwood* implicate networks of fossil fuel extraction, burning, and consumption at both intimate and distant scales. Through this, the texts refuse straightforward positions of complicity and guilt and a clear-cut story of "who did it?" or

"who is responsible for these fires?" The crimes, Hooper and Doig both conclude, are impossible to extricate from complex temporal networks of action and implication.

IV. "Every culture has a tale about . . . stealing fire" (Hooper, *The Arsonist* 233)

Hooper's text begins in the horrifying wake of the Churchill bushfires, as investigators scour the apparent ground zero—the fires' point of ignition. The scene is cataclysmic: "[B]lackened trees smoulder. Smoke creeps around their charcoal trunks and charred leaves" (Hooper, *The Arsonist* 3). Crime scene tape cordons off the area, and it is here that the reader first meets the detective team, searching for clues. There are signs all around. Scorched eucalyptus leaves, "pliable up to a certain temperature, were like thousands of fingers pointing the way the fire had gone" (7). The detectives find "signs of two deliberately lit fires" in the ash and the smoke (7), triggering the arson investigation that drives the text. Hooper follows the detectives in the coming months and years as they piece together the story of an arsonist, his[2] possible drivers and reactions, and the deadly, traumatic, and ongoing impacts on his victims. A classic courtroom drama then unfolds. The narrative's tripartite structure—following first the investigation, then the arrest, and, finally, the court case—facilitates a focus on key actors in the story: the accused, the lawyers, the cops, the jury, and the many witnesses and victims of this crime.

From the beginning of the text, Hooper offers clues to the unfolding story in addition to the police's assembling of evidence. Beyond the police cordon, different signifiers loom into view: the "latticed electricity pylons multiplied closer to their source" and "the cooling towers and cumulus vapors of the first power station, then, round the bend, a valley ruled by the eight colossal chimneystacks of . . . Hazelwood" (5). Nearby is "a vast open-cut coalmine. Layers of sloping roads descended deep into a brown core—the carbon remnants of a 30-million-year-old swamp" (5). The second fire, it seems, started near a local and unauthorised dumping site: here is the "burnt debris" of people's lives, "the domestic excess of people unwilling or unable to pay [garbage] fees at

a tip" (9). For Hooper, these are not just situating descriptors; they do not simply set the scene. They are, instead, crucial infrastructure of the story being told—they will lead us towards "a mind on fire" and an entrenched culture of extractivism and its legacies.

The Arsonist and *Hazelwood* both clearly pay attention to the social and economic history of the Latrobe Valley and the ideologies of extraction that inform it, and they foreground matters of class, patriarchy, and economic power. Both texts highlight the human cost of coal-led development informed by a shifting economic logic from collectivist capitalism to small government neoliberalism. Utopian dreams faded as coal mines were privatized in the 1990s. When unemployment soared, violence and social dysfunction rose. Long-term and intergenerational unemployment are three times more likely in the Latrobe Valley than in other parts of Victoria, and the "rate of kids in out of home care was the highest in Victoria" (Hooper, *The Arsonist* 40). Moreover, the Latrobe Valley reports some of the highest rates of lung cancer and heart disease in the state, with an earlier than average age of mortality (Doig 88). Extractivism has shaped and hollowed out opportunities for many who live there, giving form to both the material lives and imaginative realities of the Churchill community.

Doig's *Hazelwood* also examines the structuring force of extractivism on Valley lives. The town of Morwell, which is the geographic focus of the text, abuts the Hazelwood mine, separated by just four hundred meters—a yawning void on the edge of the town, emptied of one billion cubic meters of coal and earth. Doig yokes the narrative life of extraction to its embodied reality. This is a place where "nearly a century of proud mining history and some of the worst disadvantage and inequality in Victoria" coexist (4). The investment in mining identity and industry camaraderie that Doig reports among the Hazelwood workers does not result in an equitable exchange with their employers. As workers in a neoliberal economy, they are expendable and can be swiftly excised. Doig's account of the Hazelwood fire repeatedly emphasizes the culpability of a poorly regulated, poorly staffed, and innately vulnerable mine constituted of unstable and highly combustible materials.

The Hazelwood mine fire is one of the worst industrial disasters in Victoria's history, and as Doig contends, it may well "prove to be one of the worst public health disasters in Australia" (5). Triggered by an adjacent bushfire and driven by highly flammable eucalypt plantations (which fed local papermill productions, another prominent industry in the area) that bordered the mine, the Hazelwood fire started in the afternoon of 9 February 2014 and burned for the next six and a half weeks. Doig traces the threads of privatization, corporatization, and cost-saving "efficiencies" that fed this disaster and shows how they tangle together with extractivist imaginaries to erase complex histories and promote the logic of modernity's progress as an unquestionable and linear given. Doig describes the public information boards that (until their recent demolition) greeted visitors to the powerplant with an upbeat tone: these tell the story of "cool coal." They begin by stating, "our story of thermal power generation from brown coal starts around 50 million years ago," before relating that Latrobe Valley brown coal is "world famous" (54). "Did you know?" the sign continues, "the air quality in . . . the Latrobe Valley is generally far superior to that of Melbourne. Imagine what our life would be like without electricity!" (54). The public information boards conflate electricity as a human need with the production of brown coal to fuel it, despite the complicated and ever-evolving landscape of renewable energy as well as other fossil fuel-based sources. Moreover, Melbourne—a city of five million people—is compared to a region of 125,000 without any account of this vast population difference. Despite the extraordinary timescales involved here, this text skips over First Nations occupation and moves from fifty million years ago to the industrial age, with no reference to the Gunaikurnai people who are the traditional owners of this land.

The human, environmental, and economic wreckage of the Valley, with deep roots in the colonial frontier, counters the narrative of coal's enduring abundance and, as theorist Imre Szeman terms it, coal's promise of "full" modern subjects "energized and enabled by extraction" (446). Despite the Valley's unrealised civic dream, the lure of the ability to control fire—to seize and harness the means of energy making—remains,

dispersed across differently empowered actors. Hooper's and Doig's texts can be read as complementary accounts of the criminal pursuit of this control and its manifestations in both eruptive and slow violence. While arsonists are no longer clinically cast through the lens of pyromania, Hooper relates, the wielding of fire as a deliberate unleashing of force is still considered central to this pathology. Arson, which suggests an "individual's tilt towards the antisocial and a mad lack of restraint" (Hooper, *The Arsonist* 39), can diagnostically map onto the logic of rapacious extractivist capitalism, disconnecting the damaging act of from its consequences. Stephen Pyne's analysis of our altered connection to fire under modernity speaks of a pathology in human/fire relations. As "technology caged and removed fire from everyday contact" (5), Pyne argues, our imaginative relationship with fire has contorted: "It is suppressed, replaced or has gone feral" (1).

The titular protagonist of Hooper's text, the arsonist eventually convicted of the Churchill fires, Brendan Sokaluk, embodies the Valley's dysfunctions, as both a victim and a participant in its cultures of violence and disenfranchisement. Sokaluk, *The Arsonist* narrates, is a child-like man with a low IQ and a sad history of social rejection and torment. From a hard-working and loving family—his father a Polish post-war migrant and ex-Hazelwood worker, his mother devoted to raising and protecting her sons—Sokaluk faced challenges from birth, exhibiting developmental delays as well as obsessive and manipulative behaviors. Only at the age of forty-one did Sokaluk finally get diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. Hooper does not link this condition to Sokaluk's criminal actions; however, she does suggest that a culture in which his condition went undiagnosed and unassisted (beyond his family) for so many years is a contributing factor in Sokaluk's abjection. A lack of support services when Sokaluk was growing up and entering the workforce in the 1980s and 1990s, within the broader context of economic decimation as privatization hit the Valley (with 7500 immediate job losses), meant that there was little accommodation for someone with neurodiversity.

Sokulak's poor literacy skills and seeming naïveté about legal processes and the potential consequences of the charges laid against him meant

that his immediate confession (and subsequent retraction) emphasized his vulnerability to a system he did not understand: "I didn't light any fires. But I'll put my hand up" (Hooper, *The Arsonist* 145). Later he admits to inadvertently setting the blaze by dropping a lit cigarette. He is seen by multiple witnesses in the heart of the firestorm, a suspicious presence who also helps those fighting to save their homes. Evidence showed that Sokulak called in the fire to emergency services soon after it began, recalling his previous brief history as a member of the CFS (the voluntary country fire service), which ended when Sokulak admitted to lighting small paddock fires and then joining in the race to put them out. When he finally returned home on the scorching afternoon of Black Saturday, neighbors (all of whom, Hooper suggests, had already established negative conceptions of Sokulak) reported that he climbed onto his roof and watched the hills burn.

Hooper does not simplify Sokulak as either a victim or criminal in her story, and she juxtaposes the complex depiction of this man's life, his actions on and after Black Saturday, and the trial which led to his eventual conviction with searing and affective accounts of the hundreds who were killed, injured, or psychologically wounded by the events that day. By assembling witness statements and her own conversations with survivors, Hooper writes from within the firestorm, a tactic that positions the reader in its unfolding. Hooper further draws the reader in by focusing on the aural and tactile experiences of its survivors: "I've never heard a noise like it. . . . [I]t was the fire coming . . . like seven jumbos landing on the roof" (24); "it was so hot in the fire that the plastic breather in the middle of my face mask melted and the liquid plastic burnt my lips" (24); "[i]t was like the air was red" (26). These many voices, relayed in a long, fragmentary passage that, while curated, is unmediated by any analysis or framing commentary by Hooper, gives an enveloping account of the materiality of bushfire. The power of these voices as fire testimonies are irrefutable. What surrounds them, however, is less straightforward. Despite the efforts of the justice system to create factual, linear, and solidly evidenced accounts of a crime on which to pronounce its judgements, the epistemological ground of this event and its unfolding is not firm.

As Hooper writes from within the worlds of the detectives, the victims, Sokulak's parents, the lawyers, and then the courtroom—all the while building her picture of Sokulak—her text makes any one finalised account of the truth impossible. While Hooper is in awe of the detectives' skill and praises their dedication and collaborative commitment to the task of solving the crime, the poetics of her narrative suggest that uncertainty and fragility underlie the process of coming to understand what happened. In the area surrounded by crime scene tape, she warns, "place your foot unwisely and it might slip through and burn" (3). Here, in the zone of the fire's origin, "known as the area of confidence," the signs are "paradoxically . . . more bewildering" (8). "Later," Hooper tells us, "the detective will handle the statements of over six hundred witnesses and slowly piece together their stories" (20). Yet Sokulak's lawyer's "knew the police didn't have much evidence on Brendan" and still "all fingers pointed his way" (121–22). Perhaps, Sokulak's legal team posits, "he was an 'easy target'. So easy that he even managed to believe that something he did must have caused the fire" (159). Moreover, relates Hooper, by the time Sokulak went to trial several years after the event, the findings of the Bushfires Royal Commission in 2010 bore new perspectives on the tragedy. These findings shift the lens of responsibility for Black Saturday to "deep levels of bureaucratic and corporate incompetence" (161), including poor public communication systems and privatized and outdated electricity infrastructure—although the commission determined this in relation to the Kilmore East fire, outside of Gippsland, which killed 119 people.

Hooper's account understands Black Saturday as a catastrophic day of devastating loss that cannot be explained through the culpability of single individuals and their actions alone. Rather, she unpacks an event deeply entangled in histories that are not easily excised from each other. Extractivist industry and infrastructure are a key agent in the Black Saturday fires: the fires that day, while irreducible and unprecedented on the one hand, also connect to the ubiquitous coal-burning fires that have structured Valley life for decades by infiltrating local lungs over generations, both giving and taking from so many. This was the story of the Valley: "People's friends and family worked cutting the stuff out,

burning it, and then everyone breathed in the vapors of strife" (Hooper, *The Arsonist* 140).

Doig makes these entangled threads visible for his readers, too. Like Hooper, he attempts to map the fire event and draws affectively on first-hand accounts written in an on-the-ground style, following protagonists as the horror unfolded: "[N]o one had seen anything like this before. . . . 'You could feel it burn your lungs when you breathed in'" (Doig 102–03); "they were 'right in the thick of it'. . . . [T]here were 'walls of coal still fully aflame'" (150). Again, like in Hooper's text, deep histories cannot help but intersect in this story. In Doig's retelling of the Hazelwood mine fire, the imbricated human and environmental cost of extractivism is centre stage, and the long histories at play hinder an easy accounting of the event as corporate malpractice. This fire "was foreseeable," Doig tells the reader; "[t]he disaster was preventable" (2). But, the text tacitly asks, just how far back would we have to go to prevent it? "It's right to say that privatization is responsible for the extent of that fire" (54), writes Doig, yet the conditions that gave rise to privatization and its implementation did not appear alone in 1996 when the state sold off its assets in the Valley. As theorist Linda Rugg writes, the violence done to human and non-human worlds in a time of modernity "does not occur because of an 'accident' or a breach in normal practice but is instead systemic, part of the normal[ized] practice of doing business" (602).

This "normal[ized] practice" foregrounds environmental and social injustice as an everyday reality that is unevenly borne across communities and actors, contingent upon economic and social histories. While Doig is clear about the catastrophic effects of the mine fire and pays close attention to the singularity—and differentiation—of experience for those who bear close witness and are subject to its unfolding over different temporalities (the initial hours, the coming days and ongoing weeks, and the persistent health consequences several years later), he also refuses a conventional disaster narrative that parcels this event up as extraordinary and inexplicable in its time and place. This terrible disaster is also mundane, manifesting a "long creeping crisis that has become permanent" (Vorbrugg 451). *Hazelwood*'s protagonists feel the effects of

extractivism in everyday ways: "[E]very morning, as Norm drove back along the Princes Freeway[,] . . . he was greeted by a grim panorama of power stations . . . thick puffs of white steam rose behind the hills. . . . Yallourn . . . Loy Yang . . . Hazelwood" (Doig 35). It is, moreover, a disaster that endures. Six years later, "Morwellians are four times more likely to be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder than other Gippsland residents, and seven times more likely to be diagnosed with a heart attack" (279). Addressing this persistent trauma, the Victorian government has committed to tracking the long-term effects of the fire for the next twenty years (211).

Doig's refusal to narrate the Hazelwood fire outside an enduring and complex historical ecology recalls cultural theorist Stephen Muecke's critique of apocalypticism in natural disaster narratives. The "apocalypse," as something visited from outside an everyday nexus of temporality and spatiality and as something that profoundly ruptures and irrevocably transforms, allows an imaginative disconnect from the everyday. It can be wielded to define events conclusively and leave nothing else to say. This is a problem, Muecke argues, because "the stories told about natural disasters are crucial in the organization of people's responses in the medium to long term" (260). And "natural disasters" are never just that. In the tradition of environmental justice narratives that elaborate environmental crises as deeply imbricated in everyday processes and structures, Doig conveys a reality structured by slow violence and, as geographer Donna Houston terms it, of crisis as "where we live" ("Crisis" 448).

For Doig, then, this is not just an inevitable event, a symptom of brown coal's innate instability. Human error, inadequate policy, and mismanagement are the focus of his narrative, as are the Valley residents who worked tirelessly to draw attention to the catastrophe taking place on their doorstep, pervading their houses and bodies, and leaving its toxic and sometimes deadly traces behind. Doig's reportage style (which he describes as "intensely personal snapshots, part catastrophe, part everyday life" [5]) erodes the distinction between catastrophe and normality. We are introduced to the fire and see it unfolding through the eyes of nearby residents who, before they know it, are no longer removed

witnesses but rather enrolled subjects in a serious environmental, corporate, and—as the text implies—historical crime. These accounts make clear the closeness of the mine to residential lives in Morwell: it is right there, an "erupting volcano" on display through people's windows and from their front porches (Doig 15). Their intimacy with coal is also clear as Doig describes the families, workers, and community infrastructures built on and sustained by extractivist practices: "[Resident] David knew how flammable brown coal was, and how hard it was to put out once it was alight" (16). The consequences of this intimacy are complex: "By the end of the first week, [resident] Tracie had spoken to close to a hundred people and she was getting the same reports: sore throat, difficulty breathing, stinging or irritated eyes, headache" (30). This event was not restricted to a single day or set of consequences: its impacts and implications were rolling and diffused, and they extended all the way to Melbourne and beyond, connected by an electricity network.

As with Hooper's text, tracking the crime at the heart of this event proves difficult—not just in terms of its perpetrators but also its evidence and effects. Carbon monoxide, one of the consequences of fire, becomes a silent threat: this gas "is invisible, odourless and deadly in high concentrations: it's also heavier than air, so during fires it collects at the bottom of valleys" (Doig 24). The mine itself is a valley within a valley, and workers sent to deal with the fire possessed inadequate safety training, equipment, or monitoring amidst these conditions while the gas radiated far beyond the mine site. On the day of the fire, "southern Morwell was flooded with [this] gas. Ambient carbon monoxide levels peaked at 30 parts per million" (104). More visibly, brown coal dust and ash coated the town in a sticky toxic layer. Resident Keiry-Anne tells Doig that she was used to "living with coal dust" after years in the Valley, but this was something different (47): "Kiery-Anne and [her husband] Harry did their best to seal off from the smoke outside with wet towels rolled up. . . . [T]here were vented windows high on the living room walls. . . . Even though Harry was tall enough to reach and did his best to cover the gaps[,] . . . he couldn't stop the ash coming in through them. It came up through the floorboards as well" (48).

The community soon knew that this was an emergency, and while the fire was a specific and unprecedented event that dramatically escalated the prevalence of associated health conditions, they make clear to Doig that it illuminated an environmental violence many had been living with for years. Yet the state government seemed disinterested in the disaster, initially at least, and the mainstream media in Melbourne were almost silent on it. This prompted a swift, coordinated community response that was at once an effort of raising awareness in the metropole and a provision of service in the absence of governmental action. As if modelling the consequences of the decentralization that advanced the economic power of private industry such as the Hazelwood mine, the Morwell community began collecting health data themselves: "Since the government wasn't recording people's health problems, they were determined to fill the gap" (125).

From one perspective, the villains of this story are clear: the mine's owner, GDF Suez, and its questionable priorities and a disengaged regulatory and public health framework that exacerbated the event. "This disaster is not 'natural.' . . . [T]he neglect is systematic," writes Naomi Farmer, who offered one of the first in-depth reports of the fire (on the socialist website *Red Flag*) before it garnered the attention of the mainstream news (qtd. in Doig 118). Yet this is an industry that works with innately unstable materials and is premised on material precarity, something that the perceived security of previous state ownership, with superior systems of community care, overshadowed. Privatization only exposes the environmental exploitation and human vulnerability that this industry depends on. At the same time, these vulnerabilities are not uniform, nor are their consequences. While the retreat of state ownership saw job loss and economic disadvantage for many, those still employed by the power industry "found themselves in the top 5 percent of wage earners in Australia: hi-vis gentry[3]" (Doig 72). Health differentials are another story, however. Hazelwood workers die an average of fifteen years earlier than the general population (154). The mine fire illuminates the wider impacts on a community living in such proximity to extractivist industries, including the residents who do not receive the economic benefits of employment in the privatized electricity sector.

V. Whose Crime?

In the wake of the Hazelwood fire, when fingers were logically pointing at Engie, the owners of the mine, Engie's tactic was evasion. From the company's headquarters half a world away in Paris, company representative Anne Chassagnette rejected any need to compensate its victims, stating that "[t]here is no direct link that has shown we are responsible" (Doig 229). This is a common challenge for the cause of environmental justice, as Houston makes clear that environmental crises are not easily mappable as "a series of causes, effects, and responses to an external and finite problem" ("Crisis" 442). In a Valley with pervasive health issues that precede the fire—connected substantially to the slow violence of the coal mining industry and fuelled by co-morbidities and socio-economic challenges—how can the direct impact of the mine fire be registered? And how can it be disconnected from these other related impacts to attribute proportional blame?

In Doig's account, Engie's ability to subsequently pack up, sell off, and retreat from the place where they were instrumental in significant damage is indicative of a globalized economy ruled by multinationals who can withdraw from their localized impacts with relative ease, leaving abandoned infrastructure and damage in their wake. The ineffectiveness of government regulation and the agreed terms of redress—a likely vastly underfunded commitment to remediation of the mine site by Engie—are classic elements in the story of neoliberal environmental governance. Readers of such a story might, as Doig's readers likely do, oppose these prevailing modes of business and governance; they might be horrified by deaths that were, in the end, officially attributed to this event by a government inquiry (*Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry*) and Engie's refusal to accept legal responsibility. Doig's *Hazelwood* makes space for this response. But, like *The Arsonist*, *Hazelwood* also layers the question of responsibility with one of proximity. These fire events, so affectively described and closely documented, are not at a remove from the reader. They are close to us, as the texts make clear.

The stories that both Doig and Hooper offer ultimately cohere around two common points: the events that they describe cannot be disconnected from capitalist-colonizing histories that subject humans and

non-humans to varying forms of exploitation and violence; and the social and environmental burdens of these events are borne disproportionately. While we all receive cheap and reliable electricity as a benefit of coal burning, the cost of this is not equitably carried. Not all of us must live in the polluting and life-endangering shadows of an extractivist industry nor experience the rollercoaster of economic and social impacts of the energy sector's transitions. There are uneven effects that generate uneven suffering. Black Saturday shows these disproportionate effects, as the disaster was much greater for some than for others and it unfolded in a community already disproportionately impacted by access to social amenities, economic resources, and the negative health effects of living for generations with the visceral impacts of coal-fired electricity.

Environmental events such as the Black Saturday disaster and the Hazelwood fire do not sit discretely, inexplicable outside the logic of cause and effect. As Hooper and Doig insist, the reality is much more complex. While power differentials are vast and subject positions vary, we—that is, every living human—are all situated within relationships of fossil fuel production and consumption, as well as the impacts of both. As Hooper reflects in her text's conclusion, "in the end, the small world of someone like Brendan is not as unconnected to our own as it might seem—we ignore this at our peril" (240). Hooper's and Doig's refusal to displace the source of the crime onto either abstract forces (the pathological corporation; the generic malaise of lower socio-economic communities) or a single villain such as Sokaluk brings into relief a more complex network of forces and effects. Here, the texts' repeated use of situated, affective witnessing that transposes sensorial experience ("When you're standing there, it fills the horizon. It's all you can see. You can feel the heat against your face, you can see the cracks in the earth opening up and the glowing red embers inside" [Doig 20]) points to what Hooper's statement makes explicit: these crimes cannot be excised from the lives of her and Doig's readers. This is the state of "Anthropocene noir," a dark time of reckoning identified by Rose and deployed elsewhere by David Farrier to explore another of Hooper's texts, *A Child's Book of True Crime*, in which the "illusion of immunity" (Rose 216) from the consequences of ecological destruction is shattered

for privileged Western subjects. Through this lens, tracking the single origin of a crime dissolves into haze. There is no outside, and no moral high ground, from which to observe. The dark times of environmental crisis and mass more-than-human death evoked through the classic literary and filmic noir frame exceed the conventional limits of the true crime genre, which appeals to audiences because of a perceived distance from the crime being consumed. As true crime critics note, these works allow for "imaginative sympathy" (R. Smith 24) through vicarious experiences and "referred pain" (Seltzer 557) while maintaining a sense of removal—reading as having omniscience, as seeing events from above and piecing the clues together to reveal the truth.

Hooper and Doig, however, refuse this distance. Their poetics of proximity, situation, and unstable ground resist a clear conclusion and emphasise connections between histories of power and violence; they also illuminate generative networks of community, connectivity, and care that the disconnections in extractivist imaginaries do not allow. Bringing us close to the experience of many of those intimately involved in the fallout from these events (and whose lives were also entangled in the lead-up to them), the authors' perspectives are decentred as an elevated source of authority. The cause of environmental justice is not singularly voiced. While storytelling does not necessarily lead to justice, it can redress exclusions and redistribute a recognition of agency. It can illuminate and generate connections and solidarities. Importantly, the narration of slow violence in both texts is a dispersed but collective endeavour. And it does not come out of the blue. As Alexander Vorbrugg cautions those keen to make connections between storytelling and environmental justice, "it is important not to . . . confuse a proclaimed invisibility of slow violence with the silencing of narratives that do exist, but do not count" (454). Doig and Hooper work with stories generated and generating new stories in the places they write about.

Extractivism is the uber-crime that connects the Churchill fires and the Hazelwood mine disaster to these long place histories, which in turn connect to the globally dominant forces of western modernity. The conviction and jailing of Sokaluk does not undo these links, which are active and alive and continue to structure life in the Valley and beyond.

Ultimately, both *The Arsonist* and *Hazelwood* point to ecological crimes as the bedrock of contemporary life in Australia: ecological in the sense advanced by Rugg, who (building on the work of Jane Bennett) considers it inclusively as "the interaction and interpenetration of all the actors, animate and inanimate" (Rugg 603). Eco-crime thus encapsulates the scale and scope of extractivism's slow violence, bringing into view multiple systems of power and exploitation that inform and sustain this history: "from patriarchy to capitalism to colonization to race to the justice system to the state and on and on" (Rugg 604).

Despite their narrative focus on single catastrophic events that indelibly impacted the Latrobe Valley, Hooper and Doig also offer powerful examinations of how dominant extractivist imaginaries inform life in contemporary Australia and their embeddedness in everyday arrangements of human and more than human relations, both mundane and extraordinary. These imaginaries are shaped by histories of colonial violence and social inequality and they normalize a fantasy of resource extraction—of environmental resources, and of human labor and energy—as the foundation for a good life that services all. The profound damage done to human lives in the Valley since the beginnings of the colonial project reveals this fantasy as hollow. These texts do not observe at a distance, however, nor do they encourage us to do so. In the counter-imaginaries that entangle histories and places together and assert the readers' proximity to, and even complicity in, these crimes, there is no resolution brought by knowing "who did it." We are left with the uneasy awareness that we are closer to these events than we would like to be and than our prevailing narratives allow. Despite the magnitude of these events, with many hundreds of victims, they are not "beyond our comprehension" (Fraser 264). While a full, objective picture never comes into view, we are taken close to the source of the crimes and see our own complicity.

Histories do not resolve neatly, and there are ongoing, radiating effects and re-animations. When the Morwell plant powered down for the last time in 2017, it belched a final cloud, covering the town once again with a blanket of coal dust. How long will it take for those particles to force changes across different bodies in the Latrobe Valley? The

crimes that feed our climate crisis have not been solved. We might have pieced together "what happened" to fuel these disasters but this keeps no one safe. Australia still invests in extractivist industries and the climate crisis continues to weigh on us. Damaging extractivist imaginaries that encourage disconnection from dark histories and futures persist. Yet stories entangle together no matter how much these imaginaries work to keep them apart: fire, brutality, extraction, erasure, dispossession, and murder are all linked. This is a crime that calls us all to account. At the same time, the texts also bring us close to communities who bear witness to and resist extractivism and its logic. Enabling the reader to inhabit this space affectively and viscerally, Hooper and Doig encourage empathy, even solidarity, and the recognition of two communities who are actively agitating for recognition and change. As Doig relates, the predicted economic disaster of Hazelwood's closure does not eventuate: unemployment is down and there is a community-based move to transition the Valley to sustainable energy industries. Through the poetics of proximity enabled by these texts, the potential of the spectacle to distance us from the crime is diffused and we can begin to understand the alternative imaginaries already active in a community refusing its neat and terminal conclusion: "[L]ife in the Valley goes on" (Doig 280).

Notes

 1 Examples of this include works by Kissane, Hyland, Kenny, Robinson, Fraser, and Bishop.
 2 Research suggests that arsonists are overwhelmingly men (Read).
 3 The term "hi-vis" refers to the fluorescent safety wear of manual workers.

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